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## The Rational Kernel of Hegel's Dialectic

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### ABSTRACT

What is the rational kernel of Hegel's dialectic that Marx famously speaks of? How can it be extracted from the mystical shell in which it is embedded in Hegel's philosophy? Hegel sets out the general principles of his dialectic in the opening sections of his *Logic*. Starting from pure abstract "Being," he claims to derive the concepts of "Becoming" and "Determinate Being" by a purely logical process. These arguments are fallacious. However, there is a rational kernel in them. Following Marx, I show how this can be extracted by inverting Hegel's argument. To understand things concretely, we must see them as in relation to other things within a larger totality and as changing. I show how these fundamental tenets of dialectic are implied in Hegel's claims, and I defend them against opposing empiricist ideas.

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My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. . . . The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell. (Marx 2010, 19)

What is the rational kernel of Hegel's dialectic? How can it be extracted from the mystical shell in which it is embedded in Hegel's philosophy?

Hegel sets out the general principles of his dialectic in his *Logic*,<sup>1</sup> and particularly in its celebrated opening sections on Being, Nothing and Becoming. Systematic philosophy, Hegel insists, must start with bare abstract Being. This, he maintains, is pure immediacy, an empty abstraction equivalent to pure Nothing.

The negation of this Nothing, a logical progression from it, is supposed not simply to return us to bare abstract Being. By a dialectical process of "negation of the negation," Hegel claims, we move forward to Becoming, a synthesis of Being and Nothing. Unlike the concept of abstract Being, the category of Becoming contains difference within it. This is the character of Determinate Being (*Dasein*). It is the first concrete category. "Becoming is the first concrete thought, and therefore the first concept<sup>2</sup> [*Begriff*]: whereas Being and Nought are empty abstractions" (Hegel 1975, §88 addition).

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Hegel maintains that the development from Being to Nothing and then to Becoming is a logical progression. Unfortunately, that is clearly invalid. If pure abstract Being is, indeed, identical with pure empty Nothing, as Hegel insists, then no progression beyond that point is possible. The development should simply stop there. Nothing comes from nothing (*ex nihil nihilo fit*).

Hegel (1969, 84) rejects this principle on the grounds that it abolishes becoming and amounts to the view that Matter is eternal. “The maxim, ‘From nothing comes nothing, from something something,’ really abolishes Becoming: for what it comes from and what it becomes are one and the same” (Hegel 1975, §88).

This argument is questionable. Becoming needs not be creation *ex nihilo*. At times, Hegel himself appears to recognise this. For something actual, he says, “In its beginning, the thing is not yet, but it is more than merely nothing, for its Being is already in the beginning” (Hegel 1975, §88).

The Nothing involved in actual becoming is no longer the pure abstract Nothing with which Hegel’s Logic begins, but a form of Nothingness which is already bound up with Being,<sup>3</sup> and so actual becoming is not creation purely *ex nihilo*.

Hegel’s claim to derive Determinate Being from empty abstract Being has the air of hocus-pocus about it. It is as though something definite is being produced out of the blue. As Seth says, “Hegel’s language would justify us in believing that categories take flesh and blood and walk into the air . . . that logical abstractions can thicken so to speak into real existence” (Seth 1887, 125). The idea that something with real determinate being can be conjured out of mere thought is part of the mystical shell of Hegel’s philosophy. It is pure idealism. In Marx’s words, what Hegel’s philosophy amounts to is the view that,

the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” (Marx 2010, 19)

We must invert this whole picture, Marx insists, “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (Marx 2010, 19). In short, for Marx, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1987, 263).

There is a theological dimension to Hegel’s philosophy, as Marx observes. Hegel himself acknowledges this. “Being itself and the special sub-categories of it which follow, as well as those of logic in general, may be looked upon as definitions of the Absolute, or metaphysical definitions of God” (Hegel 1975, §85). Hegel’s abstract concept of pure Being is a version of his concept of God who manifests and reveals himself to create the world (Hegel 2006, 129). God is self-manifesting, self-revealing. Just as Determinate Being is derived from abstract Being, so the world is supposed to be implicit in the bare abstract concept of God.

To explain his view that abstract Being manifests itself, Hegel draws an analogy with a seed that grows to become a plant.

The concept [*Begriff*] constitutes the beginning in philosophical treatment, too. But here it is the substance of the thing, like the seed from which the whole tree unfolds. The seed contains all of its characteristics, the entire nature of the tree: the type of its sap, the pattern of its branches, etc. However, these are not preformed, so that if one took a microscope one would

see the twigs and leaves in miniature, but they are instead enveloped in a spiritual manner. Similarly the concept contains the entire nature of the object, and cognition is nothing but the development of the concept, the development of what is contained in the concept but has not yet emerged into existence, is not yet explicated, not yet displayed. (Hegel 2006, 101)

This analogy does not hold. A seed is not pure abstract Being, it is something determinate. It cannot be used to explain how abstract and empty Being can manifest itself and grow into something determinate.

In short, the arguments by which Hegel's Logic progresses from the pure abstract concept to something concrete and determinate are not valid. They are the mystical shell of Hegel's philosophy. They involve an extravagant sort of idealism which few subsequent philosophers have accepted. And yet Marx is right to say we should not reject Hegel's philosophy outright. There is a rational kernel in these ideas. What is this and how can it be extracted?

## How to Read Hegel

Nothing comes from nothing; hence nothing comes of pure empty, abstract Being. No philosophy can start from there. The specious logical form in which Hegel develops his philosophy must be rejected. This objection is made by Feuerbach. "The beginning of philosophy is the finite, the determinate, and the *real*. The infinite cannot possibly be conceived without the finite" (Feuerbach 1972, 160; italics in the original).

Marx agrees with Feuerbach.<sup>4</sup> The real starting point of Hegel's philosophy is what he portrays as a result of its development—Determinate Being.<sup>5</sup> With Hegel, "The correct method is stood on its head. . . . What ought to be the starting point becomes a mystical outcome, and what ought to be the rational outcome becomes a mystical starting point" (Marx 1975a, 40).<sup>6</sup>

This gives a vital clue about how to salvage the rational content of Hegel's philosophy. To discover its valid content, we must invert it. We must start with Determinate Being and read these initial sections of Hegel's Logic backwards—not as an argument which starts with the concept of abstract Being and then seeks to derive Determinate Being from it, but the reverse. We must begin with Determinate Being, and interpret these sections as an *analysis* of the concept of Determinate Being—as an exposition, a spelling out of the fundamental principles involved in the concept of Determinate Being. It then becomes clear that these sections of Hegel's Logic present some of the most important and fundamental ideas of dialectic in general form.

## Finitude

According to Hegel, Determinate Being is a concrete and contradictory unity of Being and Nothing, of positive and negative aspects. This manifests itself in two ways. "Something<sup>7</sup> [*Etwas*] is by its quality, firstly *finite*, secondly *alterable*; so that finitude and variability appertain to its being" (Hegel 1975, §92; italics in the original).

First, then, a determinate and concrete thing, unlike abstract Being, is finite. It is limited, it is always situated in relation to other things within a larger totality. In order to see a determinate thing concretely, therefore, it must be viewed in the context of its relations to other things.

Unlike pure abstract Being, Determinate Being, because it is limited, is not merely positive, it always also negates something else, it is a unity of positive and negative aspects.

On the one side limit makes the reality of a thing; on the other it is its negation. But . . . the limit, as the negation of something, is not an abstract nothing but a nothing which is—what we call an “other.” (Hegel 1975, §92 addition)

The limits of a thing, and thus its relations to other things, are constitutive of its nature. Hence its limits are not external to the thing or merely contingent, they are internal and essential. “The limit is present in the something itself” (Hegel 1969, 127). Its limit determines its identity.

A thing is what it is, only in and by reason of its limit. We cannot therefore regard the limit as only external to being which is then and there [*Etwas*]. It rather goes through and through the whole of such existence. (Hegel 1975, §92 addition)

If the relations of a thing are altered, the thing itself is changed. And so, “When we are cognizant of how an object is related [to everything else], then we are cognizant of its very nature” (Hegel 2006, 362). In other words, the relations of a thing are constitutive of its being.<sup>8</sup>

This is Hegel’s account of the finite nature of concrete and determinate things, it is one of the main conclusions of the initial sections of his Logic. Hegel claims to derive these views from the concept of bare abstract Being. That claim is fallacious. These conclusions are not proved by Hegel, they are not derived by valid logical arguments from the concept of abstract Being. But they are enormously important and significant nevertheless. They comprise some of the basic tenets of the philosophy of dialectic.

They are controversial ideas that are widely disputed, particularly within the empiricist tradition. As William James says, “ordinary empiricism . . . has always shown a tendency to do away with the connections of things” (James 1912, 42–43). Locke puts the point succinctly. “Relation,” he writes, is “not contained in the real existence of things, but [is] something extraneous and superinduced” (Locke 1924, II.25.8). Things have their nature purely in themselves on this view, quite independently of their relations to other things.

The effect of such views is to see things, as Hume (1894, para. 58) puts it, as “loose and separate . . . conjoined but never connected.” Particular things are thus abstracted from their relations. The world is fragmented into a collection of disconnected atoms, related to each other only accidentally and externally. This is the way that analytic thinking also proceeds (Sayers 1990). It isolates and separates things, it abstracts them from the context of their relations and considers them apart.

Analysis—distinguishing and separating things in this way—plays a vital role in knowing and understanding things. Dialectic does not deny this. It does not deny the reality of distinctions and the need for making them in thought. However, it insists that concrete and determinate things are also always and necessarily related and connected to other things within a larger whole.

Hegel gives the example of a living organism.

The limbs and organs . . . of an organic body are not merely parts of it: it is only in their unity that they are what they are, and they are unquestionably affected by that unity, as they also in

turn affect it. These limbs and organs become mere parts, only when they pass under the hands of an anatomist, whose occupation be it remembered, is not with the living body but with the corpse. Not that such analysis is illegitimate: we only mean that the external and mechanical relation of whole and parts is not sufficient for us, if we want to study organic life in its truth. (Hegel 1975, §135 addition)

This applies to all concrete things, not only to organisms. Analysing a concrete totality and distinguishing its parts is essential for understanding things. In doing so, however, one must be aware that one is severing its parts from their relations and, in the process, turning what is concrete into something abstract. The implications of this are that in order to understand the nature of concrete and determinate things it is vital to see them in the context of their relations with other things and within a wider whole.

### Alterability

Moreover, finitude is bound up with the contradictions within things, and hence with their alterability.

The nature of the finite . . . as something, does not meet the nature of the other as if it had no affinity to it, but, being implicitly the other of itself . . . undergoes alteration. Alteration thus exhibits the inherent contradiction which originally attaches to determinate being, and which forces it out of its own bounds. (Hegel 1975, §92 addition)

This takes us to the second main characteristic of determinate being described by Hegel. All determinate beings, he maintains—that is, all real and concrete entities—are alterable. They are in the process of becoming, of change. They have come into being at a certain point, they are in the process of changing, and they will eventually cease to be. This implies that to understand things concretely we must see them as developing, we must see them as changing.

This is not to deny that things can also be fixed and stationary. But such states are relative and temporary. Nothing concrete remains the same for ever. Change and motion are inherent in all things.

According to Marxism, this holds even for logical and necessary truths, such as those of mathematics and logic. These too are subject to change. For ultimately they are the concrete thoughts of concrete people, not mere disembodied and abstract ideas. Marxism as a form of materialism rejects the view that they are eternal truths, to which the statements of logicians and mathematicians merely give expression in temporal form. It rejects the concept of an ideal realm separate from the concrete and material world (Sayers 1985, 198–201). In short,

Everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic. We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient; and this is exactly what we mean by that Dialectic of the finite, by which the finite, as implicitly other than what it is, is forced beyond its own immediate or natural being to turn suddenly into its opposite. (Hegel 1975, §81 addition)

According to the analysis in the initial sections of Hegel's Logic, change and becoming—like finitude—are grounded in contradictions and conflicts. These are inherent in all determinate things. “The unreflecting observer supposes that determinate things are merely positive, and pins them down under the form of being. Mere being however is

not the end of the matter: it is . . . utter emptiness and instability besides” (Hegel 1975, §91 addition).

Determinate things are not merely positive. Mere positive being is an empty abstraction. All concrete and determinate things combine positive and negative aspects. “Nowhere in heaven or on earth is there anything which does not contain within itself both being and nothing” (Hegel 1969, 85).

According to dialectic, in other words, alterability is part of the nature of all concrete and determinate things, it is not something contingent that comes to them from outside; and this is because all determinate things contain negative as well as positive aspects within them. “There is absolutely nothing whatever in which we cannot and must not point to contradictions or opposite attributes” (Hegel 1975, §89).

The connection between alterability and contradiction may not be immediately evident. Change is often conceived of as the condition of being in one position or state at one moment and in another at a different moment. Change then appears to be a purely positive condition, with nothing negative contained in it. However, change must involve more than this. What is merely positive has no movement implied in it. It merely is. To see a thing as in motion, it must be seen not only as being in a particular position or state at a particular time, but also as *in motion* in that position or state—as coming to be and ceasing to be in it. Coming to be is the unity of nothing and being, it necessarily comprises both—it is the transition from nothing into being; and ceasing to be is the transition from being into nothing. Change—coming to be and ceasing to be—cannot be understood in terms of mere positive being alone, it unites both being and nothing.

These arguments were not invented by Hegel, they go right back to the ancient Greeks. They are at the basis of Zeno’s paradoxes of motion. These are often disregarded because they appear to lead to the conclusion that motion is contradictory and hence impossible. According to Hegel, the correct conclusion to draw from them is rather that motion and change do, indeed, involve contradictions in things.<sup>9</sup>

Bertrand Russell responds to these arguments at length in his 1914 lectures on *Our Knowledge of the External World* by appealing to the mathematical concept of continuity.

The moving body never jumps from one position to another, but always passes by a gradual transition through an infinite number of intermediaries. At a given instant, it is where it is . . . but we cannot say that it is at rest at the instant, since the instant does not last for a finite time, and there is not a beginning and end of the instant with an interval between them. Rest consists in being in the same position at all the instants throughout a certain finite period, however short; it does not consist simply in a body’s being where it is at a given instant. (Russell 1926, 142)

This may all be true, but the fact remains that merely saying that a moving body is where it is does not capture the fact that it is in motion at that point; and to comprehend this we must see it as both coming to be where it is and ceasing to be there.

Concrete and determinate things are finite and in a process of change, and this is the result of the contradictions, the unity of positive and negative aspects, the unity of Being and Nothing, that is inherent in them. These are implications of the triad of categories—Being, Nothing, Becoming—with which Hegel’s Logic begins.

To say that all concrete things are in process of change may seem trivial and obvious, but the dialectical account of the matter is far from that. It is very controversial and much

disputed. For it is widely thought that things are merely positive in nature and that negation and hence movement and change are accidental and contingent occurrences—that rest and constancy are the normal and basic states, and change can come to things only when they are affected from outside.

Again, this view is a familiar part of classical empiricism. Locke asserts that a material body is “inactive” and has “not the power to produce motion in itself” (Locke 1924, IV.x.10, II.xxi.4).<sup>10</sup> This is the mechanistic way of seeing things. It is the assumption that is embodied in Newton’s first law of motion (“an object either remains at rest or continues to move at a constant velocity, unless acted upon by a force”).

Mechanistic thinking has played a very important role in understanding and explaining certain aspects of the way the world works. However, it is an abstraction, even if a useful one. All material things do indeed have mechanical properties (mass, spatial and temporal location, velocity, etc.), but nothing is solely mechanical. All material things have other properties as well—physical, chemical and others.

In Nature it is only the veriest abstract relations of matter in its inert masses which obey the law of mechanism. On the contrary the phenomena and operations of the province to which the term “physical” in its narrower sense is applied, such as the phenomena of light, heat, magnetism, and electricity, cannot be explained by any mere mechanical processes, such as pressure, impact, displacement of parts, and the like. (Hegel 1975, §195 addition)

The mechanistic view abstracts from these and ignores them. It portrays things as *purely* mechanical. In doing so, it portrays them as purely positive and “inactive.”

Dialectic questions this way of seeing things—concrete entities are not like this.

To materialized conception existence stands in the character of something solely positive, and quietly abiding within its own limits: though we also know, it is true, that everything finite . . . is subject to change. Such changeableness in existence is to the superficial eye a mere possibility, the realisation of which is not a consequence of its own nature. But the fact is, mutability lies in the notion of existence, and change is only the manifestation of what it implicitly is. (Hegel 1975, §92 addition)

This is not to suggest that there is a “life force” in things, or anything like that. However, even the most enduring objects change, and this is not only because there are forces acting on them externally. Things change because there are contradictions—negative and positive aspects—within them. This is the dialectical view.<sup>11</sup>

These theses about the nature of determinate things are not proved by Hegel from anything more fundamental, as he claims. Hegel’s “derivation” of them from the concept of bare Being is fallacious. But again these ideas are hugely important—the heart and soul of dialectic—and they are implicit in Hegel’s arguments.

## Conclusion

These ideas have extremely important practical implications for the ways in which we seek to understand and explain things. To understand things concretely we must see that particular things are in relation to other things within a larger totality, and we must see them as in movement and change. These are some of the fundamental tenets of dialectic presented in the first sections of Hegel’s Logic.



There are other important aspects of dialectic that are not dealt with in these initial sections. For example, there is the idea of what Engels calls the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa, and the dialectical negation of the negation which does not simply return us to the original affirmation as it does in formal logic (Engels 1987, 356). These and other aspects of dialectic are dealt with in other sections of Hegel's Logic, where similar principles of interpretation apply. Engels's claim that there are only three fundamental laws of dialectic logic is, in my view, arbitrary. It is better to treat the whole of Hegel's Logic as setting out his dialectic.

## Notes

1. Hegel's "Logic" can refer either to a specific book (e.g., Hegel 1975), or to the first part of Hegel's philosophical system that he propounds in a number of his works (Hegel 1969, 1975, etc.). Here I am referring to the philosophical system rather than to a particular work.
2. I have changed Wallace's "notion" to "concept" as the translation of Hegel's "Begriff" for consistency with other translations used in this article.
3. See Hegel (1969, 85; italics in the original):

Nowhere in heaven or on earth is there anything which does not contain within itself both being and nothing. Of course, since we are speaking here of a particular *actual something*, those determinations are no longer present in it in the complete untruth in which they are as being and nothing; they are in a more developed determination, and are grasped, for example, as positive and negative, the former being posited, reflected being, the latter posited, reflected nothing; the positive contains as its abstract basis being, and the negative, nothing.

4. It should be noted that Marx's views on Feuerbach change considerably during the 1840s (Stedman Jones 2017; Wartofsky 1982), but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these changes here.
5. There is a useful critical account of Feuerbach's and other similar criticisms of the opening of Hegel's Logic in Houlgate (2006, c: 54ff.).
6. I have used the translation in the Penguin edition (Marx 1975b, 100). See also related criticisms of Hegel's method by Marx in *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1975, chap. v. 2, "The Mystery of Speculative Construction"). The question Marx is discussing in these places, the question of the starting point of Hegel's philosophy, cannot be assumed to be the same as the question of Marx's starting point for political economy, as considered, for example, in the "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1986, 37–45) or as adopted in *Capital* (Marx 2010). The relation of Marx's method in *Capital* to Hegel's Logic is an obscure and much disputed issue. I will not deal with it here.
7. I have changed Wallace's "somewhat" to "something" for stylistic reasons.
8. This theory was put forward by the British Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley in the early years of the twentieth century and became known as "the doctrine of internal relations." As such it was challenged by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and this played an important role in the formation of analytical philosophy (Sayers 2015).
9. See Hegel (1975, §89):

Zeno, who first showed the contradiction native to motion, concluded that there is no motion; and the ancients, who recognised origin and decease, the two species of Becoming, as untrue categories, made use of the expression that the One or Absolute neither arises nor perishes. Such a style of dialectic looks only at the negative aspect of its result, and fails to notice, what is at the same time really present, the definite result, in the present case a pure nothing, but a Nothing which includes Being, and, in like manner, a Being which includes Nothing.

10. See also Berkeley (1910, §25): “All our Ideas, Sensations, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever Names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive, there is nothing of Power or Agency included in them.”
11. Inherent activity is recognised by thinkers in the rationalist tradition, but only in relation to thought. As Marx says,

The chief defect of all previous materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object* . . . Hence it happened that the *active* side, in contradistinction to materialism, was set forth by idealism—but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. (Marx 1975c, 6; italics in the original)

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