

Hegel on the Double Movement of *Aufhebung*

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In this article I argue that the dialectic between cause and effect in the ‘Doctrine of Essence’ of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* serves to dispel the ever-persistent notion that the Hegelian system is a linear movement. While it is true that Hegel’s speculative philosophy is a systematic unfolding, it is an error to suppose that the Hegelian system operates as a smooth, progressive development, mechanically moving forward in a unidirectional manner. The treatment of causation in *The Science of Logic* is not a simple movement where one term encounters its antithesis and sublates itself. On the contrary, causality engenders a reciprocal action, and is what Hegel calls a *double transition* or a double movement (*gedoppelte Bewegung*), where the cause determines the effect, and the effect determines the cause. In a crucial passage in the *Science of Logic* Hegel clarifies the significance of the double movement: “for a totality to be *posited*, a *double transition* is required, not only the transition of one determinateness into another but equally the transition of this other into the first, its going back into it,” he goes on to declare that “this remark regarding the necessity of the double transition is everywhere of great importance for scientific method.”¹ Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, ‘sublation,’ is shown to be more intricate because it involves a twofold movement, a double transition, rather than a simple one to one transition. A popular criticism of the Hegelian system is its ceaseless linear progression, whereby each stage, each moment of Spirit’s unfolding is seen as a necessary moment, only to be sublated into the next moment. Just to take a canonical example, in his *Concluding Unscientific*

Postscript, Kierkegaard takes this view of Hegel's systematic philosophy, proclaiming:

According to Hegel, truth is the continued world-historical process. Each generation, each stage of this process, is legitimated, yet is only an element in the truth. Short of settling for some charlatanry, which helps by assuming that Prof. Hegel's own generation, or the one now succeeding him, is *imprimatur* [Latin: let it be printed], that the generation is the last and world history over, we are all implicated in scepticism. The passionate question of truth does not even arise because philosophy has first tricked the individuals into becoming objective. The positive Hegelian truth is as illusory as was happiness in paganism. Only afterwards does one get to know whether or not one has been happy; and similarly the next generation gets to know what truth was in the preceding generation. The great secret of the system (yet this remains unter uns [between us], just like the secret among the Hegelians) is close to Protagoras's sophism 'Everything is relative', except that here everything is relative in the continued progression.²

While it may be tempting to simply dismiss Kierkegaard's treatment of Hegel as nothing but an empty caricature, there is—to borrow a phrase from Marx—a kernel of truth hidden in its mystical shell. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel declares: "the True is the whole."³ Hegel's systematic philosophy has been the subject of continuous reproach and criticism, specifically for its claim to completeness whereby each and every logical moment is but one in a series of moments leading up to the Absolute. Each moment in Hegelian philosophy is, allegedly, legitimated; that is to say, it is a necessary part of the greater whole. This has led to the popular conception of Hegel as the thinker of necessity *par excellence*. This is true insofar as Hegel's philosophical system develops by way an internal, immanent deductive logic. However, Kierkegaard's remark that within the Hegelian system everything relative is also in a continuous progression exemplifies the general resentment towards Hegel's absolute idealism. Hegel is treated primarily as a thinker of necessity. But is Hegel strictly a thinker of necessity, or of freedom? Is he a thinker of radical emancipation or mechanical determinism? Slavoj Žižek comments on this aspect:

The Hegelian relationship between necessity and freedom is usually read in terms of their ultimate coincidence: true freedom has nothing to do with capricious free choice; it means the priority of self-relating

to relating-to-other; in other words, an entity is free when it can deploy its immanent potential without being impeded by an external obstacle. From here, it is easy to develop the standard argument against Hegel: his system is a fully 'saturated' set of categories, with no place for contingency and indeterminacy, for Hegel's logic, each category follows with an inexorable immanent-logical necessity from the preceding one, with the entire series of categories forming a self-enclosed Whole. We can see now what this argument misses: the Hegelian dialectical process is not this 'saturated', self-contained, necessary Whole, but an *open and contingent process through which such a Whole forms itself*. In other words, the reproach confuses being with becoming: it perceives a fixed order of Being (the network of categories) what is for Hegel is the process of Becoming which, *retroactively*, engenders its necessity.⁴

Indeed, the Hegelian system is a radically open, contingent movement whereby the absolute unified Whole forms itself. Žižek is right to insist that the usual criticisms of Hegel's system as a closed totality miss the point, as it were. However, this sort of characterisation of Hegel's philosophy still continues and is all-too common. Frank Ruda has also recently summed up this general negative reproach to Hegel: "Hegel was too much of a rationalist and thereby too much of an irrationalist. He was too dialectical, that is, too systematic. He sought obsessively to integrate everything into an encyclopaedic totality, and his method swallowed up everything. His megalomania shows itself in his attempt to consume, by the very means of exclusion, all the things that he excludes."⁵ Indeed, the image of the Hegelian's system as an all-encompassing monster that consumes everything and arranges it into a logically necessary progression is still ever pervasive despite being something of a chimera. It is a caricature that turns Hegel into the absolute thinker of necessity. While it is true that Hegel's philosophy develops and unfolds through an immanent dialectical logic, it is inaccurate to suppose that such a development is a linear, smooth chronological movement. The various dialectical transitions in Hegel's system are far from simple one-to-one movements. Žižek is correct to emphasize the radical openness and contingency of Hegel's project. Yes, things do progress in the Hegelian system but the path of progression is forever marked by negativity, rupture, chaos, and therefore it is "the way of despair."⁶

While totality is rightly associated with Hegel's philosophy, what tends to be overlooked in this characterisation is the intricate dynamism with which the singular terms and categories of his system relate to one another, how they coalesce and inhere, without entirely annulling themselves. Indeed, such

intricate movement is the work of *Aufhebung* in Hegel's philosophy. When terms are shown to be in dialectical contradiction, their resolution occurs by way of *Aufhebung*, with an almost surgical precision. Hegel's double transition accounts for the inherence of the singular terms most explicitly in his treatment of causality at the end of the 'Doctrine of Essence.' Hegel's double movement occurs in all of the sublated transitions in *The Science of Logic*. Therefore, I will limit my discussion to two examples: the implicit and the explicit. Accordingly, what follows is divided into two sections. In the first section I provide a brief exposition on the logic of the double movement implicit in the dialectic from being to nothingness. In the second section, I reconstruct Hegel's argument for reciprocal causality and show how the double transition is the explicit in this dialectic.

I. The Implicit Logic of the Double Movement

In her now rightly influential book *The Future of Hegel*, Catherine Malabou makes the following observation with regards to the Hegelian notion *Aufhebung*: "In its movement, the dialectical sublation is not a frozen process whose modalities are fixed once and for all, remaining detached and separate from everything it sets in motion."⁷ Malabou's point here is that sublation is not an empty formalistic process devoid of all content; it is not an external operation whereby it can be haphazardly applied to any and all external objects. For Hegel, the form cannot be separated from its content, and the work of sublation is no exception. Sublation is composed of "two factors conditioned by negativity, these being the two modalities of suppression and preservation...both together forming the *energy of the negative*."⁸ It is precisely this energy of the negative that gives Hegel's negation of negation its power and force. Sublation determines what it sublates. When something is absolutely negated, it isn't entirely cancelled out, there is a minimal remainder and it is this preservation that transforms the sublated term into something decidedly new. It's important to note here that the dual aspect of *Aufhebung* to which Malabou refers is not what Hegel means by the double transition, or the double movement. The double movement is what leads towards right before the two moments are sublated. The logic of the double movement is necessary for sublation. It is for this reason that we need to see how Hegel establishes the logic of the double movement before we can understand its relation to *Aufhebung*.

The double movement finds its purest expression in Hegel's *Science of Logic*. The general structure of Hegel's Science of Logic is something of puzzlement. Divided into three separate books: Being, Essence, and the Concept, Hegel's ontological masterwork deals with abstract thought-

determinations. It is helpful, I wager, for us to think of the tripartite structure of the texts as revolving around the theme of determinacy, determinateness (*Bestimmtheit*) and determination (*Bestimmung*). Insofar as Hegel's *Aufhebung* is a process where by thought-determinations are brought about, it is crucial for us to grasp the meaning of this notorious word. To properly do this, we first need to understand what Hegel means by determinacy. Not only is determinacy one of the many over-arching themes of the *Logic*, but also in order for us to properly think and grasp Hegel's *Aufhebung* and the logic of the double movement. Thus, some clarification is in order.

Within Hegelian terminology, then, determinacy or determinateness denotes that which distinguishes a thing or a concept from any other thing or concept. Something can be said to be determinate in being what it is in itself, rather than being what it is in relation to, or by mediation from something else. Determination, has two senses: i) delimitation, definition, making something or a concept more determinate by adding features to it; and ii) destination, destiny, calling or vocation. Determination is a thing or concept's intrinsic nature insofar as it manifests itself in the thing's relation to others. For example, the ability to think can be said to be the determination of humanity because it is the defining character of our species in relation to others (e.g., animals, things, etc.). If something fulfils its determination (i.e., its destiny or calling), then it also fulfils its *concept* (*Begriff*). In Hegelian philosophy, the destiny or determination of the concept is to determine, or fulfil itself. In this sense, then, we can see here how the concept exhibits self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*). Self-determination is the self-development, or self-movement of something. Something is self-determined if and only if it does not receive its determination by an external force or term. Logically, something can be said to be free if and only if it is self-determining.⁹ The first book of Hegel's *Logic*, 'The Doctrine of Being', can be seen as the development of determinacy/determinateness as such. While what concerns the second book, 'The Doctrine of Essence', is the immanent development of the relations between the determiner and that which it determines. This *relation* is spoken of in terms of positedness in order to articulate the interconnected relationship between that *which determines* and that *which is determined*. For Hegel, to say that something is posited (*gesetzt*) can either mean: i) that it is explicitly set out, rather than implicit, or for itself. For example, what is merely implicit in a seed, is posited (made explicit) in the plant; or ii) that which is posited is dependant on, or produced by, something else. If something is posited, then, in Hegelian terminology, it has positedness. What posits and what gets posited can also be spoken of in the language of determinateness. When something gets its determinateness from something else, then it is posited by that other something. Richard Dien Winfield

summarizes this point succinctly:

In order for determinacy to be posited rather than coevally given, determinacy must become mediated by something that underlies it as its determiner. This mediation minimally removes the immediacy with which quality, quantity, and measure comprise contrastive relations of terms having no primacy with respect to one another. The content of these terms is not thereby annulled or modified. Rather, that content is simply rendered mediated by a determiner, giving it the form of a posit posited by some positor.¹⁰

Thus, we can say that positedness is determined determinacy, rather than a determinacy that is not determined by some external factor and simply assumed to be a given. The two-tiered dynamic of determiner and the determined, or of the positor and the posited, is the general theme of 'The Doctrine of Essence,' and it is exactly what Hegel's double movement, or double transition addresses in the section on causation. In the aforementioned example of the seed and the plant, what posits and what gets posited conveys an immanent movement, an immanent relation. Entailed implicitly within the seed is the genetic information that gets posited, or made manifest, as the plant grows.¹¹ Finally, in the third and final book of the *Logic*, 'The Doctrine of the Concept,' the relation and language of positing and posited is abandoned, this is because the concept is what posits and determines itself, rather than being dependant on an other term or category for its positedness.

Aufhebung first comes on the scene in the opening dialectic of 'The Doctrine of Being.' Pure, abstract thought generates its own indeterminate, immediate content as a genuine, presuppositionless beginning for speculative science. For Hegel, such a beginning is the category of pure being, without any further determinations. Pure being is pure precisely because it lacks any qualification and quantification. There is absolutely no determinacy present. We cannot say anything about pure being, except, of course, that it is *pure*. As Hegel himself says of pure being, "in its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly."¹² Pure being is shown to be nothingness due to the utter lack of determinations. With no qualifications or quantifications, the category of sheer being moves into the category of nothing. It is crucial to stress that Hegel is not drawing a relation of identity between being and nothing. To claim that being and nothing are identical presupposes the law of identity, that is, it presupposes an external criteria that thought can bring to judge the content it thinks. In other words, it presupposes too much at the outset. Insofar as we

are dealing with simple, indeterminate and immediate categories, thought moves from being to nothing. With being, thought passed over to nothing; and with nothing it once again passed over to being. This work of ‘passed over’ is the process of becoming, of thought’s activity. But what is becoming? For Hegel there are two moments of becoming: coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. The move from pure being to nothing is thought of as ‘ceasing-to-be’, while the move from nothing to being is ‘coming-to-be’. What has occurred here is the sublation of being and nothingness. That is to say, in this rightly famous opening of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel shows us how both being *and* nothing are preserved and annulled by the work of sublation. They are sublated into a new category of thought: becoming. Becoming is composed of both being and nothing insofar as it is simultaneously a coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be of anything whatsoever. The cycle between being and nothing, nothing and being, dissolves into a single unity. However, this dissolution into a unity is not an abstracted unity. As Hegel makes clear “becoming is the unseparatedness of being and nothing, not the unity that abstracts from being and nothing.”¹³ Both being and nothing are integral moments of becoming. However, insofar as they are two moments of becoming, being and nothing only subsist in becoming as sublated moments. Being ceases-to-be and becomes nothing; nothing comes-to-be and becomes being. For Hegel: “they sink from their initially represented *self-subsistence* into moment which are *still distinguished* but as the same time sublated.”¹⁴ It is at this juncture where Hegel introduces the double movement in *Aufhebung*, albeit implicitly. Let’s follow Hegel in his own words here:

Grasped as thus distinguished each is in their *distinguishedness* a unity with the *other*. Becoming thus contains being and nothing as *two such unities*, each of which is itself until of being and nothing; one is being as immediate and as reference to nothing; the other is nothing as immediate and as reference to being; in these unities the determinations are of unequal value.

Becoming is in this way doubly determined. In one determination, nothing is the immediate, that is, the determination begins with nothing and this refers to being; that is to say, it passes over into it. In the other determination, being is the immediate, that is, the determination begins with being and this passes over into nothing — *coming-to-be* and *ceasing-to-be*.¹⁵

This passage, while abstract, contains the Hegelian double movement. As the truth of being and nothing, becoming contains the two as its moments. The movement is double because there are two determinations at work here. The

first is from being to nothing (i.e., ceasing-to-be); the second is from nothing to being (i.e., coming-to-be). It is slightly misleading to speak of these two determinations as ‘perspectives,’ or ‘directions,’ however. The term ‘perspective’ presupposes perception, and perception presupposes a phenomenal object which appears and demands to be perceived from a particular vantage point. Furthermore, the term ‘direction’ is also misleading because it presupposes time, and time, in turn, presupposes quantifications and all sorts of spatio-temporal relations that Hegel is not even concerned with at the start of the *Logic*. No, it is crucial that Hegel here calls the double movement a double *determination*. Recall that a determination in Hegelian philosophy is a thing or category’s intrinsic nature insofar as it manifests itself in the thing’s relation to others. Thus, what the double movement/determination illustrates is that being is only what it is in relation to its opposite, nothing, and conversely nothing is only what it is, in reference to its opposite. Each determines itself in reference to its other by passing over into its other. Insofar as both terms becomes their respect other, they *both* constitute becoming. This double determination in the double movement is implicit in becoming itself — becoming contains the two moments of being and nothing and their reciprocal ceasing-to-be and coming-to-be. It is paramount to emphasise that it is this double movement that leads to *Aufhebung*. As John W. Burbidge puts it, it is: “the reciprocal move from one thought to its opposite and back again that leads to sublation.”¹⁶ As we see here, Hegel opens the ‘Doctrine of Being’ with a dialectic that implicitly demonstrated the double movement. It is in Hegel’s treatment of causality, however, where this double movement becomes explicit.

II. The Explicit Logic of the Double Movement

Hegel’s account causality is fully developed in the closing chapter of ‘The Doctrine of Essence,’ in the discussion of reciprocity in the section on ‘Actuality’. Structurally, we have moved from ‘The Doctrine of Being’ to that of Essence. To say the same thing in more thematic terms: we have moved from bare determinacy in the logic of being, to determined determinacy in the logic of essence. This shift from being to essential being and its many varied relations is crucial. For Hegel, the truth of the category of being is the category of essence. Essence’s own being consists in positing its own being, as mediated and no longer self-subsistent. Hegel’s account of essential determination involves reflection because essence reflects in the very determinacies it posits: this is why the general structural theme of ‘The Doctrine of Essence’ is determined determinacy.¹⁷ It is within the treatment of essence that Hegel’s double transition becomes explicit. It’s externalisation manifests in Hegel’s

discussion of reciprocity of action, or causality. To summarise very briefly, a cause is only a cause in relation to its effect, and an effect is only an effect by virtue of its relation to a cause. There is a reciprocal relation between the two terms, whereby each presupposes the other, or to put it differently, each is, simultaneously, both cause and effect. Each term in the casual relation plays a double role: as cause and as effect. If a cause is only a cause by virtue of its effect, then the effect can be said to be constitutive of the cause, the effect *causes* the cause to be a cause. Without the effect, we cannot legitimately determine the cause to be a cause, and for this reason the cause is just as much a cause as it is an effect. This is the logic of the double movement, and this logic also applies to the category of effect. An effect can only be what it is in relation to its cause, its antecedent, yet this relation also entails it (the effect) to determine the cause to be what it is.

For Hegel, this double movement, embedded within both the logical categories of cause and effect, constitutes what he calls the 'reciprocity of action.'¹⁸ For example, if *A* is the cause of *B*, then the effect *B* can logically be said to be entailed in the cause *A*. Conversely, entailed in the effect *B* is the cause *A*. *A*, as cause, posits its effect *B*, and *B*, as effect, is posited by *A*. Each term is at the same time an effect and a cause, each side presupposes the other but in this presupposition of the other it presupposes itself, and both are continuously acting and reacting in this reciprocal relation. Each side of the causal relation contains the other in itself, that is, each side implies the other (a cause implies an effect, and an effect implies a cause). However, if the cause contains its effect within it, and the effect contains the cause, then the difference between the two is cancelled, and the difference subsequently vanishes. What remains is simply *one* single cause, or as Hegel states, "reciprocity of action is, therefore, only causality itself; the cause does not just *have* an effect but, in the effect refers *as cause* back to itself."¹⁹ The distinction between a cause and its effect is sublated, or overcome, and causality is no longer categorically a relation between two distinct terms, or two *relata*, but rather what emerges from this dialectic is a metamorphosis to a category of causality that causes itself, that is self-causing.

The alleged distinction between cause and effect is dissolved, and what endures in, and emerges from, this dissolution is the Concept. Hegel demonstrates that the category of formal causality, when logically thought through its own determinate terms of cause and effect, (i.e., inner necessity) evolves and transitions into a new term that is self-causing, self-relating, and by consequence also self-determining, rather than merely obeying the two-tiered dynamic of determiner and determined. For Hegel, that which is self-causing, and self-determining, is the concept, and freedom falls within its realm precisely

because it is the logic of the concept that deals with self-determination.²⁰ For something to be self-determined implies that it develops autonomously without any recourse or reference to other external terms or factors. For x to be considered self-determining, it cannot rely upon an external term, such as y, for its determinateness. If it did rely on y for its determination, then x would be something posited by y. A self-determining entity cannot be contingent upon, or determined by, any other term other than itself to be what it is. In this sense, logically speaking, what is self-determined is also free because it only relies upon its own self to cohere and self-subsist. Recall that in the German, determination (*Bestimmung*) also denotes a sense of calling, or destiny. If something fulfils its determination (its destination), then, it also fulfils its concept. In this sense, we can see why Hegel maintains that the concept alone is self-determining, because if something fulfils its determination by fulfilling its concept, then the concept is that which fulfils itself. The concept arrives at its destination only through itself. As Burbidge rightly observes,

Careful reflection on the relation of cause and effect, however, reveals that something can be a cause only if it is in some way incited to action by some other substance upon which it in due course works its effects. There is, then, a reciprocal interaction between two 'substances.' So we come to the thought of a double transition, from the one substance over to another that it incites to action, and from that other, now made casually effective, back to the original one.²¹

The opposition and distinction between cause and effect, between determiner and the determined, is removed in Hegel's account reciprocal action. Both have been shown to determine the other. This co-determination is, of course, the logical expression of the double movement made explicit. The mutual action involved here is not a unidirectional and linear progression. Thus, what the many critics of Hegel's philosophy fail to grasp is the intricate logic of the double movement, both in its implicit and explicit aspects. If the Hegelian system were simply a unidirectional, linear progression propelled by necessary determinations and relations, then there would be no room for the double movement. Of course, it is true that the double movement itself must collapse once both of its moments have been sublated, but the work of sublation is far from a rigid, one-to-one operation devoid of any content. To reproach Hegel's system for necessarily determining all its contents is to act as if there is no reciprocal, mutual determination at work in any cause to its effect. In short, it's to treat the Hegelian system as — for a lack of a better term — unidirectional rather than bi-directional.

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press 2010), 279.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30.

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), §20.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 227.

⁵ Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 102.

⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §78.

⁷ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisbeth During (New York: Routledge, 2005), 145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁹ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 77-79.

¹⁰ Richard Dien Winfield, *Hegel and the Future of Systematic Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 25.

¹¹ Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, 224-226.

¹² Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John W. Burbidge, *The Logic of Hegel's Logic: An Introduction* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006), 40.

¹⁷ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 337. Interestingly enough, Slavoj Žižek takes the Hegelian concept of Absolute Recoil as the main theme of his most recent book on Hegel. See Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014). Hegel's *absoluter Gegenstoss* is treated in the section on 'Shine' of the *Science of Logic*. See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 348.

¹⁸ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 502.

¹⁹ Ibid., 503.

²⁰ Ibid., 504.

²¹ John W. Burbidge, 'Conceiving,' in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Bauer (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 161-162.

Burbidge, W. J. "Conceiving" In *A Companion to Hegel*. Edited by Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur, 159-174. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

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