

Excerpt from *Hegel for Beginners*

Source: *Hegel for Beginners*, by Llyod Spencer and Andrzej Krauze, Published by Icon Books, 14 of 175 pages reproduced here, minus the abundant illustrations.

In 1808, Hegel still talked of constructing some sort of bridge between traditional logic set out in classical form by **Aristotle** and his own. Aristotelean logic had been the standard for 2,000 years.

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) perfected a form of deductive argument called the **syllogism**.

"Classical reasoning assumes the principle of logical identity: $A = A$ or A is not non- A ".

Why did Hegel need a different logic? Perhaps you may already have seen the answer to this in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Hegel usually referred to the *Phenomenology* as his "psychology", because it was the only one of his writings which deals with the world, not as it appears to Absolute Mind (or Spirit) but to quite ordinary minds like our own. It traced a path from our everyday commonsense states of mind to the vantage point of "Systematic Science".

"But in writing that book I became aware of employing a new and unprecedented way of thinking".

Dialectical Thinking

Hegel's different way of thinking has become known as dialectical thinking. What makes dialectical thinking so difficult to explain is that it can only be seen in practice. It is not a "method" or a set of principles, like Aristotle's, which can be simply stated and then applied to whatever subject-matter one chooses.

How do we begin to understand how this dialectic works?

First, by beginning to appreciate Hegel's unique philosophical ambition.

Totality

For Hegel, only the whole is true. Every stage or phase or moment is partial, and therefore partially untrue. Hegel's grand idea is "**totality**" which preserves within it each of the ideas or stages that it has overcome or subsumed. Overcoming or subsuming is a developmental **process** made up of "moments" (stages or phases). The **totality** is the **product** of that process which preserves all of its "moments" as elements in a structure, rather than as stages or phases.

Think of these structural elements as the interrelated ones of a whole architecture or even better, a **fractal** architecture.

Aufhebung or Sublation

Aristotle's logic is concerned with separate, discrete (self-)identities in a deductive pattern. Hegel dissolves this classical static view in a dynamic movement towards the **whole**. The whole is an overcoming which preserves what it overcomes.

Nothing is lost or destroyed but raised up and preserved as in a spiral. Think of the opening of a fern or a shell.

This is an organic rather than mechanical logic. Hegel's special term for this "contradiction" of **overcoming** and at the same time **preserving** is *Aufhebung*, sometimes translated as "**sublation**".

For anything to happen, everything has to be in place.

Quantum theory, postmodern cosmology, chaos theory, computer interfacing and ecology all essentially subscribe to this view of "totality" in question, without being "hegelian".

A Grammar of Thinking

In Hegel's treatment of logic, thinking dwells on itself, rather than trying to comprehend the world. The *Science of Logic* deals with logical categories, not the accidents of history or various modes of relating to the world. It is rather absent or distant from the world as such.

"I liken my study of logic to the study of grammar. You only really see the rewards when you later come to observe language in use and you grasp what it is that makes the language of poetry so evocative".

Hegel deals with a sequence of logical categories: being, becoming, one, many, essence, existence, cause, effect, universal, mechanism, and "life". Each is examined in turn and made to reveal its own inadequacies and internal tensions. Each category is made to generate another more promising one which in its turn will be subject to the same kind of scrutiny.

Negation

Hegel calls this dynamic aspect of his thinking the power of "**negation**". It is by means of this "negativity" of thought that the static (or habitual) becomes discarded or dissolved, made fluid and adaptable, and recovers its eagerness to push on towards "the whole".

Dialectical thinking derives its dynamic of negation from its ability to reveal "contradictions" within almost any category or identity.

Hegel's "contradiction" does not simply mean a mechanical denial or opposition. Indeed, he challenges the classical notion of static self-identity, $A = A$, or $A \text{ not} = \text{non-}A$.

By negation or contradiction, Hegel means a wide variety of relations difference, opposition, reflection or relation. It can indicate the mere insufficiency of a category or its incoherence. Most dramatically, categories are sometimes shown to be self-contradictory.

Three Kinds of Contradiction

1. The three divisions of the Science of Logic involve three different kinds of contradiction. In the first division **Being** the opposed pair of concepts at first seem flatly opposed, as if they would have nothing at all to do with one another: Being Nothing / Quantity Quality. Only by means of analysis or deduction can they be shown to be intimately interrelated.
2. In the second division **Essence** the opposed pairs immediately imply one another. The Inner and the Outer, for example: to define one is at the same time to define the other.
3. In the third division the Concept [**Notion**] we reach an altogether more sophisticated level of contradiction. Here we have concepts such as identity whose component parts, Universality and Particularity, are conceptually interrelated.

The third level is more difficult to depict or illustrate than the others because it is truly abstract. Here we are talking about relations which can only be disentangled from one another

by a process of abstraction.

For example. We can see how one of our most vital categories **individuality** can be built up out of a pair of apparently opposing principles, **universality** and **particularity**.

Triadic Structure

If negation is the inner life-force of the dialectic, then **triadic structure** is its organic, fractal form.

THESIS

A thought is affirmed
which on reflection
proves itself
unsatisfactory,
incomplete of
contradictory ...

ANTITHESIS

which propels the
affirmation of its
negation, the antithesis,
which also on reflection
proves inadequate ...

SYNTHESIS

and so is again
negated ...

In classical logic, this double negation ("A is not non-A") would simply reinstate the original thesis. The synthesis does not do this. It has "overcome and preserved" (or sublated) the stages of the thesis and antithesis to emerge as a higher rational unity.

Note: This formulation of Hegel's triadic logic is convenient, but it must be emphasised that he **never** used the terms thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

Hegel's dialectic triad also serves another logical purpose. Kant had distinguished two kinds of logic:

1. The **analytic** logic of understanding which focuses the data of sense-experience to yield knowledge of the natural **phenomenal** world.
2. The **dialectical** logic of understanding which operates independently of sense-experience and **erroneously** professes to give knowledge of the **transcendent noumena** ("things in themselves" or also the "infinite" or the "whole")

Hegel's view is completely different.

1. Analytic understanding is only adequate for natural science and practical everyday life, not for philosophy.
2. Dialectic reason is not concerned with Kant's "transcendent", nor with the abstract "mutilated" parts of reality, but with reality as a **totality**, and therefore gives **true** knowledge.

What is Knowing?

Knowing, for Hegel, is something you **do**. It is an **act**. But it is also presence of mind. Hegel seems to hold out the vision, even the experience, of thinking as self-presence. Of being present to, or with, oneself of being fully self-possessed, self-aware. Of self-consciousness as a huge cosmic accomplishment.

Reading Hegel gives one a sense that the movement of thought will coincide with a vision of harmony that awaits us at the end of the whole process. Every serious reader of Hegel can bear witness to the intoxication of such moments.

Absolute Knowledge, in the form of the complete self-consciousness and self-possession of spirit, is only available at the end-point of the think process. But there is no distinction possible between the driving energy of thought and this sense of harmony and fulfilment in the whole. It is ultimately the universal which has the upper hand. As Hegel's Logic puts it ...

Everything depends on the "**identity** of identity and non-identity".

In philosophy, the latest birth of time is the result of all the systems that have preceded it, and must include their principles: and so, if, on other grounds, it deserves the title of philosophy, it will be the fullest, most comprehensive, and most adequate system of all.

"The whole of philosophy resembles a circle of circles"

Further Reading:

[Introduction](#) to Shorter Logic | [Meaning of Hegel's Logic](#)

— [Hegel-by-HyperText Home Page @ marxists.org](#) —