In the Shadow of Hegel: Toward a Methodology Appropriate to the Sociological Consciousness of Philosophic Inquiry

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Abstract

In this theoretical essay, my primary task is to develop a methodology for engaging the conceptual normativity, or common-sense ideas, at work in the popular discursive practices of modern society. To do so, I will draw upon theories associated with continental philosophy, Deweyan pragmatism, and sociological theory that trace their lineages to the works of G. W. F. Hegel in order to construct a methodology for the clarification of terms and concepts of popular discourse that works within and through conceptual failure and contradiction. It is an approach that is at once ontological, epistemological, and methodological. My secondary task is to articulate the utility of the method developed here to the sociological consciousness implicit in philosophic inquiry. There is an active component to such philosophical tasks as clarifying the conceptual knowledge informing public policy and social action that is rooted in the link between knowledge and action, between understanding and activity. This is an issue of particular importance to theorists in an applied field such as educational theory.

In his political classic The Public and Its Problems, John Dewey offers up an observation that would surely resonate with contemporary readers.

The social situation has been so changed by the factors of an industrial age that traditional general principles have little practical meaning. They persist as emotional cries rather than as reasoned ideas. . . . The developments of industry and commerce have so complicated affairs that a clear-cut, gener-
ally applicable, standard of judgment becomes practically impossible. The forest cannot be seen for the trees nor the trees for the forest.\(^1\) To clarify his point, Dewey continues with four examples in which the concepts employed by situated social actors to grasp the increasing complexities of sociopolitical life fail to provide an adequate epistemic grounding for reasoned judgment and lead those actors toward performative contradiction.\(^2\) From the “reversal of the practical meaning of the term ‘liberalism’ in spite of a literal continuity of theory”\(^3\) to the power of political speech to “galvanize [a voter] into a temporary notion that he has convictions on an important”\(^4\) trade issue of which he has little knowledge, it is clear throughout *The Public and Its Problems* that Dewey recognized that our social locations provide conceptual frameworks rooted more in political ideologies, cultural practices, and historical precedents than in their ability to offer adequate explanations of empirical realities. This disjunction has real implications for the possibility of reasoned social activity in a democratic society.\(^5\)

For contemporary observers, an excellent example of this problematic that so occupied Dewey can be found on display in the Education aisle at your local book retailer. Thumbing through the titles on display presents a dizzying array of educational and political terminology employed in such divergent and contradictory ways that it quickly becomes apparent that there is no general consensus as to what those concepts mean. Such terms as *liberal*, *conservative*, *basics*, *literacy*, *cultural capital*, *equity*, and *globalization* demonstrate a fluidity of meaning within and across texts that serves the interest of political expediency at the expense of intellectual rigor. For the interested political participant seeking information on current education policy and practices, the ambiguity of the concepts and common-sense ideas used in these texts erects barriers to informed, ethical participation in the political processes and discursive practices influencing education policy. However, for philosophers, the ambiguity of meaning associated with the concepts of popular discourse and public debate has provided fertile ground for philosophic analysis.

Throughout the twentieth century, analytic philosophy dominated the English-speaking world as a school of philosophy that took the ambiguity of the concepts and terminology of discourse as its principle subject. Within this line of thought, the ambiguity of concepts is treated as a bug in the system to be worked out through philosophic analysis; a clarification most often accomplished through logical forms and propositions. However, the weakness of an analytic philosophy is to be found in what it doesn’t allow itself to see. By focusing exclusively on language and logical forms, analytic philosophy subtly denies the dynamics in which concepts operate. It brackets out the contexts in which concepts are encoded and decoded with meaning in a dynamic society. This myopic view of the mechanics of language to the exclusion of the constellations of externalities acting upon it and being influenced by it, its politics, leads analytic philosophy to focus on individual trees to the exclusion of the dynamic forests in which they live.

Grounded in Rawl’s liberal conception of justice as fairness, Brighouse’s inquiry into school choice and social justice makes for an excellent example of the
limitations of an analytical method. His attempt to “offer a theory of social justice for education policy” demonstrates sophisticated thinking on two important educational concepts at work in popular discourse, however the de-contextualized nature of his inquiry renders the conclusions he reaches of little political value or utility. Brighouse develops a series of logical propositions supplemented by a cursory, if not inadequate, review of research literature addressing school choice to conclude that, among other things, 1) “[e]ducational inequalities due to family background circumstances or family choices are unacceptable,” and 2) that it is theoretically possible to achieve social justice aims in an educational marketplace. While I am open to the possibilities implicit in this conception of educational justice and downright suspicious of this second claim, my concerns here are of a more practical nature.

What is the import of these claims for societies in which, conceptually, this idea of justice is already held as a general truism but are, existentially, fractured along the intersections of class, race, power, ethnicity, and so on? Is it reasonable to speculate that in a modern capitalist society so constituted, such as the US or the UK, the inequalities of a public institution can be resolved through the appropriation of its institutional mandate by a regulated private marketplace? Is there significant evidence in the research literature that school competition fosters, or demonstrates a significant potential to foster, the realization of educational justice (i.e., break the linkages between family background and educational opportunity)? In short, based on the best evidence available at this historical moment, within this sociopolitical context, what is to be done? What education policies demonstrate the most promise in achieving the aims of educational justice as defined by Brighouse? In this regard, Brighouse abdicates responsibility: “Ultimately, it is not up to philosophers to judge what reforms can move us in the direction of social justice and to win political support for them: those are the tasks of citizens, activists, politicians and policy-makers.” Brighouse’s analytical inquiry into the concepts of justice and school choice at work in popular debates over education policy adopts an apolitical stance steeped in a long history of liberal politics that denies philosophic inquiry the possibility of rendering judgment. It is an approach to philosophic inquiry that seeks to disconnect from its sociopolitical context through logical analysis and, in so doing, renders itself incapable of intervening in the social dynamics that constitutes its subject of inquiry.

In this theoretical essay, my primary task is to develop a methodology for engaging the conceptual normativity, or common-sense ideas, at work in modern society without falling prey to the pitfalls of an analytical method. To do so, I will draw upon theories associated with continental philosophy, American pragmatism, and sociology that trace their lineages to the works of G. W. F. Hegel. From this theoretical perspective, it will become apparent that the ambiguity of concepts is not a bug in the system but a feature. It is the product of a dynamic ontology that is fragmented and contradictory. I will draw upon these Hegelian-influenced theoretical perspectives in order to construct a methodology for the clarification of terms and
concepts of popular discourse and political speech that works within and through conceptual failure and contradiction. It is an approach that is at once ontological, epistemological, and methodological; it is a method that views trees as constitutive elements of a dynamic forest or ecosystem . . . as an organic totality.

My secondary task is to articulate the utility of the method developed here to the sociological consciousness implicit in philosophic inquiry. There is an active component to such philosophical tasks as clarifying the conceptual knowledge informing public policy and social action that is rooted in the link between knowledge and action, between understanding and activity. More simply, there is a politics implicit in philosophic inquiry that must be acknowledged by its practitioners. This is an issue of particular importance to theorists in an applied field such as educational theory. Developing new understandings of tough educational issues or ideals point toward definite modes of human action that demand attention on the part of theorists, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners alike. My goal is to develop a methodology for social and educational theorists to meaningfully engage popular debates over education policy via critical encounters with the conceptual knowledge providing the “unwritten imperative” preceding the implementation of specific policies “as an orientation, a sovereign positioning in space that is documented” by the implementation of a policy or social action as a fait accompli.14 The method outlined here seeks to develop new understandings out of the world and new modes of action in it while it develops means to establish the validity of those understandings and justifications for those actions. It is a method firmly situated within its sociopolitical context that offers theorists the possibility of rendering judgment on current and proposed education policies and of making a positive contribution to public policy and political discourse.

An Ontology of Modernity: A Problematic

Returning to our Deweyan example, we see that at the core of Dewey’s complaint lies a more fundamental observation into the ontological dynamics of Western modernity.15 Dewey is pointing us toward the “reality” that a modern society in constant transformation cannot find its ethical and epistemological grounding in historical precedent or tradition. Modern society must find this grounding through a continued and sustained inquiry into the dynamic processes, social relations, and complex interactions that constitutes modern capitalist society, a process that is mediated and wrought with epistemic hurdles. As we shall see, hierarchically structured and dynamic, modern society presents unique epistemological challenges requiring that individuals maintain an uneasy relationship with the conceptual knowledge and common sense ideas made available by their social locations.

The Discourse of Modernity

At the heart of Dewey’s problematic are the challenges of living in transformation. It is a problematic that is fundamental to modern philosophy and is by no means unique to Deweyan pragmatism. As a subject for philosophic inquiry, modernity’s
peculiar relationship to history and time presents fundamental challenges to the possibility of reasoned social activity in an increasingly specialized and dynamic society that is simultaneously historically constructed and fractured.

Tracing the origins of this philosophical conversation of modernity to the work of Hegel, Habermas identifies the core of this problematic as being located in modernity’s time consciousness of itself. The societies that emerged in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries defined themselves in terms of progress, growth, self-determination and revolution. Decrying the predictability and oppression of previous epochs, these emerging societies defined themselves in relation to historical change and elevated transformation to a normative ideal. To the revolutionaries of Western, capitalist society continuous developments in technology, science, and politics renders each historical moment unique and the dawn of a present-future.

The secular concept of modernity expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future. . . . Because the new, the modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new. Thus, it is characteristic of the historical consciousness of modernity to set off “the most recent [neuesten] period” from the modern [neu] age: Within the horizon of the modern age, the present enjoys a prominent position as contemporary history.

Although there is much to criticize in his larger body of work, an important contribution that Habermas makes to social theory in his recovery of the discourse of modernity is this retroubling of modernity’s relation to historical time as a fundamental problematic of philosophic inquiry.

In a modern capitalist society, there is no reason to assume that the technological, political, and social dynamics of one’s current social reality will continue unchanged into the future or that an historical past, viewed as being unique and never to be replicated, can serve as justification for activities in the present or the future.

Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape.

The present-future cannot rely on the criteria of the past as justification for policies and social action. Simply put, there is no guarantee that what is “true” today (or yesterday) will be “true” tomorrow. In a self-changing totality, epistemic validity can only be established as working ideas, contingent truths or (to use Dewey’s terminology) warranted assertions that emerge from sustained inquiry into empirical realities and are validated by their ability to guide human practice and solve problems in the here and now. From political to social theory, Western modernity
denies the possibility of universal claims to normative truth requiring instead a reflexive approach to ethical life and reasoned social activity.\(^{19}\)

The ethical, social, and political norms necessary for the smooth functioning of society\(^{20}\) must emerge from a sustained inquiry into the dynamic processes that make up that social reality. If modernity must create its normativity from within itself then it must do so conceptually, through a process of conceptualization. However, defined by its embrace of progress and transformation, modernity’s uneasy relation to historical time stands in contradistinction to the historically constructed empirical realities that is its subject in the concrete. There is a necessary tension woven into the fabric of Western modernity born of the temporal fractures immanent in the process of conceptualization by which societies construct their own normativities from their internal gaze. Marx points us toward this tension when he correctly notes: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”\(^{21}\)

Building off of Habermas’s conversation with Hegel, it is clear that the process of conceptualization through which modern society must construct its own normativity takes place within the framework of a fragmented totality that is at once dynamic and changing while also being historically constructed and, as we shall see, hierarchal. The specialization of material, cultural, and intellectual production in modern capitalist society\(^{22}\) takes place within narrow spheres of human activity that are hierarchically ordered and interdependent. With its roots in historical precedent and tradition (or historically received), this hierarchal ordering of activity and occupation assigns differing political, economic, and social value to specific social activities along the fractures of class, gender, and ethnicity. Thus the common-sense ideas and concepts taken for granted by groups atop this hierarchal order carry disproportionate weight in the social construction of conceptual norms more generally. Yet, the narrowness of these concepts prove to be inadequate for providing an explanation of the dynamic whole to which they refer. For societies that must construct the norms and common-sense ideas to guide reasoned ethical life and social policy from within themselves, this one-sidedness leads to conflict and contradiction. It leads to what Hegel calls “the way of despair.”\(^{23}\)

**The Way of Despair**

In his theories on hegemony, Antonio Gramsci’s work points to the importance of the conceptual norms of common sense as a subject of philosophic inquiry and political action. For Gramsci, hegemony is the process by which the hierarchal organization of modern capitalist society is actively constructed and maintained through sociopolitical coalitions (or historic blocs) built around specific conceptual frameworks or “common sense” ideas.\(^{24}\) Gramsci repeatedly referenced Marx’s observation that individuals become conscious of their life-worlds on the ideological terrain of common sense to emphasize the power of the everyday and the taken-for-grantedness of practical life as a necessary element of a dynamic and fractured
totality. Gramsci’s interests in popular culture, cultural production, and the intellectual function of political parties reflects his understanding that the landscape on which hegemonic dominance is actively constructed is a mediated one. Through popular mediations, dominant groups vie for social hegemony on the ideological front of “common sense” by adopting, transforming, or rejecting pre-existing (or historically constructed) conceptual frameworks at work in popular discourse in order to advance specific sociopolitical goals.

Gramsci helps to advance our discussion on the ontological dynamics of Western modernity in two important ways. First, Gramsci demonstrates that the conceptual norms emerging from modernity’s introspective gaze are contested frameworks that move within the tensions between the self-changing reality of modernity and its hierarchal structures constructed along the historically given and received. Yet, these conceptual frameworks are simultaneously capable of achieving systemic stability and are, indeed, necessary elements in creating an “operative reality.”

“Ideologies” are anything but appearances and illusions: they are an objective and operative reality; they just are not the mainspring of history, that’s all. It is not ideologies that create social reality but social reality, in its productive structure, that creates ideologies. . . . If humans become conscious of their tasks on the terrain of superstructures, it means that there is a necessary and vital connection between structure and superstructures, just as there is between the skin and the skeleton in the human body.

For Gramsci, the conceptual frameworks of common sense are dynamic structures that are organically connected to the self-changing social realities of a modernity that is fragmented and historically constructed. Social hegemony is a “long war” for social, economic, and political dominance between competing social groups that find in the conceptual norms of common sense one of their principle battlegrounds, a battle in which theorist and practitioner alike are a participant. It is a “war of position” to frame and define the conceptual norms that inform political life and public policy. From this perspective, the ambiguity of the conceptual norms employed by modern society to understand itself and formulate sociopolitical action and policy is a necessary element of modern society as it is presently constituted. It isn’t a bug in the system; it is a feature.

Second, Gramsci demonstrates that the contested conceptual norms emerging from a fractured totality will express the class interests, cultural values, and political ideologies of those groups atop the social hierarchy as being universal norms. “As long as society is divided into groups, one cannot talk of the ‘spirit’ without necessarily concluding that one is dealing with the ‘spirit’ of a particular group.” Gramsci clearly understood that there is no fixed relation between the interests of dominant groups and dominant ideologies, but the conceptual norms and ideologies held by those groups are overrepresented in the production of cultural, political, and intellectual knowledge. Thus those interests and ideologies will necessarily be reflected in the knowledge created. As Marx notes:
The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, ie. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force... For each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.30

The conceptual norms that must emerge from the transformative “real” of Western modernity will necessarily reflect the ensemble of hierarchically structured socio-political, economic, and cultural relations from which they emerge, and it is here that we encounter one of the central problematics of modern philosophy.

The transformative real of Western modernity requires that the conceptual norms necessary for the smooth functioning of society emerge from a sustained inquiry into the dynamic processes that make up that society. Yet, the hierarchal structuring of society along the historically constructed fractures of class, race, and gender erect practical epistemic barriers to this process of conceptualization. Reflecting the narrowly framed interests, ideologies, and values of groups atop the social hierarchy, the conceptual norms emerging from this fragmented totality provide inadequate conceptual frameworks for reasoned social activity and ethical human practice, because they conceal the larger totality of relations involved in their domain. Tracing this line of thought from Hegel through Marx and on to Gramsci, Stuart Hall explains the epistemological hurdles created by using one moment of a dynamic process to understand that process in its totality.

If, in our explanation, we privilege one moment only, and do not take account of the differentiated whole or “ensemble” of which it is a part; or if we use categories of thought, appropriate to one such moment alone, to explain the whole process; then we are in danger of giving what Marx would have called (after Hegel) a “one-sided” account. One-sided explanations are always a distortion. Not in the sense that they are a lie about the system, but in the sense that a “half-truth” cannot be the whole truth about anything. With those ideas, you will always represent a part of the whole. You will thereby produce an explanation which is only partially adequate—and in that sense, “false.”31

The normativity emerging from modernity’s introspective gaze suffers from a one-sidedness of perspective that limits modernity’s collective ability to accurately conceptualize (or reflect back unto itself) the dynamics that is its subject in the concrete (self-knowledge). Thus, social policy or activity formulated within the logic of those conceptual frameworks prove unlikely to succeed in fulfilling stated goals and often actively work to undermine them (undermining self-determinative action). The movement from the particular to the universal is the path to abstraction, the way of despair.

Dynamic and internally contradictory, the ontology of Western modernity creates conceptual norms that are at once dynamic and stable, particular and uni-
versal. They are norms that are contested, indeterminate, and necessarily suffering from an ambiguity of meaning that reflects the dynamics of the ideological landscape from which they emerge. Remarking on Hegel’s influence on Marxian theory, Gramsci introduces the intellectual into this nexus of contradiction, normativity, and political praxis.

It [Hegelian philosophy] is the full consciousness of contradictions, the consciousness wherein the philosopher himself, understood both as an individual and as a social group, not only understands contradictions but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and raises this element to a principle of politics and action.32

The ambiguity of the concepts employed in popular discourse requires that we maintain an uneasy relationship with these conceptual norms, and it requires a reflexive approach in the formulation of public policy and social action within their conceptual frameworks. Fulfilling the organic role Gramsci envisioned for social theorists requires a dynamic epistemology that can be used to inform a reflexive methodology for working within and through conceptual failure and contradiction.

**A Correspondence Theory of Knowledge**

Kimberly Hutchings identifies the outlines for just such a dynamic epistemic model in Hegelian philosophy. The dialectical method detailed in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an epistemic model that Hegel developed to reconcile conceptual knowledge to the empirical realities that are its subject and to establish the conditions for a self-knowledge (normativity) that is appropriate to “modernity.” Hegel considered the *Phenomenology* to be the “ladder” to his *Science of Logic* in that it both established the problematics of a self-changing real and a reflexive epistemological framework for living in transformation. From Hegel’s perspective, the one-sidedness of the conceptual norms emerging from a fractured modernity cannot be transcended in pursuit of Truth. The way out of despair is to work your way through it.

**A Critical Phenomenology**

One of Hegel’s key contributions to philosophic discourse was his early troubling of the subject-object dualism of classical Western philosophy. In the dynamics of a transformative ontology, Hegel recognized that neither the subject/knower or object of knowledge were fixed essences. Conceiving of the subject and object of knowledge in mutually exclusive terms requires of a knowledge claim the privileging of one of these to the exclusion of the other as well as “explaining how the identity of these non-identical terms has been established.”33 Rejecting the mechanistic relation of object-independent minds to mind-independent objects as being mediated by cognition or reason, Hegel conceived of the subject/knower and object of knowledge as inextricably linked by the social dynamics in which the knowing subject attains consciousness of both herself as a knowing subject and the object of knowledge as a subject of inquiry.
In particular, Hegel undermines the idea of the subject-knower as an abstract, individuated entity distinct from the object it is trying to grasp. . . . For Hegel unpacking the role of self-consciousness in conscious knowing involves unpacking the relation of “I” to its natural condition, to other “I”s, to its social and historical context and to its historically shifting forms of self-understanding in common sense, religion, art and philosophy. . . . [It is] an ontological claim about the co-anchoring of subject and object in a shared, material, self-changing reality, which is the medium through which claims to knowledge and self-conscious action are possible. This reality is reducible neither to mind-independent objects nor to object-independent mind.34

The co-anchoring of subject and object in a transformative ontological “real” requires of an inquiring consciousness (individual or group) that an epistemic claim find its validation in the recognition of its truth by others, a recognition that depends “on the idea of the possibilities and constraints immanent in what it is to be where one is.”35 The dynamic relationship between the subject/knower and an object of knowledge offers no privileged position (or position from nowhere) from which to justify an epistemic claim. Both the subject and object of knowledge are “immanently implicated in the same context which conditions the object of inquiry, its philosophical treatment and any meaning which will be generated in the encounter.”36

As Hutchings notes, the principle lesson of the Phenomenology is that conceiving of the subject and object of inquiry as being mutually exclusive and binary “results in one-sidedness and a consequent failure to comprehend not only the excluded or denigrated term, but the ground of the authority of the privileged one.”37 A mutual exclusivity of subject and object places an inquirer in the position of requiring access to “nomenal and transcendental realms from which human understanding was forever excluded.”38 In order to work through this philosophic failure or problematic, the Phenomenology presents three “characters”: the knowing subject, the object of knowledge, and observing reason (Hegel and the reader). Its text traces the repeated attempts by the subject/knower to employ a conceptual framework in order to grasp the object of knowledge only to be met with repeated failure that returns the subject back to the initial question or issue from which the inquiry began. However, with each return to this point of departure, the knowing subject incorporates the lessons learned in its previous failures in order to develop more sophisticated concepts and modes of understanding. “The transformative dynamic of this learning process is presented by Hegel as an immanent dialectic in which a mode of understanding proves to be unsustainable in its own terms and has therefore to be re-conceptualized.”39 Working through conceptual failure and contradiction, Hegel outlines an epistemological model appropriate to modernity, one that is historically contingent and provisional.

Hegel’s dialectics involves a movement from the clarification and definition of a concept (subjectivity) to the division of the concept into its determinations
within the social totality (particularity) to the transformation of the concept into a more sophisticated form through the articulation of the determinations and complexities involved in its subject (universality). It is an epistemic model that is both deductive and inductive. An inquirer begins with a conception that is defined in its most immediate form, as it is used most commonly. From there the concept is pulled apart into the relations, processes, and complex determinations to which the concept makes reference. In so doing, the one-sidedness of the concept becomes manifest at points in which it fails to adequately explain the phenomena it supposedly describes or points at which an activity contradicts the conceptual norm from which the activity finds its justification. Yet, in its division, the articulation of the determinations and dynamic processes subsumed by a concept provides the necessary preconditions for its transformation. Through conceptual failure and contradiction a concept is transformed into increasingly sophisticated conceptual frameworks of the phenomena to which it makes reference. It is, as Marx was to later observe, a “working up of observation and conception into concepts.”

The epistemic model that emerges from Hegelian dialectics is a correspondence theory of truth. Kenneth Westphal explains:

> According to Hegel, our experience of the object is structured both by our conception of the object and through the object itself, which we endeavor to comprehend using that conception. Similarly our experience of ourselves as cognizant subjects is structured both through our cognitive self-conception and our actual cognitive constitution and engagements, which we endeavor to comprehend using that conception. Hegel’s analysis implies directly that, on the one hand, we have no concept-free empirical knowledge or concept-free self-knowledge. On the other hand, neither are we trapped within our “conceptual schemes”! Put positively, our experience of the object can only correspond with the object itself if our conception of the object also corresponds with the object itself.

Beneath the metaphysical language of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel outlines a reflexive epistemic model that establishes the validity of a knowledge claim by its ability to offer answers in the concrete and by its recognition from the “others” always already implicated in both the subject and object of knowledge. In a dynamic ontology of self-changing subjects and objects, these claims are necessarily historically contingent and partial. “The partiality of any knowledge claim is guaranteed by the relative identity (the identity and non-identity) not simply of knower and truth, but of knower, the object of knowledge and the ‘observing consciousness’ from whom the knower claims, but may well not receive, recognition.”

Hutchings’s recovery of Hegelian thought makes an important contribution to our larger discussion on the conceptual frameworks of the popular discourse in that it establishes “the epistemic ladder” to the methodology that I will employ in this research. Hutchings points us toward the conclusion that there is no way to transcend the ambiguity of meaning associated with the conceptual norms of popu-
lar discourse and political speech. “Normative judgment [is] necessarily grounded in the complexity of practice and context.”

In contrast to an analytical model, the clarification of the conceptual frameworks of popular discourse requires of an inquirer a “this-worldly” engagement with these conceptual norms as they are used in the concrete processes of a hierarchally fractured, self-changing “reality.” “Hegel offers an escape from the way of despair by following through the logic of despair itself, rather than identifying a transcendent path ‘beyond.’” The epistemic validity of any one conceptual framework is established in an emerging process of engagement with the dynamic structures, relations and historical precedents to which it refers. It finds its “truth” in its ability to answer questions, solve problems and guide human activity within those dynamics and in its recognition by the others always already implicated in an epistemic claim.

The product of this epistemic engagement is a necessarily historically contingent, provisional claim to knowledge and action inextricably linked to its context. It is an epistemic claim that seeks to not only reconceptualize the subject of inquiry through an articulation of the complex determinants that is its subject in the concrete but to also construct the conditions of possibility for its recognition by “others.” It must seek to establish the necessary preconditions for reasoned debate, ethical practice, and constructive activity. It must establish the necessary preconditions for an ethical, emergent normativity. It is an epistemic model that is inherently implicated in political, social, and cultural life.

Hutchings notes that Hegel considered the *Phenomenology* to be “the ladder” to his *Science of Logic*. In turn, I hope to use Hutchings recovery as my ladder, but in a rather unique way. The dialectical movements of the *Phenomenology* became the synthetic method of the *Science of Logic*, a methodology that was to have a profound impact on two important thinkers in the history of Western modernity: John Dewey and Karl Marx. I will construct a synthetic method of philosophic inquiry from a recovery of this philosophical influence in Dewey’s and Marx’s work so as to benefit from the accumulative contribution made by each of these significant theorists.

**Toward a Synthetic Mode of Inquiry**

The synthetic method Hegel developed in the *Science of Logic* mirrored the three moments of his dialectical method in the *Phenomenology*. What was in the *Phenomenology* a movement from subjectivity to particularity to universality became in the *Science of Logic* a movement from definition (universality) to division (particularity) to synthesis (individuality). Mirroring the dialectical movements in the *Phenomenology*, the movement from definition to division to synthesis constitutes a movement of expanding cognition from the abstract universality with which an inquirer begins to the complex determinants and contradictions conditioning its actualization to its reconceptualization to a level of complexity that is appropriate to its subject. Constructed as a method for establishing the epistemic validity of conceptual norms employed by modern society to understand its own complexi-
ties (self-knowledge) and to formulate reasoned, ethical policy (self-determination), Hegel’s *Logic* was to have a profound impact on Dewey and Marx. Building off of Jim Garrison’s recovery of this influence on Dewey and Mark Meaney’s recovery of its influence on Marx, I will construct a synthetic method of philosophic inquiry so as to benefit from each of the voices making a contribution to this conversation. I will first outline the framework for this method through its three movements of definition, division, and synthesis, and I will finish with a discussion of the specific insights that I take away from each of the conversations presented in this essay.

**Definition**

If there is an a priori at work in the synthetic method that emerges from this broad, far-reaching conversation on the influence of Hegel’s *Logic*, it is an a priori of concepts; more specifically, an a priori of an inquirer possessing conceptual norms that serve as both common sense knowledge informing practical life as well as an impetus for creative, constructive inquiry. Indeed, inquiry is predicated on the existence of an inquirer or inquirers possessing conceptual norms as practical tools for constructing their “life-worlds” who find themselves in a problematic situation in which a conceptual framework fails in its practical application. As Garrison notes:

> [U]niversals [concepts, theories, and the like] are rules for carrying out operations; that is, they are norms of action . . . The purpose of inquiry is to transform an indeterminate situation wherein we have encountered an obstacle to smooth functioning into an organically coordinated situation that allows us to restore smooth functioning.

In Hegelian terms, concepts are not simply common sense norms of self-knowledge; they also guide and justify practices, beliefs, activities, and modes of human association. Concepts become manifest in their practical applications in the concrete as self-determinative, productive action. Thus, inquiry finds its impetus in the contradictions and disjunctions that occur in the movement of conceptual norms from an abstract universality to the particular determinants that is its subject in the concrete. These disjunctions, or “indeterminate situations,” create an impetus for inquiry in their disruptions to the smooth functioning of practical everyday life, and inquiry finds its terminus in the re-institution of “factual and conceptual subject-matter in conjugate correspondence with each other.”

Hegel’s observation that the *Begriff* (concept) contains within it moments of subjectivity, particularity, and universality is at once an observation on the epistemic challenges presented by a transformative ontology while also being a very pragmatic approach to philosophic inquiry. The disjunctions that emerge from practical activity and practice may provide the impetus for inquiry, but a synthetic method points toward the conceptual norms underpinning those activities and practices as the starting point for philosophic inquiry. “[F]or anything to have any meaning at all some consolidation of meaning with what is sensibly and physically present is always required . . . [A]ll data collection involves some universal, however restricted.”
The first task of a synthetic advance is to define the concept or subject of inquiry into the moments of Begriff. “Hegel characterizes definition as the transformation of a given objectivity into the simple form of the concept, that is into universality, particularity, and individuality.” In its simple individuality, the concept is presented as an abstract representation of the object of knowledge. In its simple universality, the concept is defined by its normative claims to the simple individual. In its simple particularity, the concept is defined in the actualization of the simple universal in the concrete. “[T]he moments of the concept govern” the initial definition of the concept as well as the “initial consideration of the relationship between [its] particularities.” The first task of a synthetic advance is to define the concept in its most immediate form through its own conceptual logic; to define it as what Hegel called a logical universal.

This initial movement toward definition will provide two essential elements. First, it will present the subject of inquiry in its most immediate form within popular discourse as a logical universal. Second, and just as important, the moments of the concept developed in definition will provide the “logic” for determining and isolating the data required to advance the inquiry process. “Once the logical universal has been isolated, the investigator then moves from universality to particularity and there isolates the particular determinations or conditions of the universal.” The process of definition that begins the synthetic method will create a path to be retraced in the second movement of a synthetic advance: division.

**Division**

The second moment of a synthetic analysis is a deductive movement of division. In division, the inquiry follows through the logic of the concept defined in the previous moment of definition. It requires that an inquirer articulate the concrete conditions and processes that constitute the subject of the logical universal defined in the first moment of inquiry. “In division, the investigator no longer presents the universal in its abstract universality as a definition, but in ‘connection’ with its own conditions.”

In division, the inquirer develops and expands the moments of the concept (or logical universal) by retracing the path established in definition from particularity to universality to individuality. Division begins in the concrete processes in which the universal actualizes itself in an articulation of the phenomena it describes, the activities it prescribes and the conditions under which those actions are carried out. Division requires that an inquirer sift through the empirical evidence and engage in empirical inquiry into the particular determinations of the logical universal in order to isolate and develop the processes and conditions of its realization in the concrete activities that is its subject. “The universal formulates symbolically possible operations leading to possible consequences that may not occur when the action is carried out. Only existential operations provide universals with actual consequences.”

The moments of the logical universal provide a framework for the movement toward division, but it does not dictate the evidence or data that will be used to
articulate the particularities generated by the subject of inquiry. “Stimuli, sensation, data, or facts are never given; rather, they depend on the inquirer’s active processes of selection, discrimination, and coordination.” A synthetic method posits the inquirer as an active participant in the process of inquiry and movement toward knowledge. An inquirer is required to not only identify and justify the empirical evidence related to the subject of inquiry but to also expand the investigation beyond the narrow strictures dictated by the logical universal to related phenomena, processes and activities of particular relevance to the larger inquiry. “The determinations of the data is an active constructive process guided, in part, by some universal idea of what is relevant to the larger problematic situation from whence the data are selected.”

Through empirical analysis of the particular determinations of the subject of inquiry, the inquirer articulates points of correspondence between the particular and the universal as well as points of disjunction in which the universal fails to offer an adequate explanation of the phenomena that is its subject or points of contradiction between its prescriptions and its normative justifications. Further, empirical analysis establishes points in which specific practices and processes not initially prescribed or articulated by the universal demonstrate a formal relationship to its determinants and is of particular relevance to the larger inquiry. The articulation of the particular determinants that are the subject of the logical universal defined in the first moment of a synthetic analysis will thus produce an expansive and inchoate mass of empirical data and determinants related to the subject of inquiry that must be classified according to their relations one to another and to an expanded universal in the form of regular syllogisms, or “if-then” propositions. This expanded universal is then set over and against the simple universality articulated in definition and in its relations with an expanded individual representation of the subject of inquiry, again in the form of regular syllogisms.

The result of this working back through the moments of the logical universal is an expanded presentation of the universal as a practical unity of formal relationships that are not necessarily interdependent or organically connected. “In division, one merely presents the relationship of universality, particularity and individuality as an immediate unity. Division does not consist in a proof that the moments are essentially related in an organic unity.” The deductive movement of division presents the universal through its particular determinations and the conditions of its actualization in concrete operations. However, in so doing, it creates the empirical ground for an inductive analysis that synthesizes the particular determinants of the universal into a reconceptualized form more appropriate to its subject. “The way down and the way up are the same since concrete operations may suggest symbolization into universal ‘if-then’ formulations of symbolic operations, which is why the relation of the two forms of operation [deductive and inductive analysis] form a hermeneutic helix.”
Synthesis

Dewey described a synthetic mode of analysis as a “double movement.” Using the moments of the logical universal identified in definition as a framework, synthetic inquiry moves deductively toward the particular conditions and complex determinations that are the concrete conditions in which the universal becomes actualized. From this grounding, synthetic inquiry then moves by inference and induction to a reconceptualized universal. For Dewey, this double movement is a process of going “to and from meaning.” Garrison explains:

[W]e move from facts [data, kinds, and so on] discriminated and fixed by analysis, through inference, to a suggested meaning [an idea] that synthetically unifies the initial facts and additional facts that the idea [hypothesis, theory] calls to the inquirer’s attention. . . . The relation between inference and implication, like that of induction and deduction as well as analysis and synthesis to which they closely conjoin, is that . . . [t]hey are subfunctions of a single organic function; in Hegel, they are dialectical unity.

The third and final moment of the synthetic method is this inductive movement toward meaning. Benefiting from the pulling apart of the subject of inquiry into its complex processes, conditions, and determinations in division, the final product of synthetic inquiry is a transformed universal (concept) developed to a level of sophistication that is appropriate to its dynamic subject.

In synthesis, the subject of inquiry (logical universal) is redefined as an organic whole in which its particular determinations are “mediated moments of a single process.” The final movement of synthesis works through the complex determinants developed in division in order to reconceptualize the initial subject of inquiry into a more sophisticated framework that escapes the one-sidedness that was Hegel’s nemesis while also acting on the world, Dewey’s and Marx’s concern. Following Hegel’s Logic, synthesis redefines the subject of inquiry as a single process mediated by the moments of Begriff as an organic unity. In its demonstration, the inquirer presents the reconceptualized universal through its moments of individuality, universality, and particularity as if-then propositions that establishes the newly constructed framework as a dynamic unity. It is after this working through the moments of the Begriff that synthesis reaches its conclusion in a formal definition of the transformed universal.

The demonstration of the transformed universal begins by moving through the “expanded moments” of division. Through a process of inference, implication, classification and abstraction, the complexities of the expanded individuality developed in division are presented as a transformed individuality or representation of the object of inquiry. The empirical grounding from which the transformed individuality is constructed provides for a more sophisticated presentation of the subject of inquiry and expands the range of possibilities available for the development of its other moments. Once presented, the transformed individuality is set over and against the expanded universality developed in division in the presentation of a
transformed universality as regular syllogisms. Drawing from the expanded universality, the inquirer makes a series of judgments that adopt, transform, or reject the possible normativities made available by the expanded universality in correspondence to its transformed individuality. Continuing, the transformed universality is then set over and against the expanded particularity established in division in the presentation of a transformed particularity as regular syllogisms. Again, the inquirer is required to make a series of judgments that adopt, transform, or reject the possible practices and determinants made available by the expanded particularity in correspondence to its transformed universality. The product of this working back through the moments of the concept is a conceptual framework that presents the subject of inquiry as mediated moments in dynamic relations; interdependent and mutually constituted. Meaney explains:

[B]ecause the relationship between the many determinations is a mediated one, the investigator must . . . demonstrate that the object [of knowledge] is in fact a concrete unity of distinct moments. Then, once the process of proof is complete, the investigator concludes the inquiry with a second or real definition that displays the object as a concrete, organic whole.65

Through induction, implication, classification, and inference, the final movement of a synthetic analysis is a reconceptualized individual object of knowledge defined through the mediated moments always already imminent in a conceptual norm or universal. Synthesis finds its conclusion in the formal definition of the subject of inquiry as “symbolic, relational possibilities” that prescribe “existential operations,” or modes of action, as both the concrete actualization of the redefined concept into the concrete and the means by which its epistemic validity can be established.66

**Synthesis as a Transformative Project**

I began this essay with Dewey’s observation about the relative vacuity of public debate in order to open a discussion on the ambiguity of meaning associated with the conceptual frameworks of “common sense.” Using Dewey’s observation to set the stage, I brought Habermas and Gramsci into conversation with Hegel in order to demonstrate that this ambiguity of meaning isn’t a bug; it’s a feature. It isn’t a question of logic; it’s an ontological perspective.

The conversation between Habermas and Gramsci demonstrates that this ambiguity of meaning is a product of a dynamic ontology that is simultaneously historically constructed and fractured along the lines of class, gender, and race. The concepts of modern society are at once dynamic and stable. In necessary tension with a transformative “real,” these concepts are simultaneously contested by competing social actors and agents seeking to frame and reframe their normative claims as well as the activities and policies to which these concepts speak. Yet, despite these tensions, the concepts are also capable of creating operative realities and achieving systemic stability in the realm of “common sense,” the normativity necessary to
the smooth functioning of human society. As products of a contested sociopolitical landscape, the principle lesson to be learned in this conversation is that modern society needs to maintain an uneasy relationship with the conceptual norms of common sense through which society actualizes itself in self-determinative action. For philosophic inquiry, this requires a dynamic approach to epistemology in which the validity of a normative claim is to be established in relational correspondence to the concrete realities to which it refers, or the conditions of its actualization.

Hutchings teases out just such an epistemic model through her recovery of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. The epistemic model she details is a double movement of deductive and inductive cognition in which the inquirer becomes an active participant in an expanding comprehension of a concept through an articulation of the complex determinants that are its subject in the concrete. The important lesson we take away from Hutchings’s conversation with Hegel is that there is no way to transcend the contradictions and ambiguity of conceptual norms. Philosophic inquiry must work through those ambiguities and contradictions in order to reconceptualize norms to the level of sophistication necessary to inform self-determinative action without falling prey to performative contradiction.

The product of philosophic inquiry is a necessarily provisional, historically contingent conceptual framework. The epistemic validity of this conceptual framework is established in the relational correspondence between its normative claims and the existential outcomes they generate in their actualization in the concrete. Far from the “view from no-where” associated with classical Western philosophy, Hutchings’s conversation with Hegel posits philosophic inquiry and inquirer in a “this-worldly” engagement that seeks to establish the necessary preconditions for the transformation of conceptual norms to the level of sophistication appropriate to their existential realities.

Bringing Garrison and Meaney into conversation with Hegel provides a formal method for accomplishing this philosophic task. Tracing Hegel’s influence in Dewey and Marx, the synthetic method of philosophic inquiry that emerges from this far-reaching conversation mirrors the epistemic model Hutchings recovered from Hegel. Moving from an indeterminate situation of conceptual failure and contradiction, inquiry begins with a definition of a concept in its most immediate form. From definition, inquiry moves through the logic of this conceptual framework in a deductive movement that articulates the complex determinants and processes conditioning its actualization in the concrete (division). Moving inductively from this empirical base, the concept is then synthesized into a conceptual framework through which the indeterminate situation from which inquiry began is resolved and through which the epistemic validity of its normative claims are to be established. The product of a synthetic method is the reconceptualization, or redefinition, of a concept as an organic system of normativity and action; more specifically, normative claims that prescribe modes of action through which their epistemic validity is to be established and recognized by others. The synthetic method that has emerged in the preceding pages is a method for car-
rying out philosophic inquiry that embraces the politics implicit in its domain. It is a methodology that empowers a theorist to posit himself or herself as an element in the contradictory dynamics of modern society and raise that element to a principle of politics and action.\textsuperscript{67}

**Conclusion**

In September of 2007, National Public Radio’s Andrea Seabrook interviewed Daniel Robinson of Oxford University to offer listeners a philosophic perspective on the “bad options” facing American policy in the Iraq War. The central problem being, if the U.S. pulls out of Iraq, then there will be bloodshed. If the U.S. stays in Iraq, then there will be bloodshed. Robinson’s response began with a brief discussion of the classics of ethical theory (Aristotle, Kant, and Mill) and ended with a somewhat troubling conclusion on the “nerve racking” limits of philosophy. While all three of these moral philosophies offer us a course of action, just about every “reasonable” option one could think of would likely find support from each of those very same theories. Philosophy is not a guide book of answers but a guide book of methods that force us to be more deliberative, to distrust our passions, to trust our reason more, and to know our limits. While I certainly do not want to devalue or question the necessity of those philosophic tasks, demarcating the limits of philosophic inquiry to the role of the gadfly would go a long way toward explaining philosophy’s marginalization in the academy as well as philosophy of education’s marginalization in colleges of education.

Perhaps Robinson’s discussion would have benefited from a Deweyan perspective on the role of philosophy in modern human society. Within a Deweyan framework, there is a sociological consciousness implicit in the philosophic recognition of the link between knowledge and action or, in Hegelian terminology, self-knowledge and self-determination.

All knowledge in short makes a difference. It opens new perspectives and releases energy in new tasks. This happens anyway and continuously, philosophically or no philosophy. But philosophy tries to gather up the threads into a central stream of tendency, to inquire what more fundamental and general attitudes of response the trend of knowledge exacts of us, to what new fields of action it calls us. It is in this sense, a practical and moral sense, that philosophy can lay claim to the epithets of universal, basic and superior. Knowledge is partial and incomplete, any and all knowledge, till we have placed it in the context of a future which cannot be known, but only speculated about and resolved upon. It is, to use in another sense a favorite philosophical term, a matter of appearance, for it is not self-enclosed, but an indication of something to be done.\textsuperscript{68}

For Dewey, the role of philosophy is to engage the highest ideals and issues of the day, “to gather up the threads into a central stream of tendency, to inquire what more fundamental and general attitudes of response the trend of knowledge exacts of us, to what new fields of action it calls us.”\textsuperscript{69} Dewey’s conditioning of philosophic problems through an explication of the dynamic processes that are their subjects in
concreto, his “gathering up of the threads,” finds its terminus in their resolution, a process of conceptualization and human action that “assumes uninterrupted, free, and fluid passage from ordinary experience to abstract thinking, from thought to fact, from things to theories and back again.” From a Deweyan perspective, philosophic inquiry moves between the ideas animating the social imagination and the societal processes and human activities seeking justification in those ideas. It is a perspective that seeks to not only trouble our thinking about the difficult issues societies face but, more importantly, to make judgments as to what is to be done. It is a theoretical perspective that positions philosophic inquiry as a political act.

In this light, Marx’s thesis that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” comes into clearer focus. Marx’s critique itself was a Hegelian task that sought to establish the foundation for revolutionary change through an interrogation of the highest ideals of an emergent capitalist modernity. Marx’s praxis philosophy fulfilled its sociological consciousness through a “ruthless criticism” that sought to “develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles.” Engaging the highest ideals of the day is a political act from which the theorist must not withdraw. The key is to identify an appropriate point, or points, for philosophic intervention. In this regard, I agree with Buck-Morss that the nexus for this political act is to be located in “the explanatory power of the (Hegelian) full concept” as opposed to Laclau’s conceptualization of politics as an “empty signifier.” One of the key political battlegrounds for social theory is to be located in the conceptual norms (nomos) preceding, or ordering, social action and policy formation. For the educational theorist, a vital battleground for philosophic intervention is to be located in the nomos animating popular debates over education reform that precede the formation of education policy.

As we have seen, the ontological landscape of modernity requires a reflexive approach to the conceptual norms emerging from its internal gaze. Nevertheless, while necessarily contingent and fallible, conceptual understandings lend themselves to certain actions just as social actions lend themselves to certain conceptual understandings. Divorcing understanding from action, self-knowledge from self-determination, denies philosophic inquiry that most precious of attributes: relevancy. Denied the power of judgment, philosophy is incapable of carrying out such tasks as bringing clarity to public discourse and debate, empowering individuals and societies to answer tough ethical questions, and providing human society with the hermeneutical tools required to ethically organize and inform human action and social policy. It becomes disengaged from the world. This is an issue of particular importance to an applied field such as philosophy of education. If educational theory is to be “in” the world it must remain “of” the world.

While philosophy’s role as the gadfly is certainly vital, it is just as important that philosophic analysis provide mechanisms for working through the issues societies and individuals face. To return to the example with which this essay began, the concepts one would encounter on the Education aisle of a book retailer, such as equity and globalization, signify complex issues facing public education in the here
and now. Bringing philosophic clarity to these concepts must entail the construction of new understandings, or conceptualizations, that lend themselves to specific modes of action (i.e., education policies) while also articulating the means by which the epistemic validity of those claims are to be established. A philosophical analysis of the concept of globalization must generate new understandings of the relation of globalization to public education that point toward specific education policies and practices while also articulating an agenda for educational research to validate those understandings and advance human knowledge.

In this essay, I have traced the outline of a methodology that provides philosophy with an important tool for fulfilling its essential role in modern society. While necessary, the method developed here places large demands on theorists. It is a methodology that requires theorists to work across a wide array of disciplinary fields and a willingness to engage in empirical research to address gaps in knowledge that emerge from inquiry. However, the critical method outlined in this essay provides an important tool in the education theory carpenter box for fulfilling the sociological consciousness implicit in its domain.

Notes

3. Ibid, 134.
4. Ibid, 132.
5. Ibid, 192-93.
7. Ibid., 209.
8. Ibid., 118.
9. Ibid., 182.
13. This paper articulates the theoretical component of an ongoing cultural studies in education research project into the popular discourse of education policy and reform. More specifically, the synthetic method developed in this essay constitutes the methodology I am currently employing in a discourse analysis of the concept of globalization as it is used in the popular discourse of education reform.
15. A note on terminology: I will adopt “Western modernity” or “modernity” as a means of denoting our current historical moment from a sociological perspective. My intent is to open a conversation across this historical epoch from its founding in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to contemporary thought. I would ask the reader to not interpret this use of terminology as an attempt to enter into the larger conversation between the “modernist project” and “post-modernity.”
17. Ibid., 5-6.
18. Ibid., 7.
19. The vital nature of this epistemic change is evidenced by the prominence given it by theorists such Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty.
20. A mode of social organization in which individuals successfully construct operational realities or meaningful life-worlds.
22. In fact making modern capitalist society possible.
25. Ibid., 156-58.
26. Ibid., 52-53.
27. Ibid., 157.
28. Ibid., 196-97.
29. Ibid., 188.
34. Ibid., 39-49.
35. Ibid., 109-10.
36. Ibid., 49.
37. Ibid., 36.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 152.
44. Ibid., 110.
45. Ibid., 152-54.
46. A more expansive examination of this Hegelian influence can be found in James A. Good’s *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The Permanent Hegelian Deposit in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).
It is important to note that this methodology is not specific to any one thinker, and it is not my intent to engage in an in-depth explication of the various similarities, differences, and intellectual trajectories among their work. The basic outline of Hegel’s method developed in *Logic* will indeed form the backbone for the synthetic method that will be used in this research, but it is not my purpose here to argue that this method is Hegelian, Deweyian, etc. My primary concern is to develop a synthetic mode of philosophic inquiry appropriate to both this historical moment and the tasks to which it will be employed.


See discussion above on Hutchings’s recovery of Hegel’s epistemology.


Ibid., 173.

Ibid., 175.

Ibid.


Ibid., 22.

Ibid., 22-23.

Compare and contrast with an eye toward revealing points of contradiction and correspondence.


Ibid., 21.


Ibid., 175.

Ibid., 175.


Ibid.


Ordering in the sense of Foucault’s *episteme*.

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