

Our Being Is Becoming

An Introduction to Thinking Dialectically

an online course with the Institute for Social Ecology



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Course Dates: Start date December 5, runs on Thursdays at 8pm Eastern time for six weeks.

Course Description:

What is dialectics? Do we need to study it just because Marx, Lenin, and Bookchin did? What does it have to do with understanding the world we actually live in?

We will take on these questions and more through this six-week introduction. Dialectical philosophy is the conceptual foundation of social ecology and Marxism

alike, without which neither tradition can be properly understood. More than that, however, we make the case that dialectical thinking is an indispensable tool for understanding reality more clearly. In the most basic sense, dialectics is a philosophy of *change*, and it is of particular importance for those who seek to change reality: for revolutionaries.

This course will *not* be a slog through Hegel or dense philosophical esoterica. While we are confident that all students of these ideas will get something out of this course, it is first and foremost aimed at beginners with no prior philosophical training, with the primary goal of establishing clear-headed, practical understanding for applied use.

This course is also recommended as a prerequisite for **The Philosophy and Politics of Social Ecology** and **Frankfurt School Critical Theory**.

We will establish a foundation of understanding of dialectical philosophy over six weeks through the following sessions: an introduction to what dialectical reasoning is and why it is useful, an overview of dialectical thought across a variety of premodern philosophical traditions (Hellenistic, Indian, Chinese, and Nahua), a legible breakdown of Hegel's main ideas we need to grasp, dialectics applied to the study of history, dialectics applied to the study of nature, and lastly, what dialectics means for the pursuit of truth through deliberation and democracy. Each week will be accompanied by readings and multimedia materials. The syllabus also includes supplemental readings each week for those who want to go deeper.

This course is open to all. As with all ISE courses, no one will be turned away for lack of funds.

Syllabus

Week 1 - December 5, 2024

Introduction: Breaking with Category Thinking

- “Dialectics,” chapter 2 from *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* by Friedrich Engels (in *Anti-Duhring*, 1878)
- “Zapatismo and Pluriversal Ontology,” talk by Linda Quiquívix at the Institute for Social Ecology's 2023 summer intensive course (video)

- “The Dangers of Category Thinking” by Bart de Langhe and Philip Fernbach in the *Harvard Business Review*

Week 2 - December 12, 2024

Ancient Philosophical Roots

- “Infinity and Beyond: Anaximander and Anaximenes” from *The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* with Peter Adamson (podcast, episode 2)
- “Old Man River: Heraclitus” from *The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* with Peter Adamson (podcast, episode 5)
- “The Tao of Dialectic” by Antonio Wolf, *Epoché Magazine*
- Selection from the *Tao Te Ching* by Laotzi (several translations)

Further readings (optional):

- “Teotl” (Chapter 1) and “Agonistic Inamic Unity” (Chapter 3) from *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* by James Maffie
- Selections from *Cracking the Walnut: Understanding the Dialectics of Nagarjuna* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- Selections from *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* by Thomas McEvilley
- Selection from *Dialectical Methodology* by Nataraja Guru

Week 3 - December 19, 2024

Making Heads and Tails of Hegel

- “The Dialectical Method” by J.N. Findlay, from *Hegel: A Re-examination*

Further readings (optional):

- Selection from *Notes on Dialectics* by C.L.R. James
- Selection from *Encyclopedia Logic* by G.W.F. Hegel
- “The Dialectical Method” by Ernst Bloch

Week 4 - December 26, 2024

Dialectic as Ontology: History

- “Hegel: Philosophy of World History and Spirit” by Ellie Anderson (video)
- “Marx 101: Key Concepts of Dialectical Materialism” by Red Plateaus (video)

- Karl Marx, “Preface” from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)
- Karl Marx, “Idealism and Materialism” from *The German Ideology* (1845)
- Karl Marx, “Afterword to the Second German Edition” from *Capital*, Volume I (1873)
- Selection from *Dance of the Dialectic* by Bertell Ollman

Further readings (optional):

- Introduction to *Capital*, Volume 1 by Ernest Mandel
- Selection from *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone
- “Dialectics and Revolution,” chapter 6 from *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* by James and Grace Lee Boggs
- Selection from *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* by G.W.F. Hegel

Week 5 - January 2, 2025

Dialectic as Ontology: Nature

- Selections from *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, by Murray Bookchin (“Introduction: A Philosophical Naturalism” and “Ecologizing the Dialectic” in Chapter 3, “Thinking Ecologically: A Dialectical Approach”)
- Selection from *The Dialectics of Nature* by Friedrich Engels
- Selection from *The Dialectical Biologist* by Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin
- “Meteorisations: Reading Amílcar Cabral’s Agronomy of Liberation” by Filipa César

Further readings (optional):

- Selection from *Estudos Agrarios* by Amilcar Cabral
- “Dialectical Ecology: The origins of dialectical ecology” by John Clark, from *The Routledge Handbook on Ecosocialism* (chapter 12)

Week 6 - January 9, 2025

Truth Is an Eternal Conversation: Dialectic as Social Method

- *Euthyphro* by Plato, translated by Benjamin Jowett
- “On Practice: “On the Relation Between Knowledge and Practice, Between Knowing and Doing” (1937) and “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?” (1963) by Mao Zedong

- “The Mass Line: What It Is and How to Use It” from *Liberation Road*
- Selection from *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire

Further readings (optional):

- “Structures, habitus, power: basis for a theory of symbolic power,” chapter 4 from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by Pierre Bourdieu
- Selection from *Hegel Contra Sociology* by Gillian Rose
- “Words for Our Present Reality” by the *Strange Matters* editorial collective