

An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy: Dialectic

Abstract

This essay presents Hegelian dialectic not as a “thesis–antithesis–synthesis” concordance of content but as a formal transition that relocates the locus of contradiction. The in-itself–for-itself–in-and-for-itself marks a perspectival shift that returns an external opposition into an internal gap; therefore, dialectic is not expansion but a procedure of reflection. From this vantage, Kant’s “thing-in-itself” names the **minimal difference (negativity)** immanent to a thing; consequently, “being = thought” is not a totalitarian slogan but the self-transparency of speculative judgment.

1 Dialectic and In-Itself/Für-Itself: The Construction of the ‘Self’ of Self-Return

Dialectic is speculative judgment; that is, nothing other than purely logical judgment. As Hegel maintains, it is a purely logical methodology for judgment and thinking and—just as its results show—an ontological dynamics of the actual world and its exposition. Accordingly, this text, as an explanation of the very method called dialectic, is intended to serve as a remedy for the misreadings that reduce it to the “self-augmentation of Spirit” or a “totalitarian ideology” epitomized by the thesis–antithesis–synthesis schema. To that end, what follows explains the foregoing speculatively and methodically, in accordance with Hegel’s intent.

1.1 Self-Externalization (Entäußerung) and Self-Return (Rückkehr)

The in-itself (*an sich*) appears as the in-and-for-itself (*an und für sich*) through its synthesis with the for-itself (*für sich*). Therefore the in-itself recovers itself through its relation to the for-itself. Thus, as “pure form,” the in-itself remains as the otherness within the “content” called the for-itself and functions merely as the formal difference of dialectic. That is to say, apart from logical order, the in-itself does not precede its “self-externalization” into the for-itself. The concept retroactively posits itself as in-itself.

Accordingly, dialectic is a purely logical procedure: for “form (the otherness of content)” to function, “content” must exist. This “content” is the for-itself (determinacy), a state freed from the in-itself (indeterminacy). Hence the relational sense of otherness belongs to the for-itself. The in-itself is the otherness of the for-itself, and thereby it “returns” (*Rückkehr*) to itself. In other words, reflection is always reflection through the for-itself, and self-return is possible only through self-externalization (alienation). Because the in-itself is indeterminate, it has meaning only as the otherness within the for-itself. Thus the purely logical order that places the in-itself first is inverted again: the in-itself appears only in the interstice of the externalization called the for-itself. Yet this otherness is not only otherness with respect to the for-itself but also otherness with respect to itself. That is, the otherness of the in-itself is located within the in-itself; the distance between the in-itself and the for-itself is a distance the in-itself bears toward itself (see 1.2). Therefore the self and its return (= self-externalization) cannot be distinguished apart from speculative thinking, and the in-itself is posited merely retrospectively as a presupposition of dialectic. This mismatch concerning the origin of the in-itself (“Does it precede the for-itself or follow it?”) is itself a contradiction. The in-itself (*an sich* = the self *selbst*) is pure contradiction as such. Hegel formalizes this speculative proposition: “Alle Dinge sind an sich selbst widersprechend.” (“All things are in themselves self-contradictory.”) — (GW, 11:76–78)

1.2 The Identity of Self and Self-Externalization: Contradiction as “the In-Itself”

Thus we must repeat the foregoing: **apart from logical order, the in-itself never precedes its ‘self-externalization’ into the for-itself.** Hence the self-return of the in-itself is a purely logical procedure that constitutes the self called in-itself as otherness within the for-itself. (self-return = self-externalization = self; “the self” exists only as self-formation.) That is, the relation of the in-itself and the for-itself (*an sich und für sich*) is the otherness of the other and the other of the other, and it is the in-itself and the for-itself that have been transposed from the for-itself outside the in-itself into the in-itself. This transition is sublation, and what is conjoined through this transition is the “in-itself-for-itself.” ¹ Hence in-itself-for-itself can be understood by the expression “negation of the negation.” It means that the in-itself alone does not show up (does not exist). That is, the in-itself is always already the in-itself within the in-itself-for-itself. (Every standpoint is already in-and-for-itself.) Substance looks at itself through the subject. But the way substance exists in the subject is the negative mode of the subject’s de-substantialization—that the subject is not substance. Therefore the subject is the gap that substance has with itself (and also the gap that the subject has with itself). In brief,

the gap is the distance between reality itself and the concept of reality; but this distance is located in reality itself—reality is as such already a gap. From the standpoint of the concept, this gap is located within the concept as well.

1.3 Two Transitions in Dialectic: “Negation” and “Negation of the Negation”

The elements of the logical process called dialectic (= the self-unfolding of the concept) can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Indeterminacy called the in-itself is posited, and external to it determinacy called the for-itself is erected.
- (2) In this process, the difference between in-itself and for-itself is disclosed and is set up as an external opposition.
- (3) This external opposition is sublated into the in-itself and is transformed into the unity called in-itself–for-itself.

Here, the transition from (1) → (2) is “negation; externalization,” and the transition from (2) → (3) is “negation of the negation; return.” Thus the difference between external opposition and internal gap is nothing but the difference between “negation” and “negation of the negation.” This is a topological difference of contradiction: it is merely a matter of whether its place is outside or inside. By this, the in-itself and the for-itself become the purely formal conversion called the in-itself–for-itself (a conversion of form). Hence the “thesis–antithesis–synthesis” schema is an over-simplification that harms the dialectic’s dynamic process and its core insight. It should rather be considered in terms of “where the contradiction is located”—that is, as the difference between “negation (in-itself, for-itself; the contradiction exists outside) → negation of the negation (in-itself–for-itself; the contradiction exists inside).” This movement is the reflective structure of the concept itself; therefore, sublation is not a process of “merging” two opposed propositions simply to increase content or to combine theses. It is a purely formal conversion, a shift in standpoint. Hegel’s procedure in the *Philosophy of Right*, where contingent and particular rules develop into universal ethical life with inner necessity, is one of the most representative examples of this dialectical process. ²

[An sich] —(negation)—► [Für sich] —(negation of the negation)—► [An u

That is, the difference between “in-itself and for-itself” and “in-itself–for-itself” is a minimal difference formed through the structure of internal dynamics (contradiction; the dialectical motor of Spirit). The process of dialectic—“the self-unfolding of the concept”—

is the process that binds what once seemed an external opposition between form and content by relocating the opposition that existed outside into the interior of form. And one representative result of this dialectic is Hegel's core insight "being = thought." Accordingly, through the process of sublating the in-itself-for-itself, being and thought are disclosed as an indistinguishable identity of form. [3](#)

2 Deepening the Dialectic: The Kantian *Ding an sich* and the In-Itself-For-Itself

Having surveyed the general logic of the "in-itself-for-itself," let us now see how this form is reproduced through the Kantian "thing-in-itself." Summarizing the foregoing in comparison with Kant's transcendental philosophy: Kant's *Ding an sich* (hereafter "thing-in-itself") is the *an sich* of the *Ding*; it is possible only through the *Ding für sich*, the thing that is not "itself." The thing-in-itself is the otherness of the thing that is not itself. In other words, the thing-in-itself is the minimal difference immanent to the thing. Put differently, the thing-in-itself exists only in a negative mode—only as a "negation of the negation"—with respect to the thing that is not itself. Hence the thing is always already a thing *an und für sich*, an in-and-for-itself thing. Therefore the thing-in-itself is a self-contradiction, being the otherness of the thing-in-itself; accordingly, the thing-in-itself is identical with appearance (phenomenon). This is one of the Hegelian paradoxes known as "the identity of identity and non-identity": insofar as the in-itself and the for-itself that constitute difference are the form and content of the concept itself, the "negation of the negation" yields the concept's self-identity. [4](#)

Thus in-itself existence is not something positive but only something negative (that is, it has no content). The in-itself is always on a dimension "already passed over," posited only logically. That is, in-itself existence is "posited" as a logical presupposition with respect to for-itself existence. Accordingly, within the relation of in-itself-for-itself, form (= the in-itself) functions as an excess over content (= the for-itself). Only formal difference, only the gap, exists. Therefore for-itself existence, by definition, includes its relation to in-itself existence. Hence "negation" is already "negation of the negation." What exists is not the One but the gap itself. [5](#)

3 Conclusion: Speculative Judgment as Dialectic

We thus arrive at a position opposed to the common understanding of Hegel. The one who reaches the extreme of speculative judgment (= absolute knowing): the “manifestation of Absolute Spirit,” what Hegel calls “the Absolute,” signifies only this—that the spirit which has become aware of the power of contradiction in speculative judgment has actually appeared in the world. That it can embrace all oppositions and contradictions and take in every difference means nothing other than that it is already, as such, the originating cause of opposition and the very source of contradiction. Hence Hegel’s “speculative philosophy” is by no means a philosophy of totalitarianism, for the Absolute knows better than anything that it is itself contradictory. Therefore dialectic is not a mere method of expansion. It is solely the labor of the spirit’s self-reflection, and the world is a manifold generated and transformed within this movement of self-reflection.

Notes

[1](#) This means that the in-itself alone does not show up (does not exist). The in-itself is always already the in-itself within the in-itself-for-itself. (Every standpoint is already in-and-for-itself.) Substance looks at itself through the subject. But the way substance exists within the subject is the negative (*negativ*) mode of the subject’s de-substantialization—that the subject is not substance. Therefore the subject is the gap that substance has with itself, and also the gap that the subject has with itself. “That the true is actual only as a system, or that substance is essentially subject, is expressed in the representation which speaks of the Absolute as Spirit—the most sublime concept, belonging to the modern age and its religion. Only what is spiritual is actual. Therefore...” — GW (9:17). Since form is purely indeterminate, the in-itself of the concept is fundamentally de-substantial. The paradoxical fact that substance is a substance without positive content exhibits the dynamism of “self-relating negativity,” the very property of contradiction.

[2](#) Hegel states in the *Philosophy of Right*: “If the Good is regarded as the substantial universal of freedom, but still as abstract, then general determinations and the principle of those determinations—yet as identical with it—are required; and with respect to conscience, since it is only the abstract principle of determining, the universality and objectivity of its determinations are required. Each of these two, when elevated on its own side to totality, becomes the indeterminate that still needs to be determined. — But the integration of these two relative totalities into absolute identity is already

accomplished in itself, in that this very subjectivity—floating in the vanity of its own emptiness as pure certainty of itself—is identical with the abstract universality of the Good; thus the (hence concrete) identity of the Good and the subjective will, the truth of both, is **ethical life (Sittlichkeit).**” – GW (14,1:140). Here the Good is “form,” and only through the “content” of subjective will can it become a concrete universal and thus reach the actuality called ethical life.

[3](#) As note 1 makes clear, the in-itself is indeed the otherness of the other, but it is also the otherness of itself—because “the self” possesses only the result of self-externalization and purely logical-formal difference. The minimal difference (Hegel’s “absolute difference”; see Appendix A) between self and self-externalization connects with the fact that contradiction is internal. This shows that the minute difference the concept has with itself, arising within the concept, is the dialectical motor driving change. Thus this is the in-itself itself and, at the same time, the otherness of the in-itself.

[4](#) Analogously, if we consider Kantian apperception from the perspective of the “I think” and the representations beneath it—and think it as Hegelian speculative judgment, that is, treat the issue in a purely logical and reflective way—we reach the same conclusion. The self that exists in an in-and-for-itself manner originates from the fact that the knowing I (the in-itself “I”) and the known I (the for-itself “I”) are externally opposed yet, in truth, constitute an internal gap. Hence the in-itself “I” is the very effect of this self-reflective structure of dialectic, i.e., “contradiction as such.” This enables a radical reading whereby Absolute Spirit is the sublation of all concepts; and because the concept is itself contradiction, what is experienced as external is retroactively revealed as already internal. Thus being = thought, and “absolute knowing” is nothing other than such absolute sublation. Therefore, when Hegel speaks of “the Absolute,” we must remember the speculative sense: it is not a quasi-divine mind that has attained ultimate knowledge. Precisely from the fact that spirit is contradiction, it becomes capable of embracing everything.

[5](#) Accordingly, the purely formal in-itself is the very absence of content (and also the absence of form). It exists only within the dialectical gap with for-itself existence. The in-itself continually negates itself within the for-itself and thereby forms the “substance-and-subject” of existence. The relation of in-itself and for-itself is not a mere opposition, but exists as the purely formal difference that is the in-itself itself. This difference is not a positive difference; it arises as a structural difference in the process of self-confirmation within the other, dynamically formed through “negation of the negation.” As note 4 shows, the self-unfolding structure of the concept is a self-reflective derivation of the fact that the concept is already contradiction. (self = self-reflection)

Appendix

Appendix A. Absolute Difference and Minimal Difference

“Absolute Difference. *Der absolute Unterschied.*”

Difference is the negativity (*Negativität*) that reflection has within itself. This very ‘nothing’ (*Nichts*) is articulated in the discussion of identity (*Identität*), and at the same time identity itself is determined as self-negation and, by being distinguished from difference, is revealed as an essential moment.

“Difference is the negativity that reflection has in itself; the very ‘nothing’ stated in identical speech; the essential moment of identity itself which, as the negativity of itself, is at once determined and distinguished from difference. This difference is difference *an und für sich*, absolute difference, the difference of essence—difference *an und für sich*, not difference through something external, but difference that relates to itself, hence simple difference.” — GW (12:43–45)

Commentary. “Minimal difference” (pure difference) and “absolute difference” (*absoluter Unterschied*) both express the gap within the self. For Hegel this exceeds mere ontology and bears a logical meaning, so its extension is broader. This too can be called the form of the law of contradiction as self-relation (“the identity of identity and non-identity”). Žižek juxtaposes Deleuze’s notion of “minimal difference” with Lacan’s *objet a*, and extends its usage as Hegel’s “absolute difference.” While “absolute difference” is closer to Hegel’s intention, if one aims to emphasize the gap internal to concept and thing, “minimal difference” often captures that nuance better.