

# The Categories of Quality

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## 1 Overview of the Categories of Determinateness (Quality)

The categories of determinateness (*Bestimmtheit*) or quality (*Qualität*) are three – <being>, <existence>, and <being-for-itself>. This contrasts with Kant’s characterization of quality as consisting of <reality>, <negation>, and <limitation>. It’s interesting that Hegel begins with quality, as Kant (in the Principles) begins with discussion of quantity.<sup>1</sup> The categories of quality are:

- Being
  - Nothing
  - Becoming
- Determinate being/existence (*Dasein*)
  - Finitude
  - Infinity
- Being-for-itself
  - One-many
  - Repulsion-attraction

Within each of these are various further determinations, such as <quality>, <reality>, <negation>, <something>, <limit>, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is because *Fichte* also begins his derivation of the categories with quality (specifically, <reality>)?

Why this structure rather than some other? Hegel's answer must be that this structure (or path) is necessary, and it is necessary because it follows from the nature of thought/being itself. In general, we can see the "movement" of the development of the categories in thought as from sheer unmediated indeterminacy to the determinate specification of *a* being. Thus the progression is from the nature of being to its basic determinate form as *something* that *is*.

There are many questions one might ask with regard to the opening of the *Logic* (at least with regard to its main content). But the first must be *why this?* Why start with quality? In the *Encyclopedia* he remarks that

*Quality* is, to begin with, the determinacy that is identical with being in the sense that something ceases to be what it is when it loses its quality. By contrast, *quantity* is the determinacy that is external to being and indifferent in relation to it. Thus, for instance, a house remains what it is, whether it is bigger or smaller, and red remains red, be it brighter or darker. (EL §85 Z)

This helps clarify why we start with the categories of quality – they concern being as such, rather than an external relation *to* it (quantity).

## 2 Being

### 2.A Starting Points

Why start with <being>?

the beginning ought not itself to be already a first *and* an other, for anything which is in itself a first *and* an other implies that an advance has already been made. Consequently, that which constitutes the beginning, the beginning itself, is to be taken as something unanalyzable, taken in its simple, unfilled immediacy; and therefore *as being*, as complete emptiness. (SL 52/21:62)

Hegel's claim is that we must begin with that which is wholly immediate, and hence not mediated by anything else. In this sense then it seems the reasons to start with quality are the same as those for starting with <being>, though there is a sense in which Hegel could also have started from <nothing>, since it is equally immediate. This also raises an important question – are we to read the opening of the *Logic* as answering the question as to why

there is something rather than nothing? For example, Houlgate takes Hegel to provide a straightforward answer to this:

Hegel's answer is simple: there has to be something because logically nothing slides into being, being transforms itself into determinacy, and being's irreducible determinacy in turn proves to be something.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> (Houlgate 2006, 313).

However, this strikes me as somewhat misleading. Hegel does not *start* with <nothing>, rather he starts with <being> and shows that *that* “slides into” (or vanishes into) <nothing> and vice versa. So there seems rather to be a kind of priority to <being>, even if it is identical (in some sense) with <nothing>.

Another option is to read Hegel as starting with a fact, or perhaps more in line with Fichte, with a “fact-act” (*Tathandlung*)—viz. the act of thinking. In this sense the *Logic* opens with the claim that thinking *is*.<sup>2</sup> This differs from Fichte's starting point in that nothing is assumed here as to *what* it is that is thinking, or even that thinking entails a thinker. Moreover, instead of presupposing that thought is “absolutely spontaneous” or that it is governed by specific (i.e. “logical”) laws, Hegel instead contends that thought “moves” and that it moves in the sense of “immediately vanishing into its opposite” (SL 60/21:69). It may turn out that the *way* that thought moves admits of lawful characterization, but this is not presupposed at the outset.

### 2.B Thinking or Intuiting?

Another curious feature of the opening of the *Logic* is that Hegel seemingly treats thinking and intuiting as interchangeable. For example, in discussing being Hegel says,

[t]here is *nothing* to be intuited in [being], if one can speak here of intuiting; or, it is only this pure empty intuiting itself. Just as little is anything to be thought in it, or, it is equally only this empty thinking

and similarly in the discussion of nothing he says,

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<sup>2</sup> We might even just want to say that the *Logic* begins with <is> itself—or what is the same—with the activity of thought, which is an activity of connection captured in the copula. So in this sense we are both identifying thought with being and capturing the basic feature of thought as such—i.e. as a connection that signifies being. For a discussion of the categories of quality as a development of Kant's conception of thinking see (Pippin 1989; Bowman 2017).

[i]n so far as mention can be made here of intuiting and thinking, it makes a difference whether something or *nothing* is being intuited or thought. To intuit or to think nothing has therefore a meaning; the two are distinguished and so nothing *is* (concretely exists) in our intuiting or thinking; or rather it is the empty intuiting and thinking itself, like pure being (SL 59/21:69)

From a Kantian standpoint this is surprising since intuiting is inherently relational – there must be something actual to which the intuition is related. This is part of why Fichte characterizes the immediate consciousness one has of one’s activity in thinking as an intellectual *intuition*. It is a relation to something actual (viz. in Fichte’s terms, a self-relating to the actuality of the activity). In contrast, conceptual thought is typically taken to be *existence-independent*. That is to say, one can think of that which does not exist—conceptualization and judgment does not entail existence.

Hence, insofar as Hegel begins with an intuiting that is not an intuiting of a particular, but rather of sheer indeterminate being/nothing, and also in construing this as a kind of thinking that is inseparable from its object, he is tacitly employing a conception of mental activity that is largely identical with features of intellectual intuition, as employed by Kant, Fichte, and Schelling (though not identical with all the varied aspects of how each of these three uses the notion).

### 2.C The Identity of Being and Nothing

The conclusions of Hegel’s initial two paragraphs are startling. They are:

1. Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing.
2. Nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is (SL 59/21:69).

Note that Hegel cannot *argue* for either (1) or (2), at least not at the beginning. To do so would be to presuppose something about argument, thinking, and thus about concepts, judgment, truth, and reasoning. So in whatever way we arrive at (1) and (2), it is not via a deductive (or inductive, etc.) argument. So how do we get to these claims?

If we take seriously Hegel’s introductory remarks about the movement of thinking, then we should read the beginning of his discussion here in just that way, which means that the thinking that *is*, but is so purely indeterminately, of its own accord (or we might say, of its

own nature), adverts to nothing, and vice versa. Is this a phenomenological claim, in the sense of the *Phenomenology*? Not obviously, since it is not about the *appearance* of what thinking is, etc., but about the *truth* of this. More generally, the topic of the *Phenomenology* is experience (in the broadly Reinholdian sense of that term), but the topic of the *Logic* is *thought* (in a sense that is not fully obvious at the start of the *Logic*). And it doesn't seem right to say that the account Hegel gives here is "phenomenological" in something more like our contemporary sense, since it isn't one concerned simply with "what it is like" to be thinking in a particular way, where "what it is like" denotes some individual psychological state (or property thereof) that can be typed by what it is like to have it/be in it.

Perhaps there is a middle way here. Insofar as the reader of the *Logic* is also a thinker, the activity of working through Hegel's discussion is similarly the activity of one's own thinking as proceeding in a similar manner. Here again we see another point of possible connection with Fichte's method. The reader, instead of being invited (or summoned) to think of themselves, simply *thinks*, and in doing so sees particular results. The first invitation is that of thinking of pure being, which ultimately comes to nothing. The second invitation is to then think of this nothing. But the nothing that one thinks thus *is*, and one is thereby thinking of being again. We then have a kind of oscillation in thought between these two contents. These are identical in the sense that they both are thoughts of pure indeterminacy. But they are different in the sense that they are held as opposites to one another by the understanding (i.e. that 'moment' or 'aspect' of thinking that considers features in complete isolation for one another). As Houlgate puts it, "All we may do is consider the concept of indeterminate being and note what, if anything, that concept *itself* turns out to be or do".<sup>3</sup> Putting things this way also helps us keep in mind the sense in which the method of the *Logic* is identical with its subject matter. Thus the dynamic of change or transition is not external to the various categorial forms in the *Logic* (see Hegel's comments in Remark 3), but rather identical with it—it is the dynamic of those forms themselves.

Now, that said, what should we make of the opening two claims? It seems as if what Hegel is contending is that there is something *erroneous* or incorrect about our thought of being and of nothing (or the concepts thereof). That is, in thinking of being we turn out to be thinking of nothing and vice versa. If we took this thought of being, which ultimately turns to nothing, as a kind of independent content then we would be making a mistake. Similarly for the thought of nothing. It turns out that in treating <being> and <nothing> as distinct and independent concepts we are faced with a contradiction, the resolution of which requires situating these concepts with respect to some more determinate concept in which they are no longer opposed.

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<sup>3</sup> (Houlgate 2006, 32).

Hegel sums up this (surprising?) claim of identity and difference by saying that

1. [i] *Pure being and pure nothing are therefore the same.* The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being – “has passed over,” not passes over. [ii] But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that *they are not the same*, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that *each* immediately *vanishes in its opposite*. Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: *becoming*, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just as immediately dissolved itself (SL 59-60/21:69-70).

According to Hegel, to think <being> or <nothing> is not to think some determinate independent content, nor is it a kind of independent *being* (or nonbeing). To think so is to think merely as our “understanding” would have things. Instead there is a more determinate content—<becoming>—that is the thought of coming to be and passing away.

## References

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