

Hegel's dialectic

A typology of Dialectical Movement in Hegel's *Logic*

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Thirteen distinct forms of the dialectic abstracted from Hegel's work are elaborated below.

1. Inner Contradiction or Self-negation

The first type of movement that Hegel presents us with is the movement which a concept exhibits when subject to internal, skeptical critique. What we mean by 'internal' is this. A concept is to be understood as some aggregate of actions (word meanings or physical actions), which are organised around some word or other symbol or artefact, and together constitute a project, an object-oriented system of actions. A critique is *internal* if it arises within that project, according to its own principles. In that sense then the concept may be said to come into contradiction with itself, or *negate* itself. This typically happens when the concept comes up against some kind of limit beyond which it ceases to be valid. Think for example of a legal principle which is applied in the courts but at a certain point or when faced with a particularly difficult case, the principle breaks down. The judiciary then have to work out how to modify the principle, or ultimately abandon the principle and supplant it with a new principle, whilst relying on precedents and experience in trying so far as possible to keep to the spirit if not the letter of the law, so to speak. This is the kind of process Hegel applies in his *Logic*.

This form of movement underlies the whole of Hegel's *Logic* and the various forms of movement to be described below, first exhibited by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel demonstrates the process by means of a **logic of concepts**.

The logic of concepts differs from propositional logic in the following respect. The logic of concepts examines only propositions of the form "*X* is absolute," or if you like, "Everything is *X*." Clearly, such claims come up against their limit and prove to be only relative truths.

In the *Logic*, "*X*" is not a blank space like the "*p*" and "*q*" of propositional calculus in propositions like " $p \rightarrow q$ " or " $\forall(p) q$," and so on. "*X*" is a definite logical concept or category. By this means, Hegel creates a method by which he can exhibit the logic of concepts beyond the bounds of logic, particularly the concepts found in the human sciences. We can demonstrate this logic by examining five distinct forms of movement which are manifested in the *Logic*.

2. Seriality or Objective dialectics

Seriality is the form of movement found in Book One of the *Logic*, Being. Hegel insists that philosophy must make its beginning without any presuppositions. Any proposition like "*A* is *X*" ascribes some content to *A*, so such an *A* cannot be the starting point of Logic. Logic must begin from a claim like "*A* is." This concept is Being. The point is that Being is not any determinate being at all, it just is. In other words, Being is Nothing. So the simplest conceivable concept Being, proves immediately to be its opposite, Nothing. Being can longer stand; it has shown itself to be Nothing. This is the most well-known of Hegel's logical moves and is the archetype of seriality or objective dialectics.

“Transition into something else is the dialectical process within the range of Being. ... when some-what becomes another, the somewhat has vanished.” (Hegel 2009, §§161, 111n)

It is seriality because what results is one category supplanting another which then disappears. The new concept is not what it is in relation to the preceding concept, but simply supplants it. It’s just one damn thing after another. Thus the concepts form a series of formations somewhat like syncretic thinking: as each concept falls into contradiction it is abandoned and replaced by another which rises from the ashes of its predecessor. An example would be a concept like race, which, once subject to criticism dissolves into ethnicity.

It is called *objective* because all the concepts of this division of the logic express an outsider or observer point of view. The self-consciousness of the object is not taken into account. So when a sociologist takes measurements of a social process, a series of values are produced which are objective and have no basis in the self-consciousness of the social actors being observed. Each measurement supplants the former measurement unaffected by the previous act of measurement. This is the thinnest and least interesting of all the forms of movement and is basically the type of conceptual movement characteristic of positivistic science. Nonetheless, it underpins all the processes to follow.

3. Diversity, or the Struggle of Opposites

The form of movement of the Second Book of the Logic, Essence (a.k.a. Reflection), Hegel calls *diversity*.

“Transition into something else is the dialectical process within the range of Being: reflection (bringing something else into light), in the range of Essence. ... (2009, §161)

“In the sphere of Essence one category does not pass into another, but **refers** to another merely. In Being, the form of reference is purely due to our reflection on what takes place: but *reference to another* is the special and proper characteristic of Essence. In the sphere of Being, when some-what becomes another, the somewhat has vanished. Not so in Essence: here there is no real other, but only **diversity**, reference of the one to *its* other. The transition of Essence is therefore at the same time no transition: for in the passage of different into different, the different does not vanish: the different terms remain in their relation. ...

“In the sphere of Being the reference of one term to another is only implicit; in Essence on the contrary it is explicit. And this in general is the distinction between the forms of Being and Essence: in Being everything is immediate, in Essence *everything is relative*.” (2009, §111n)

This Book of the *Logic* deals with the emergence of a new concept, the emergence of a form of self-consciousness, through the reflection of an existing concept on the series of conceptions produced in Being. So in Essence, each successive concept is relative to another, and each stage in the development of Essence is a unity of opposites, such as Matter and Thing, Form and Content, Cause and Effect, and so on. The two opposites form a unity because each is meaningful only in relation to its other. Realisation of how the opposites mutually constitute one another is the insight which moves the process forward. But the form of movement is this: as the opposition develops, it gives rise to another opposition which expresses the contradiction more deeply, and the former opposition does not disappear, but merely moves into the background, so to speak, and continues to exist as a subordinate moment of the new opposition.

So as Essence progresses, the reflection becomes more and more multifaceted, but it still lacks a stable and unifying concept of itself. It is somewhat like a research project into a complex social or public health problem in which a multiplicity of approaches have been investigated and co-exist side-by-side, but without a definitive resolution which is able to bring all the divergent points of view into relation with one another.

4. The Leap or *Aperçu*

The 'leap' is a dramatic change which has been described by a number of writers in quite different terms. We may mention: Goethe's *Urphänomen*, C. S. Peirce's apperception, the Old French term *aperçu*, Stephen Jay Gould's speciation, Marx's social revolution and Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift. In Hegel's *Logic* the leap is typified in the formation of the true, abstract concept which marks the movement from Essence to the Subjective Logic, and is always to be found in the founding of a new science.

All writers agree that the outcome of the leap cannot be predicted or determined by the preceding conditions, but rather the new concept provides a solution for all the outstanding problems which could not be resolved in the former situation. It represents a sudden insight or *aperçu*, like when Sherlock Holmes suddenly puts all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together. It is a leap. The difference between the higher grades of Essence (such as Real Possibility and Reciprocity) and the Concept, is that in Essence we have a very rich, theory-laden and multifaceted representation of the process, but no unifying concept of it, just so many unsolved puzzles, circular chains of cause and effect, real possibilities which only require to be realised and so on. The leap to the abstract Concept is the key to unlock the mystery, but still lacks the richness of actuality represented in the higher grades of Essence, but nevertheless functions as the basic explanation of actuality, bringing out what hitherto lay hidden behind contradictory appearances.

5. The Unfolding of what is Implicit as Development

The Subjective Logic begins with an abstract concept which remains to become more concrete. Hegel describes this development in the following terms.

“The onward movement of the notion is no longer either a transition into, or a reflection on something else, but **Development**. For in the notion, the elements distinguished are without more ado at the same time declared to be identical with one another and with the whole, and the specific character of each is a free being of the whole notion. ... The movement of the Notion is development: by which that only is explicit which is already implicitly present.” (2009, §161)

The development of the Concept is not a transition into something different, but rather a bringing out of what was already implicit in the Concept. It is what Kuhn called 'normal science', that is, puzzle-solving. Hegel conceptualised this process in terms of the reconciliation of the logical dissonance between the individual actions, the universal symbols and tools of the new concept and the object-oriented project of the Concept. The concept remains what it always was, but it develops. In this process, what proves under fire to be faulty logic is disclosed and overcome and the Concept grasped successively more firmly and truly – honed or fine-tuned one might say, as when the parties to a treaty resolve subsequent disputes by seeking the clearest possible formulation of the treaty so as to overcome difficulties in its implementation.

6. Objectification: the interplay of Subject and Object

The development of a new Concept (or social movement, form of social practice, science, etc.) is driven not only its internal logic but also by interplay with the rest of society, its object. At the same time as an abstract concept develops what was already implicit in it, it also interacts with other institutions and in one way or another *merges* with them. Its ideas are translated into the terms of other movements, while conversely the requirements and achievements of other movements (concepts) are incorporated into itself. This process is often described as **objectification**. In the process of objectifying in the customs and practices of a community and ‘mainstreaming’ itself, it becomes domesticated; the outcome is a transformed totality in which the new concept is simply one aspect of a new whole.

Hegel describes three forms of movement by means of which this interchange between subject and object takes place: **Mechanism**, **Chemism** and **Organism**. They can be conceptualized as three competing conceptions of multiculturalism. In Mechanism, the subject and object remain complete and self-subsistent things which relate externally to one another, adapting to the extent of co-existing with one another like the patchwork of ghettos found in some cities. In Chemism, the subjects find selective affinities with one another in which they mediate each other’s needs by their labour, like the way different immigrant groups find niches in the division of labour in a society. In Organism (or Teleology) each is to the other both a means and an end, with the formation of an ‘ecosystem’ which functions as an organism in its own right, both preserving difference and consolidating mutual interdependence.

7. Exceptions that become a Rule

Going beyond the *Logic*, in the *Subjective Spirit*, Hegel introduces a new form of movement which, among other things, allows him to theorise how consciousness emerges out of natural processes. This is best illustrated by an example.

Imagine an organism as a self-enclosed system of feelings which regulate its own behaviour. If such an organism were to come into contact with some other body, then these feelings would be different in some way, and these differences would alert the organism to the presence of something outside its own system of self-regulation. Those differences – unusual and unexpected feelings – are thereby sensations, feelings which alert the organism to the presence of others and make possible interaction with the objective world and other centres of activity. But at the same time, these sensations are just feelings, in themselves no different from any other feelings, arising from the same natural processes. Thus the exceptional or outlying feelings form a new system of their own, the system of sensations regulating the external interactions of different organisms – a new layer of reality.

Darwin’s idea of natural selection is a variant of this type of movement.

Hegel uses this dialectic to show how a whole series of ‘layers’ of reality are built one upon another in which at the same time *all are natural processes*, obedient to the same laws of physics and chemistry as inorganic objects. The internet and the computers connected to the internet work in much the same way, with coherent meaningful texts and images, conveying meaningful information between selected human beings at disparate points on the network, mediated by 1s and 0s and nothing else.

8. The Negative is creative

Hegel uses a variation on “exceptions that become a rule” in the *Objective Spirit*, the work in which he develops his theory of history and social life.

Marx makes fun of this dialectic in *Capital* when he says:

“A criminal produces crimes. ... The criminal produces not only crimes but also criminal law, and with this also the professor who gives lectures on criminal law and in addition to this the inevitable compendium in which this same professor throws his lectures onto the general market as ‘commodities’. ... The effects of the criminal on the development of productive power can be shown in detail. Would locks ever have reached their present degree of excellence had there been no thieves? Would the making of bank-notes have reached its present perfection had there been no forgers? etc. (Marx, 1863)

A right only comes into existence after it is violated, ... and someone objects and struggles to realise the right and inscribe it in law and custom; but if it were never violated in the first place, it could not exist as a right. This is sometimes referred to as the “labour of the negative.”

9. Normalisation of Alterations

Hegel described the gradual changes in a nation’s customs as “an alteration which ... lacks the form of alteration” and this is a very well known process of maturation. At some point, some insignificant alteration is made in a practice which is not understood as a new custom or law, but simply an expediency for the moment; but, it remains expedient and in fact, becomes normalised, and in itself what was a momentary accommodation becomes accepted as custom and no-one can even remember where it came from. This is the classic form of gradual development.

Although Hegel never formulated the idea of natural selection, Darwin’s idea is very similar.

10. Normative Essentialism

Next, we come to the uniquely Hegelian idea whereby some process or social practice realises its own concept. For example, Hegel said that humans are essentially free, but whereas Rousseau observed that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains,” Hegel saw the entire history of civilisation as a realisation of that freedom. Likewise, Hegel saw the process of growing up as a process of realising one’s own concept, the concept of who you really are. All the processes listed above may be subsumed in the process of personal or social development. This process has been referred to by Robert Brandom as making explicit what was already implicit.

11. Differentiation

Lastly, Hegel shows that as an initially-abstract concept develops and becomes more concrete, there arise specialised concepts. For example, once Chemistry is unified on the basis of the concept of the chemical element and its molecule, Chemistry differentiates into Organic and Inorganic Chemistry, and Molecular Chemistry, Industrial Chemistry and so on. This process happens through specialisation or a division of labour, with each branch having its own founding definitions, principles, methods and institutions.

A corollary of this dialectic is that whenever two concepts interact with one another, a specialised form of labour is entailed in participating in that interaction and as a result the abstract concept constituted by this interaction develops into an independent concept in itself. For example, when two

neighbouring peoples, with the discovery that each produces a surplus which meets a need of the other, begin trading with each other, then that trading activity becomes the activity of a certain class of people with their own self-consciousness, forms activity and principles.

12. Organic development

When a social institution, such as a state, develops subordinate concepts – such as a head of state, legislature and an executive – formerly the functions of a single organ – such as an absolute monarch – then the resulting more concrete body Hegel calls “organic,” because its parts are not an aggregate of otherwise separate powers but ‘organs’ or the whole, which have no separate existence or function outside of maintaining the whole, like the organs of the human body.

Conversely, institutions or processes which have distinct bases and have existed separately, may be drawn together as “organs” of a single organism. For example, a king who conquers a nation and rules through the native nobility and the institutions already independently existing in civil society, absorbs them into an integral state as its organs. This is the same process which Vygotsky described in which thinking and speaking each originate from separate bases – there is pre-intellectual speech and pre-verbal intelligence – but once they come together they are inextricably intertwined in a single process of verbal intelligence and intelligent speech.

13. Development through difference

A unity which is immediate and in that sense abstract may develop into a concrete unity by passing through a phase of difference or diversity. An instance of this is the development from the ancient state based on kinship into a modern state, in which civil society opens up in the gap between the family and the state. Civil society is characterised by particularity and difference and mediated interdependence. On the basis of this struggle of diverse interests, a state which expresses the concrete unity of all can arise.

Organisers know that when a relatively immature organisation begins to prove incapable of transcending internal differences, it must pass through this phase – be it a split or a period of federalism – in order to be able to later form a stronger, more mature unity. This is a special case of negation of the negation.

Summary

Each of the forms of movement Hegel describes also include numerous specialised dialectical concepts to represent the entities undergoing change. Study and practice is required to get used to these concepts and to be able to recognise them and deploy them in understanding complex social processes.

The concepts introduced by Hegel do not rely on reifying processes of change as natural, but on the contrary, the complexities of grasping these processes is located essentially in the processes of rational conception. Hegel’s *logical* approach makes the specific nature of each process intelligible.

References

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Marx, K. (1863). *Theories of Surplus Value*, [Addendum 11 to Part 1](#).