

Dialectic – Subjective & Objective

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Contents

1	The Dialectical “Moment” of Thinking	1
2	The Objective Dialectic	4

1 The Dialectical “Moment” of Thinking

In the *Encyclopedia* Hegel presents the “dialectical” in terms of a “moment” of thinking, or rational activity more broadly.

In terms of form, the logical domain has three sides: (α) the abstract side or that of the understanding, (β) the dialectical or negatively rational side, (γ) the speculative or positively rational side.

(*Anmerkung*): These three sides do not constitute three parts of logic, but are moments of every properly logical content [/Momente jedes Logisch-Reellen/], that is to say, of every concept or everything true in general. (EL §79/p. 125)

Here we see Hegel make a distinction between understanding, “negative” or dialectical reason, and positive or “speculative” reason. These are not to be understood as independent logical forms or faculties. They are rather three aspects or characteristics of a single form of (rational) activity.¹

For Hegel, the term “understanding” (*Verstand*) captures what Kant means by “understanding” as well as what Kant typically means by the activity of theoretical reason. Hegelian understanding grasps wholes in terms of their parts, and seeks to connect parts together by means of necessary and sufficient grounds. Moreover, each “part” is understood partly in terms of its relation to what it *is not*. This is often captured in the phrase “all determination

¹ For a broadly sympathetic characterization of the dialectic along these lines see (Beiser 2005, chap. 7).

is negation” (*Omnis determinatio est negatio*; HW p.9/15:11). For example, in the determination of a figure (e.g. a square) one traces a line that delimits a space (the square) from what it is not (the surrounding space).

Hegel’s position here is a very fair representation of how Kant thinks of determination, or what amounts to the same, predication.

For Kant, determination involves exclusion, which excludes according to a law.

Every **concept**, in regard to what is not contained in it, is indeterminate, and stands under the principle of **determinability**: that of **every two** contradictorily opposed predicates only one can apply to it, which rests on the principle of contradiction and hence is a merely logical principle/ which abstracts from every content of cognition, and has in view nothing but the logical form of cognition.

Every **thing**, however, as to its possibility, further stands under the principle of **thoroughgoing determination**; according to which, among **all possible** predicates of **things**, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it (A571-2/B599-600)

In the case of intellectual (i.e. logical) exclusion, the law is that of contradiction. However, in the case of space and time, the law of contradiction is not the basis of exclusion, but rather the topology of space and time itself—what we can literally think of as its form. Since the law of exclusion by which space and time determines each of its parts is fundamentally different from the law of contradiction, we cannot construe determination solely as a function of the intellect’s activity, for the law of contradiction is a basic law of the intellect’s activity. Let me explain each of these points.

Determination is exclusion in the sense of setting one of two opposing (i.e. contrary) predicates as the predicate of a substance.¹ Here “opposing” *can* mean *logically* opposing, as in, e.g., the predicates <hot> and <not-hot>. But the opposition needn’t take this form—i.e. it need not be determined by the law of contradiction. Kant’s clearest examples of this are what he comes to call, starting in the 1760s but continuing through the critical period, “really opposing” grounds, as contrasted with merely “logically opposing” grounds.² For example in his *Negative Magnitudes* he says,

² As Kant notes in a lecture: “Every ground is either logical, through which something is posited or cancelled according to the principle of contradiction; or real, through which something is posited or cancelled without the principle of contradiction. The first is analytic, the second is synthetic” (28:402). For discussion see (Stang 2019).

Real opposition is that where two predicates of a thing are opposed to each other, but not through the law of contradiction. Here, too, one cancels what is posited by the other, but the consequence is something. The motive force of a body in one direction and an equal tendency of the same body in the opposite direction do not contradict each other; as predicates, they are simultaneously possible in one body. The consequence of such an opposition is rest, which is something. It is, nonetheless, a true opposition. For that which is posited by the one tendency is cancelled by the other tendency, and the two tendencies are true predicates of one and the self-same thing, and they belong to it simultaneously. (2:171-2)

Forces can exclude one another through opposition, but the opposition here is not that of *contradiction*. One piece of evidence Kant offers for this is that opposing (i.e. contradictory) predicates cannot be combined single being—e.g. a judgment (A150/B189-90)—while opposing forces *can* be combined in a single being. Kant's example in the latter case is a stationary being that is so because of the outcome of being acted on by an opposing force.³

So determination is the exclusion of one predicate in favor of its opposite. What “opposite” means here depends on the kind of law to which one appeals. In the case of *logical* determination, the exclusion is defined in terms of logically opposing predicates. In the case of *real* determination, the exclusion is defined merely negatively, in terms of predicates that oppose but not logically.

The critical period doctrine is thus one according to which a ground determines by virtue of (i) the predicate/property; (ii) the law governing the connection between positing that predicate and positing its consequent. In the case of a logical ground the law is that of contradiction, hence positing some predicate P has the consequence of excluding or opposing $\sim P$. To use a simple example, predicating <bachelor> of John excludes John's being <not-bachelor>. Since <bachelor> consists of “marks” (*Merken*) like (let's assume) <male> and <unmarried>, predicating <bachelor> of John “determines” that he is male and unmarried, to the exclusion of his being non-male or married. Thus the logical ground <bachelor> is the basis of various other analytic truths concerning John, such as that he is male and unmarried.

³ Note that Kant has a tendency to slide between talk of predicates/marks and talk of marks *in an object* (or its grounds) — e.g. JL 9:58; cf. Meier elides the ontological and epistemic uses in his *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* where he describes a mark as “that in the cognition or the thing, which is the ground on which we are conscious to ourselves of it (§115; 16:296-7)”. For extensive discussion of marks and of the connection between a mark-as-property and mark-as-partial-representation see (Smit 2000, sec. 3; Grüne 2009, chap. 1.2).

So understanding consists in distinguishing and relating determinations, each of which is understood in part through its negation of others. It is this manner of separating and opposing that then leads understanding (or so says Hegel) to the negative or dialectical “moment” of reason, where a determination becomes “self-sublating” or self-contradictory. What this exactly comes to is highly obscure, and seems to depend in part on the specific nature of the subject matter whose dialectical moments are being traced. But given Hegel’s characterization in the *Encyclopedia* we can tentatively draw some general features out, which seem applicable to all such dialectical moments.

The first is that pertaining to the understanding itself. Suppose that one judges of some object *o* that it is a particular way *W* (e.g. that the ball is red) – *o* is thus *determined* as being *W*. But what does being *W* amount to? It amounts to *o*’s not being not-*W*. We’ve now reached the cusp of the “negative” or dialectical moment, because now it turns out that what was treated as a single and independent thought—viz. of *o*’s being *W*—turns out to require a contrary thought—viz. of *o*’s being not-*W*. This “dialectical moment” of opposition between the thought of *o* as *W* and as not-*W* does not however lead to the annihilation of one’s thought (recall that Kant thinks of contradictory thought as self-annihilating). Instead it leads to a *positive* turn in one’s thought, and this is the “speculative” moment of reason. In this positive moment reason is conscious of some whole in virtue of which the parts are what they are. So, for example, in the case of a judgment like “the ball is red”, which then yields its opposing determination of not-red, we can contain these two oppositions in a broader concept, <color>, as the positive outcome of this otherwise negative activity.⁴

Thus understanding and speculative reason, while both features of rational activity (i.e. “thought” in its broadest sense), are nevertheless opposed, in the sense that the divisions and oppositions made or recognized by understanding are resolved by seeing those divisions as themselves only possible via appeal to some prior whole. It is this overall push and pull between these features of thought (via the “moment” of dialectical activity) that drives thinking, and is the source of all conceptual content (or conceptual determination/determinacy, as Hegel sometimes says).

2 The Objective Dialectic

Hegel does not, however, construe the dialectical moment as present only in *thinking*, where that term is understood as something like a subjective or psychological act.

⁴ Fichte’s development of the concept <limit> in *GWL* proceeds in a similarly characteristic manner of oppositions that are then contained in a larger whole, a whole which reveals the meaning of those oppositions.

Properly construing and recognizing the dialectical dimension is of the highest importance. It is in general the principle of all movement, all life, and all actual activity. (EL 129, §81 A1)

Everything that surrounds us can be viewed as an example of the dialectic. We know that all finite things, instead of being something fixed and ultimate, are really changeable and perishable, and this is nothing but the dialectic of the finite. By virtue of this dialectic, the same thing (as in itself the other of itself) is driven beyond what it immediately is and turns over into its opposite. (EL 130, §81 A1)

These are not statements that are easily read as being about our concepts, or the nature of thought more broadly, rather than about the world itself. Hegel's position thus seems to be that the dialectical moment is not simply a feature of our thinking but is present in reality itself, apart from how we think of it. This is, of course, in keeping with his conception of the subject-object distinction (and thus the thought-reality distinction) as non-fundamental and derivative of a more basic unity (or even identity).

This raises a general question (or set of questions) for how we understand Hegel's system as a whole. Is it supposed to be the case that every distinction in being has a counterpart in thinking and vice versa. How seriously should we take the Spinozistic doctrine (assuming Hegel accepts it) that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (EIP7)? Book three of the *Logic* is the “subjective” logic, in which we see a discussion of concept, judgment, and syllogism. Should we expect to see a sense in which nature conceptualizes, judges, and “syllogizes”, apart from the specific acts of (at least potentially) self-conscious beings like us?

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