

Sublation, Reflection, Speculation | The Emphyrean Trail on WordPress.com

Did you think we were done with dialectics? This one is going to be a bit more fun than usual.

Sublation is something that should already be familiar, but in case it is not, here it is:

Sublation equally means "to keep," "to 'preserve'," and "to cause to cease," "to put an end to." Something is sublated only insofar as it has entered into unity with its opposite.

—Hegel, *Science of Logic*

If you have read one or two of the other dialectical method posts, you should already be aware that sublation and speculation are quite intimately related. Sublation is the settled structure of speculation, and speculation is the turn of thinking of the thinking we carry out as a dialectical movement, and surely everyone has heard the formula of sublation as "negation of the negation". I have here a third term to add: *reflection*. Why? Because to stand back and think about something is to reflect on it, and it's a term that comes up quite often in philosophy in general, and Hegel is no exception. I'll claim here that reflection is intimately tied not just to sublation, but to the entire method, but it is only so in the sense of an older archaic version of the term: *reflexion*. Time to showcase a bit of what good ol' Hegelian philosophical etymology and wordplay is all about.

Reflection As Reflex

Reflection is a bit of an odd word. It's something that in picture-thinking is associated with *mirrors* and the image of ourselves before us from *outside*. To *reflect* in cognition is commonly taken as a stepping back and thinking about things; it is also understood to mean *self-reflection*, that is, thinking about ourselves. In both senses, both stepping back from things and from ourselves, a cognitive *opposition* to the object reflected upon is implied. To *reflect* on something like an apple, for example, is to try to grasp the apple in cognition; it is the attempt to literally reflect the truth of the world as if the mind were capable of being a mirror. To reflect on ourselves is, likewise, to attempt to grasp ourselves in our thinking. Reflection, while properly implying the opposition of dialectics, unfortunately lacks the explicit force to connote its speculative movement in English. Reflection simply seems to imply a givenness of the object and the mind's cognition as a kind of *subjective exercise* of crafting and moving the mirror of the mind into proper place to reflect the given truth which is external and independent of being reflected. This subjective mirroring, however, cannot be guaranteed to mirror the object itself, and in fact the reflection can go outwards rather than inwards, i.e. we

project onto things external considerations not inherent to them. It is for this implication of indifferent external opposition of thinking to its objects that Hegel differentiates *speculation* from *reflection*. Reflection is the thinking of the understanding which believes in the truth that things are only what they are in themselves and do not become otherwise, the thinking which sets itself apart from its object and externally tries to judge the reflection of what it itself denies to have access to by its very nature (the thing in itself).

Interestingly, reflection is a modern derivative spelling of what originally was written as *reflexion*. Now why is this of interest? Because reflexion explicitly implies things deeply speculative. Clearly, it is directly derived from *reflex*, which is further derived from *flex*. These two words are still quite common even if they are mainly associated with body physique and movement. Buff people who have bulging muscles *flex* (move) their muscles as a show of physical fitness. Yoga practitioners and acrobats are *flexible*; they can bend/move their body quite a lot compared to the average person. The doctor you visit for your yearly checkup—at least if you happen to live in a first world country that has universal healthcare or you can just afford it—taps your knee with that peculiar looking tiny hammer, and you experience a *reflex* of your leg below the knee, it kicks up *without your intending*. Another example: you walk down a lonely street late at night on your way to your car. Suddenly you feel a hand on your shoulder and *immediately* slam your elbow into them. You don't know who it was or why they touched you—you didn't even think about those things—you simply had a reflex to the simple touch in an unexpected moment.

Flexion *is movement*, analogical to thinking. Reflexion is an immediate *counter-movement to a first movement*, something unintended, analogical to thinking of thinking—the transformation of thinking into thought without any intention of having done so. This is the speculative key of reflexion which is not apparent in reflection. Reflexion also properly implies the *self*-opposition of dialectics, and it does so even more strongly than reflection, for it captures its full immanent moving opposition in a single moment.

Sublation: Negation of Negation As Reflexion

Ah, the “*negation of the negation*,” one of the most repeated phrases by Hegelians and non-Hegelians alike, and something that honestly confuses more than it helps when beginning. This is mostly because the formalism does not explain what it means about the method, but is simply stated as if it were a heuristic.

In the second chapter of the *Science of Logic*, in the section of **Something and Other**, there is the first strictly logical mention of the *negation of the negation*, a.k.a. **absolute negativity**. Something begins in *immediate being* as a pure affirmation of itself,

denying non-being, its negation, as something internal to it.

Something is the *first negation of negation*, as simple existent self-reference. Existence, life, thought, and so forth, essentially take on the determination of an existent being, a living thing, a thinking mind ("I"), and so forth. . . . At the base of all these determinations there lies the negative unity with itself. In all this, however, care must be taken to distinguish the *first negation*, negation as negation *in general*, from the second negation, the negation of negation which is concrete, *absolute* negativity, just as the first is on the contrary only *abstract* negativity. . . . Something is an existent as the negation of negation, for such a negation is the restoration of the simple reference to itself – but the something is thereby equally the *mediation of itself with itself*. . . . This mediation with itself which something is *in itself*, when taken only as the negation of negation, has no concrete determinations for its sides; thus it collapses into the simple unity which is *being*. (§21.103, Cambridge trn.)

At first glance, **Something** is a sublation as the unity of Quality and Existence as determinate being. This unity first *is*, and is immediately taken as pure affirmation of itself in the first movement. Something is the negation of the negation for in its immediacy it has expelled one moment of Quality's two united modes, *negation* as lack, from itself. Negation is that which is outside Something, not part of its pure affirmation; thus, this Something is the negation of its negation—Something affirms itself against its negative and denies it determining power over itself. This first immediate form of Something is abstract, it simply *is*. The negation of its negation is likewise simply an abstract negation which tells us nothing, hence the collapse into the immediacy of pure Being if we simply leave things at that.

Something, however, in excluding **negation** from it, expels it as something **Other** to itself, for negation is an existent moment of quality which cannot be ignored. Our immediate being is Something, and its negation—its non-being—is Other to it. Both are immediacies, however. Hence, both equally *exist*, and each is equally revealed as Other in relation to its negation. The distinction of Something and Other is nothing but a name, an intended distinction with no logical basis—the Other is just as much a Something. The truth of the relation is one of paradoxical nature: Something is in truth *Other to the Other*, and thus the **reflexion** explodes immediately from it. *In being itself, Something is immediately opposed to itself*. This repeats in explicit form what had first implicitly occurred in Being and Nothing: the *thinking* of Being was Nothing, and Nothing *is* this empty thinking. In both, an action and reaction immediately occur. Being's *being* immediately negates it into what we tend to conceive as its absolute other, Nothing. This Nothing, however, in *being* only immediately negates itself into contradiction as well.

[Comment:] The general structure of this can be externally analogized here as the

necessary internal difference resultant of *thought* and *thinking*. Thought as pure immediacy is contentless; it is nothing. In order for thought to truly *be*, it must be enacted—it must be a *thinking*. We can only be said to have thoughts insofar as we have enacted them as a thinking. What is a thought, after all, which cannot be enacted as a thinking? It is not a thought, but merely a string of symbols, a name slapped onto something which has been left unpenetrated by intellect's activity. Even in the regular concept of thought there is something peculiar in the identity of thought and thinking. We say "I thought the other day..." Thought is clearly meant as thinking which has already gone on, and that is exactly what we find in Hegel: thought is a past thinking.

Something, as the Other of the Other, first finds its *being* only in *Being-for-other*. In *Being-for-other*, however, it is *Being-in-itself* in order to hold itself from collapsing the distinction of otherness and leaving us with indeterminate Being. It is in the full explicit determinateness of Something as having a Determination that the first return from Otherness, the negation of negation, occurs, for Determination is *Being-in-itself* that negates the otherness as absolute other and takes it into itself as its affirmation.

The full development of this necessary truth, that *Being-in-itself* is only possible via negating *Being-for-other* and vice versa—that each is intelligible only in immanently negating the other in a mutual negation and repulsion from each other—is the first real development of the immanent negation of the negation. Something is not itself merely in abstractly negating an abstract negative as Other, but it is itself only via the incorporation of the Other into itself, of negating this otherness as otherness, for Something *must be Other to itself*. Something truly is itself and its opposite as one, it is not separate. Something is self-othering, self-opposing, and thus **self-contradicting**. Its full realization as the negation of its negation is a return to itself as incorporating this self-contradiction, the unity of Other with Other as an explicit unity of Something with itself.

Reflexion

Let us expand this to consider the reflexivity and speculative form. Something, as Qualitative Being, is *in-itself* via the split of Existence and its *existence* (thought and thinking, substance and subject). Taken as *absolute*, Something cannot appeal for its being to anything outside it; thus, it must immediately affirm that it is *in* itself. Notice that a split has been linguistically made between Something as Being and its enacted being. It is not enough for us to simply say Something *is* and leave it at that any more than it is to say Being simply is. If we did so, we would only collapse into pure indeterminate Being and lose the Existence we have logically worked up to so far. The *being* of Something is at first not taken in contrast to an other, as the explicit negation of another, but is simply *in-itself*, i.e. Something is only as it is within its absoluteness. It is from this *Being-in-itself*, however, that the Other truly explodes, for to *Be-in-itself*, it can *only be comprehended* as **not** *Being-for-Other*, i.e. as not being in

dependence to or in relation to another being. That which is in-itself is a being which holds its content within it with no dependence, but the logical implication is immediately the opposite: it is only in-itself by holding itself against the Other, by negating the external negation from overbearing on it and swallowing it whole into pure nothingness.

Since Something is the negation of negation, the self-contained absolute, this Other cannot be anything other than Something itself. Being-*in*-itself already linguistically breaks the unity of Something as an inner bound—that which is *in* it and that which is *outside* the inner. Something becomes like a mere surface skin which hides the true fruit within it, and while the fruit is skin and meat it is just as much not identical as a whole with its parts, which both are and are not itself. Something, then, in order to *be* something at all necessarily negates itself and others itself. Were the other *absolutely not* Something, then it could not relate to it even in a negative manner (indeterminate Nothing is unrelated to anything), and were Something incapable of self-negation, it could not differentiate itself and be determinate—it would simply be indeterminate pure Being.

The opposition of Something and Other is, as has been explained, the opposition of Other and Other. The *Other of the Other is the Other of itself*. The Other in *being* itself explodes itself out of itself—it *others* itself—it enacts a *reflexion* in its simple flexion, i.e. in the *thinking* of Other there is generated the thought of the Other outside and opposed to itself, and this is the truth of the Other as such. To repeat what was quoted above:

Existence, life, thought, and so forth, essentially take on the determination of an existent being, a living thing, a thinking mind ("I"), and so forth. . . . At the base of all these determinations there lies the negative unity with itself.

All full concepts are *negative unities with themselves*; they are all full sublations. While we cannot say this immanently all the time, in these higher concepts, we are justified in saying many things about what were at first only implicit structures of prior concepts. In the movement of Being and Nothing, it is the case the the *Being* of Being is Nothing, and Nothing is Being in merely *being* Nothing—a Nothinging. As a unified movement, both *are* Becoming. In Becoming, we realized that the *Becoming* of Becoming was Existence, that is, the *being* of Becoming—its engagement or enactment—is Existence. In Existence, the reflexion is explicit: Existence *exists* as Qualitative Being, or Something. We have already shown how Something exists as the Something of Something, or the Other of the Other.

A *negation of negation*, as we can see, always manifests as a *self-opposition*, a self-contradiction, an absolute *dialectic*. To say even more, I repeat part of what was quoted above:

Something is an existent as the negation of negation, for such a negation is the restoration of the simple reference to itself – but the something is thereby equally the *mediation of itself with itself*. . . . This mediation with itself which something is *in itself*, when taken only as the negation of negation, has no concrete determinations for its sides; thus it collapses into the simple unity which is *being*.

Something, as negation of negation, is the negation of itself in itself. *Self-mediation* is *immediation*. Abstract immediacy has only ever been possible through self-opposition. We cannot simply say "Being"; we must say "Being *is*" and oppose it to itself to make intelligible what we mean. Language as the existence of thought shows that thought immanently differentiates, and in the Absolute, this difference can only be an inward reflexion of self-generated content that advances only in self-transcending reflection, yet this self-transcendence paradoxically appears as if it was an ever-present ground we simply have dug into. Immanent construction appears as its opposite: transcendental deduction. Interestingly this appearance is only retroactive, for in the initial development the conditions for the possibility of 'X' which are supposed to ground a thing are in fact originated from the very things that they ground.

Being *is* Being and Nothing, i.e. Existence. It is literally a *reflection* in mirrored opposition, and it is just as much itself as it is not in simply *being* itself. Being is shown in Existence to be Being in opposition to itself via negation in the concept of **Limitation**. It is *reflexion* in its enactment; its movement is an unintended one arising from an intended one. We *intend* to think Being, but instead we think Nothing. We intend to think Becoming, but instead think Existence. We intend to think Something, and instead we think the Other, and further, the Other of the Other. To make it clear, this is not simply a subjective quirk of thinking alone, but the objective reality of thinking and Being. The Absolute, in *being*, must be one universality by being all individualities.

The crux of difference between the *understanding's reflection* and *speculation's reflexion* is overall not simply one of externality of cognition, nor of cognition which is intended or unintended movement, but also of the acknowledging and accepting of a possibility of thinking. Understanding itself is capable of noticing reflexion, but its difference from speculation is its unwillingness to take the reflexion of dialectic for what it *is*, i.e. as a legitimate basis for further thinking.

To finish, the first sentence of the quote is telling of the nature of *Concepts*: Existence *exists* only as an existent being; life *exists* only as a living thing; thought *exists* only as a thinking mind; universals *exist* only as individuals. It is the immanent necessity of Being to *be*, and the truth of what this means is not a dead identity, but instead a developing dynamicity of self-difference. If thought as *self-thinking* can show absolute form, Hegel seems to think, we then have the key measure of all that can *rationally* be. If

thinking can *think* itself, the thought goes, then Being must *be* itself in the same manner of absolute form. If this is the case, then Being is graspable by thought completely by simple virtue of the fact that *thinking* is just the moment where Being finally turns against itself in full and sees all that it has been.

09/09/2017—Author's note:

By chance while I was looking for a quote on something else, I stumbled on this gem:

The living substance, further, is that being which is truly subject, or, what is the same thing, is truly realized and actual (wirklich) solely in the process of positing itself, or in ***mediating with its own self*** its transitions from one state or position to the opposite. As subject it is ***pure and simple negativity***, and just on that account a process of splitting up what is simple and undifferentiated, a process of ***duplicating and setting factors in opposition***, which [process] in turn is the negation of this indifferent diversity and of the opposition of factors it entails. ***True reality is merely this process of reinstating self-identity, of reflecting into its own self in and from its other***, and is not an original and primal unity as such, not an immediate unity as such. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves.

—§18 [Phenomenology of Mind](#); emphasis added

It has been 9 months since I last read the *Preface*, and I did not remember this at all when writing this blog, but I'm happy to see I am not very far at all from Hegel's own descriptions.