

## How to Distinguish Dialectics from Sophistry?

Rongqing Dai

Freelance Philosopher, New Jersey, USA

**\*Corresponding author:**

Rongqing Dai, Ph.D. Freelance Philosopher, New Jersey, USA. Tel: +1-732-395-3163; E-mail: rongqing.dai.mail@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*Along with the history of western civilization, dialectics has been presented to the public by philosophers of big names such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and many others, in very different tones. Consequently, after millenniums long practical applications, misuses, criticisms, as well as eulogies, dialectics is still like an elusive ghost among the philosophical professionals without being clearly comprehended.*

*The most confusing part of dialectics and thus the biggest obstacle to learning dialectics is its apparent similarity with sophistry. In this article, we will first review the attitudes of Aristotle and Kant towards dialectics, and then discuss how to distinguish dialectics from sophistry through their subtle difference, and finally we will take a look at the relationship between the Hegelian dialectics and sophistry.*

**Keywords:** Dialectics, Sophistry, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Metaphysics, Logic

### Introduction

It has been generally ignored by the public that the nowadays social political life in human civilization is more and more severely dominated by sophistry. The political interests, instead of the truth, are normally what politicians, social activists, and the vast majority in the society around the world care about most in either their domestic affairs or the international affairs; correspondingly, this general political and cultural mindset is often fulfilled with the use of arguments that would philosophically bear the mark of sophistry in its classic sense.

However, the prevalence of the culture of sophistry would always have the tendency of heating up the competition of powers when different parties pursuing different interests, because the practice of an obvious evasion of the truth at the onset of a conflict would normally weaken the intention to negotiate. This has led to the ever increased uncompromised conflicts between peoples of different interests or different political stances in the world.

There are many reasons behind this sad reality and some of them might even be legitimate in various senses, but one undoubtedly negative reason for this to happen is the general intellectual unpreparedness of the public for identifying sophistry in life. This ignorance of sophistry is further exacerbated by the confusion between dialectics (which is now a generally positive term to the public) and the notorious sophistry. To make the matter much more complicated,

the said confusion has a deep root in the history of philosophy for thousands of years, which makes the philosophical discernment between dialectics and sophistry to be critically important to the social wellbeing of the world right now and in the future.

Plato has often been considered as the founder of the theory of dialectics in the history, and his view of dialectics was best expressed in the following statement “*when a person starts on the discovery of the absolute by the light of reason only, and without any assistance of sense, and perseveres until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world, as in the case of sight at the end of the visible* [1].” However, this perspective of dialectics has not been well appreciated and accepted even among the best known philosophers in the millenniums after him, starting from his famous student, another philosophy giant Aristotle. Although Plato was also famous for his fight against sophistry, to his student Aristotle, neither dialectics nor sophistry was worthy of the true philosophy.

### Criticisms of Dialectics by Aristotle and Kant

To Aristotle, as he stated in his *On Sophistical Refutations*, “*dialectical arguments are those that reason from premisses generally accepted, to the contradictory of a given thesis*” [2]. Obviously, sophists could also pull off this effect; therefore, with the above perception of Aristotle about dialectics, one would be understandably unable to tell dialectics from sophistry, since it does not emphasize that the reasoning by dialectics needs to be logically correct while sophistry could achieve the same effect with fallacies.

Accordingly, he remarked, “*dialecticians and sophists assume the same guise as the philosopher; for sophistic is Wisdom which exists only in semblance, and dialecticians embrace all things in their dialectic, and being is common to all things; but evidently their dialectic embraces these subjects because these are proper to philosophy [3]. For sophistic and dialectic turn on the same class of things as philosophy, but this differs from dialectic in the nature of the faculty required and from sophistic in respect of the purpose of the philosophic life. Dialectic is merely critical where philosophy claims to know, and sophistic is what appears to be philosophy but is not.*”

Kant’s attitude towards dialectics was bewildering. On the one hand, he showed disdain for dialectics by claiming that ancient dialectics is “*a name for the logic of illusion-that and nothing else*”, and thus “*is a tricky set of techniques for giving an air of truth to ignorance and even to intentional tricks, which it does by aping the methodical thoroughness that logic always prescribes, and using its technical paraphernalia to prettify every empty pretension [4].*”

He imputed the occurrence of such kind of negative dialectic way of thinking to the usage of canon as organon; in other words, to Kant, the so-called dialectics is to produce the materialized contents, which are additional to the premise, through logical reasoning itself without bringing in extra materialized information. He elaborated two general scenarios in which dialectics would appear as follows:

*“General logic separates the formal business of the understanding and of reason into its constituents, presenting them as principles of all logical evaluation of our knowledge. This part of logic can therefore be called an ‘analytic’ (because of its process of separating-out = analyzing), and it is at least the negative touchstone of truth. Before we investigate the content of an item of knowledge in order to learn whether it contains positive truth about its object, we must first examine and evaluate its form by means of these rules. But something’s passing this test-agreeing perfectly with logical laws-doesn’t guarantee that it is materially (objectively) true. So nobody can venture to think or say anything about objects on the basis of logic alone, without first getting solidly based information about them from outside logic. Still, there’s something seductive about this glittering art for giving all of our items of knowledge the form of understanding (even if we remain dead ignorant about their content!). Indeed it’s so seductive that this general logic, which is merely a canon for judging, has been used, misused, as if it were an organon for the actual production of objective assertions or something like them. When general logic is misused in this way as an organon, it is called ‘dialectic’.*

*Since the transcendental analytic should properly be only a canon for evaluating the empirical use of the understanding, it’s a misuse to let it count as the organon of a general and unrestricted use of the understanding, and to judge synthetically, to assert, and to decide about objects in general, on the basis of nothing but the pure understanding. Using pure understanding in this way as an organon would thus be dialectical.”*

Accordingly, he propounded: “*the first and most important task of philosophy is to deprive dialectic of its bad influence, once and for all, by blocking off the source of the errors.*”

In a statement contrary to Plato’s view, Kant argued, “*The ideas of pure reason can’t ever be dialectical in themselves; any deceptive illusion involving them must be due solely to their misuse. Why? Because we get them from the very nature of our reason; and it’s impossible that that supreme court for the rights and claims of speculation should itself generate deceptions and illusions. It’s to be expected, then, that the ideas have their own good and appropriate role in the natural conduct of our reason.*”

Accordingly, he contemned dialectical methods as “*quite unworthy of the dignity of philosophy, and we don’t need ‘dialectic’ or any other word to name something so bad.*”

But on the other hand, Kant did seem to love the name of “dialectic” very much, as implied in the above sentence, and decided to use that name “*to stand for a critique of dialectical illusion*” in his famous theory on the critique of pure reason, because he considered “*such a critique does count as part of logic... .namely evaluating the pure understanding and guarding it against sophistical tricks.*”

He had such a passion for the name of “dialectic” probably because he noticed “*there will always be a dialectic of pure reason, because dialectic is natural to reason.*” Nonetheless, his strategy “*to deprive dialectic of its bad influence, once and for all*” did not seem to be “*blocking off the source of the errors*” as he propounded, but rather to use the term of “dialectic” differently from the popular ways, to be the name for his method to prevent what he considered as the dialectical illusion. Although he did not make further clarification, this use of the noun “dialectic” should be completely different from what he considered as the ancient use of that term, considering his disdainful comment on the ancient use.

### How to Distinguish Dialectics from Sophistry?

I would argue that both Aristotle and Kant misunderstood the true nature of dialectics. For the sake of the discussion in this section, I would refer the term sophistry to its traditional iconic use, i.e., as Hegel described, “*by false reasoning, some truth is either refuted and made dubious, or something false is proved and made plausible [5].*” Later in the next section I will discuss the peculiar (and thus nontraditional) view of Hegel towards sophistry.

Although dialectical arguments could reach the contradictory of a given thesis (as pointed out by Aristotle), the requirement to avoid violating logic or falling into fallacy would naturally differentiate it from sophistry, and thus we could conclude that Aristotle missed the point about the true value of dialectics. While Kant seemed to have vaguely sensed that dialectics would function beyond the territory of logic and science, he still misunderstood it by claiming dialectics as resulting from the misuse of canon as organon .

By carefully scrutinizing how dialectics has been functioning in human intellectual activities since the ancient times, we might identify the nuance between dialectics and sophistry: they differ from each other in such a way that the dialectics functions **beyond** the formal logic and science while sophistry **violates** either the formal logic or science. In other words, what are revealed by dialectics complement the formal logic and science, and thus the performance of dialectics should not violate the formal logic or contradict with science, while sophistry operates in violation of either the formal logic or some scientific (or metaphysical) principles.

The practical difficulty of using the above defined metaphysical difference for the discernment between dialectics and sophistry is obvious since it is generally not easy to distinguish between “beyond” and “violating”. In mathematical terms, when the universal is given, something beyond a set of rules would be considered as violating that set of rules; in the Hegelian system, whatever is not A would be considered as the opposite of A. But in the strict sense, there does to be a difference between “beyond” and “violating”. The fact that dialectics functions beyond the territory of the formal logic and science shows that they belong to different dimensions, while anything that violates the formal logic or some scientific (or metaphysical) principles would be erroneous. Therefore, in order to better distinguish between dialectics and sophistry, one needs first to be strong in logic and science.

### The Hegelian Dialectics and Sophistry

Hegel’s exposition of his new logical system bespoke his befuddlement about the nature of dialectics. On the one hand, his intention of integrating the so-called objective logic (meaning metaphysics) and subjective logic (meaning the formal logic) with his dialectical elucidation indicates that he did sense that the dialectic domain should exist beyond the traditional territory of the formal logic and metaphysics; but on the other hand, the immense effort he spent to produce a self-consistent logical system by indiscriminately kneading the formal logic, metaphysics, and dialectics together indicates that he was still confused about the logical demarcation between them [6].

Consequently, the audience could easily be confused by his elaboration of his new philosophy with an impression that he was trying to replace the formal logic and metaphysics with his new logical system that was composed of a few core dialectical notions and formula, as has been widely perceived among the public for the past couple of centuries. That should definitely not be what Hegel originally meant to, since replacing the formal logic with the dialectic narrative would mean he could not even perform the normal logical judgment on his way home from the classroom. Nonetheless, this confusion might have tremendously contributed to the later ridiculous movement of attacking metaphysics as the adversary of dialectics, which happened in both western and eastern countries.

In addition to his conceptual confusion mentioned above, his eccentric use of language should be another important reason, which in turn would be because his new thoughts outpaced his vocabulary. Because of this confusion, it became quite a common pattern in the teaching of the Hegelian dialectic methodology that the teachers would first introduce the general idea about methodology, and then present the content of the Hegelian dialectical methodology to the students without comparing with the methodologies of specific sciences or the methodologies for various specific life tasks. This could create the illusion that the Hegelian dialectic system was supposed to be presented as a universal methodology which could fit into any situation. However, when people do apply the Hegelian dialectics in life not as a supplement to other methodologies but as a universal replacement, they could unsurprisingly end up with some statements that could cause the Hegelian dialectics to be related to the traditional concept of sophistry.

### Hegel’s Affirmative Attitude towards Sophistry

To make the matter much more complicated, when discussing the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, Hegel even

offered eulogy to the ancient sophists, which has been taken as an affirmative action to accept sophistry as positive. In “The Sophists”, he said “Greece has to thank the Sophists for this culture, because they taught men to exercise thought as to what should have authority for them, and thus their culture was culture in philosophy as much as in eloquence [5].

*The Sophist is one who knows how to make men clever (deinon) in speech. In fact, what is most striking in a man or people of culture is the art of speaking well, or of turning subjects round and considering them in many aspects.*

*On account of their formal culture, the Sophists have a place in Philosophy; on account of their reflection they have not. They are associated with Philosophy in that they do not remain at concrete reasoning, but go on, at least in part, to ultimate determinations.... We see that Protagoras possesses great powers of reflective thought, and indeed reflection on consciousness came to consciousness with Protagoras.”*

In The Philosophy of History he went even further to say, “It was the Sophists-the ‘Teachers of Wisdom’-who first introduced subjective reflection, and the new doctrine that each man should act according to his own conviction [7]. When reflection once comes into play, the inquiry is started whether the Principles of Law (das Recht) cannot be improved. Instead of holding by the existing state of things, internal conviction is relied upon; and thus begins a subjective independent Freedom, in which the individual finds himself in a position to bring everything to the test of his own conscience, even in defiance of the existing constitution. Each one has his ‘principles,’ and that view which accords with his private judgment he regards as practically the best, and as claiming practical realization. This decay even Thucydides notices, when he speaks of every one’s thinking that things are going on badly when he has not a hand in the management.”

Although apparently Hegel was playing with the etymological interpretation of the ancient Greek term “sophist” when he called sophists as the “Teachers of Wisdom”, from his tone and his laudation to them in the contexts, we could sense his true admiration towards them.

### Hegel’s Awareness of the Negative Nature and Impact of Sophistry

However, it would be very hard to take them as positive comments when he said the following: “On the one hand something definite is in question, such as the constitution, or a war...on the other, soon disappears, just because the matter can be arranged either this way or that, and thus particular points of view always are decisive [5]. Men likewise make use of good arguments, after the manner of the Sophists, against Philosophy...There are, they say, various philosophies, various opinions, and this is contrary to the one Truth; the weakness of human reason allows of no knowledge. What is Philosophy to the feelings, mind, and heart? Abstract thinking about such matters produces abstruse results which are of no use in the practical life of man.

*With such reasoning men can easily get so far as to know (where they do not, it is owing to the want of education-but the Sophists were very well educated) that if arguments are relied upon, everything can be proved by argument, and arguments for and against can*



be found for everything...In the crime of desertion in time of war, there is, for example, the duty of self-preservation. Similarly in more modern times the greatest crimes, assassination, treachery, &c., have been justified.

To the Sophists the satisfaction of the individual himself was now made ultimate, and since they made everything uncertain, the fixed point was in the assertion, 'it is my desire, my pride, glory, and honour, particular subjectivity, which I make my end.' Thus the Sophists are reproached for countenancing personal affections, private interests, &c. This proceeds directly from the nature of their culture, which, because it places ready various points of view, makes it depend on the pleasure of the subject alone which shall prevail, that is, if fixed principles do not determine. Here the danger lies.

The phenomenal is not sensuous Being, for because I posit this as phenomenal. I assert its nullity. But the statements 'What is, is only for consciousness,' or 'the truth of all things is the manifestation of them in and for consciousness,' seem quite to contradict themselves. For it appears as though a contradiction were asserted—first that nothing is in itself as it appears, and then that it is true as it appears."

### Hegel's Confusion about the Relationship between Wisdom and the Truth

Nonetheless, the general tone of "The Sophists" is not to condemn sophistry, but to alter the negative public perception about the sophists, as he said, "*Sophistry is certainly a word of ill-repute, and indeed it is particularly through the opposition to Socrates and Plato... We have to put this evil significance on one side and to forget it. On the other hand, we now wish to consider further from the positive and properly speaking scientific side, what was the position of the Sophists in Greece.*"

This intention of scientifically evaluating the positive contribution of what he considered as the culture of the sophists, instead of the negative individual deeds, to the development of philosophy does have its merit in understanding the dynamics of human history that matters to the development of philosophy, and I do not intend to deny the fact pointed out by Hegel that sophists once played certain positive roles in the history of western philosophy. However, I simply could not concur with Hegel for considering sophists as the teachers of wisdom because of the *truth principle of wisdom* which states that truth must be the principle of wisdom in the sense that the manifestation of wisdom must be consistent with the truth and beneficial for people to seek and discover the truth.

Hegel's treatment of sophistry indicated his ignorance of the above *truth principle of wisdom*, which further led him into the trap of the negative *law of the equivalence of the truth*: the truth is generally put into the equation of power, wealth, capability etc., in human social practices. This is evinced from the disproportion between his admiration towards the functional role of sophists in the development of philosophy (e.g. reflection on consciousness, cultivate the skills of talking, as he mentioned), and the effort he spent to discuss the negative impact of sophistry. Especially, he did not spend much effort to do what Plato was striving to do: pointing out the negative impact of false reasoning to the civilization; in fact, he even managed to play down the importance of that effort of Plato. In this way, he traded the principle of truth for the functional contribution in other aspects, instead of standing firm to the principle while appreciating the meaningful functional contribution in the meantime.

Furthermore, Hegel occasionally defended the ancient sophists by comparing them with the populace of his own time, as in the example of saying "*Sophistry thus does not lie so far from us as we think. When educated men discuss matters now-a-days, it may seem all very good, but it is in no way different from what Socrates and Plato called sophistry—although they themselves have adopted this standpoint as truly as did the Sophists* [5]." In doing so, he attempted to justify the negative deeds of the ancient sophists with the modern social behavior of his time, instead of using the sophists as the example to warn his contemporary of the detrimental impact of the erroneous way of thinking.

### Conclusion

Although the presence of dialectics in life is obvious, to grasp it is not trivial due to its similarity with sophistry. Therefore, thinking dialectically has become not only a practical difficulty but also a theoretical challenge. Nonetheless, if we could understand its logical domain in reference to the formal logic and science by which we conduct our daily thinking, it would be easier for us to benefit from the correct dialectical way of thinking. Furthermore, the awareness of various forms of confusion in history about dialectics and sophistry, especially by those renowned philosophy giants, could be very helpful for us to avoid the negative consequence of sophistry while think dialectically in the positive way.

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