
Absolute Negativity – complete Method or incomplete Strategy?

Negatividade absoluta – Método completo ou Estratégia Incompleta?

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Abstract: Hegel's philosophy is sometimes presented as using a predetermined method that is almost mechanically applied for the creation of a philosophical system. The article aims to show that what Hegel calls a method is not such an operation, but more like a strategy that can use many different operations to achieve its end (differentiation of topics and unification of differences). Four operations used by Hegel to further this strategy in his logic are suggested (abstraction, thinking something as existent, identification and observing thought processes). Finally, the purpose of this strategy is considered.

Keywords: Hegel. Methodology. Logic.

Resumo: A filosofia de Hegel é às vezes apresentada como a utilização de um método pré-determinado aplicado quase mecanicamente à criação de um sistema filosófico. O artigo tem como objetivo mostrar que o que Hegel chama método não é uma operação desse tipo, mas algo mais próximo a um estratégia que pode usar muitas operações diferentes para atingir o seu fim (diferenciação de temas e unificação das diferenças). Quatro operações utilizadas por Hegel para promover essa estratégia em sua lógica são sugeridas (abstração, pensamento em algo como existente, identificação e observação de processos de pensamento). Finalmente, o propósito dessa estratégia é considerado.

Keywords: Hegel. Metodologia. Lógica.

The question of the method followed in Hegel's philosophy is clearly of utmost importance for considering its viability in general, yet, it is hard to find any agreement even as to whether there is any method to be found. Even scholars convinced that Hegel has a method find it hard to express it, at least in terms that can be understood by someone not familiar with intricacies of Hegel's thinking.

A common suggestion is that Hegel's method has something to do with negations, and indeed, it has been called a method of absolute negativity. Other

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Abbreviations:

GW = Hegel, G. W. F.: *Gesammelte Werke*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.

Band 12. Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band. Subjektive Logik (1816). 1981.

Band 20. Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830). 1992.

Band 21. Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band. Objektive Logik. Erster Teil. Lehre von Sein (1832). 1985.

V = Hegel, G. W. F.: *Vorlesungen: ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.

Band 11. Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik, Heidelberg 1817. 1992.

scholars speak instead of e.g. self-reference as the driving force of Hegelian dialectics.² Such statements suggest that this method could be discussed independently of and before any previous *experience* of an actual situation, in which the method would have been used: we might thus call it an *a priori* method, which could then be applied, perhaps not to all things whatsoever, but at least to various topics. Furthermore, this notion of an *a priori* method appears to suggest that all the uses of that method go through certain predetermined stages, just like long division is a procedure that can be applied to various divisions and that still always follows certain steps, even if the answer is always different for different divisions.

In contrast to these *a priori* Hegelians, Hegel himself appears to follow what could then be called an *a posteriori* route, that is, instead of *beginning* with a method, known before any experience of an actual use of the method, he *ends* his logic with a description of the very method he apparently has used throughout the logic. This difference might appear to concern mere direction of exposition: although Hegel himself has chosen to first exemplify his method and only after that generalize from the concrete use of that method, surely we can take the method itself as granted and just apply it without further ado. Such an attitude forgets to ask whether what Hegel calls a method truly is a single, well-defined method with clear steps, in other words, whether it is like a recipe providing concrete steps for baking a cake.

My aim in this article is to first show that what Hegel calls is not actually a single method, but more like a strategy that could apply many methods or procedures in order to fulfill its goals. Secondly, I shall expound some of the particular procedures used by Hegel in his logic. Thirdly, I will reflect a bit on the purpose this strategy is meant to satisfy in logic.

1. The first strategic goal: strive for differences

Although one might be tempted to see what Hegel calls method as a simple process or operation, problems appear when we turn into Hegel's actual account of it. The beginning of the method, Hegel says, should be immediate, and furthermore, abstract and simple generality (GW 12, p. 239, 17-18) – in effect, it would be

² A recent example combining both descriptions is found in Brady Bowman's *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity* (2013, Cambridge University Press), in which Bowman borrows Dieter Henrich's notion of autonomous negation, which is apparently an operation that shares some characteristics with classical negation, but instead of being applied to independent propositions and concepts is applied self-reflectively to itself and at the same time produces difference and then immediately again cancels that difference and so on (p. 48-54).

something isolated from all relations to everything else. Still, the beginning should not be a mere abstraction, but at least implicitly a concrete totality (GW 12, p. 240, 29-31), and therefore, it should be possible to unfold within it various differences, e.g. aspects, sides and parts (GW 12, p. 241, 24-27).

Hegelian method should thus involve development of a multiplicity from an apparently simple and unitary beginning. In effect, we are given something and we are asked to demonstrate something different from what is given. Problem is that nothing in this description tells us how to do it. Instead, the supposed method appears as a mere task of finding differences, once something is given as an object and isolated from everything else. No actual method for searching these differences is provided, only an indeterminate strategic end of gaining them.

Indeed, one could point out further that Hegel himself appears to admit that different topics or beginnings require different procedures for the development of multiplicity. The task is easiest with organic and intentional beginnings (seeds and intentions), which by themselves aim to develop themselves in certain direction and we need just describe the characteristics of this process. In case of inorganic things, on the other hand, the topic investigated is just a real possibility or potentiality for multiplicity, that is, one who is following the method must take a more active role in order to develop the beginning further. (GW 12, p. 241, 11-23).³

It appears then that the strategic goal of searching for differences inherent in a given abstract beginning can be achieved through various procedures. This does not mean that Hegel would have no actual methods or procedures for discovering such differences. On the contrary, he could have many such methods, but they just would not be used mechanically, following the same steps over and over again. Instead, the topic to be studied would determine which methods or procedures

³ One might naturally ask, if the active role of the follower of Hegel's method would somehow contradict the supposed necessity and immanence of this method. This question is a great example of letting one's own presuppositions hinder reading Hegel: one sees a word like "necessity" and thinks that by this Hegel must mean something like necessity one is used to talk about. Clearly, before trying to say what the necessity of Hegel's method means, we should first learn what Hegel himself has to say about necessity. As in the passage described above Hegel uses the concept of real possibility, it seems clear that the necessity of the method should be what he calls «real necessity». This real necessity is then more like an inevitability of a certain process: when all the conditions required for the occurrence of something are present, then something must occur (GW 11, p. 388, 11-15). Now, one of these conditions is always an activity that transforms the conditions into existence and which Hegel explicitly mentions might be a human being (G 20, § 148, 18-24). Sometimes the activity might be inherent in the object of the method, at other times it has to be something external to it. The processes used in the method are then necessary, because of their inevitability – if we do what we do or if we let the object do what it does, the result surely follows; these processes are immanent to the topic discussed, because they are based on potentialities inherent in the topic itself, even if the actualisation of these potentialities might require our help.

worked this time, thus making the introduction of the actual method radically *a posteriori*. Indeed, we could have different methods to use in logic, philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit and even within their various subdisciplines, without breaking the strategic unity of the whole, that is, the search for ways to differentiate things.

Now, I am especially interested of the methods or procedures used for this task of differentiation in Hegel's logic, the supposed foundation of Hegelian system. I do not intend to discover all the procedures Hegel uses – this would require meticulous examination of the whole of Hegel's logic – but at least discern some of them, and hopefully find at least the central procedures. I shall begin with a procedure I will call abstraction.

2. First methodological procedure: abstraction

One strategic aim of Hegelian philosophy is then to develop differences from a given beginning. Quite a direct procedure would help to achieve that end in those cases, where the very isolation or abstraction, with which the general strategy begins, itself produces the required differentiation. In effect, we would here need to do nothing but this abstraction and the goal would be discovered immediately.

Now, this direct procedure apparently works in the very beginning of Hegel's logic, where we are asked to think of being, and indeed «*pure being* – without any further determination»: that is, we must think about being, but not being of any determinate entity or being in any specific situation or being in any determinate manner (GW 21, p. 68, 19). As Hegel himself notes, we could also describe this topic as a result of abstracting from any determinate way of being (GW 21, p. 86, 21 – p. 87, 23). In effect, we try to grasp not some specific things or entities that exist, but isolate this existence⁴ without any reference to specific entities. There is nothing to intuit or think about in this final result of abstraction or “undetermined immediate”, which is then just nothing, that is, a complete abstraction from everything, and in a sense, something very different from what “being” could be (GW 21, p. 69, 4-8).⁵

Although abstraction in itself can then serve in at least one case as a procedure for something different from a beginning, it clearly cannot work as a

⁴ I here use the word existence in the regular sense of the world, instead of in the specifically Hegelian sense of something arising out of ground and conditions.

⁵ I assume that not just pure being, but also determinate ways of being can be described as “being”.

universal procedure. Take for instance the result of this abstraction, that is, nothing: because this is the ultimate abstraction, there simply is no further abstraction to make. True, Hegel does speak of «abstracting from nothing» (GW 21, p. 87, 11-18), but this is clearly just a roundabout reference to a completely reverse operation, which Hegel metaphorically assimilates with creation of the world, that is, return of everything, which was earlier abstracted.

Furthermore, if nothing is thought as a beginning, even this return to a more concrete starting point is closed off, because nothing is then not explicitly taken as a result of any abstraction. Clearly something more is required to get rid of nothing, or what means same, to achieve something existent. In the following section we shall see a simple procedure for discovering something at least virtually existent.

3. Second methodological procedure: thinking something as existent

Even if the simplest methodological operation or abstraction could not help us finding differences in all cases, we can imagine an almost as simple method as abstraction: just consider a case in which just simply observing or thinking an isolated topic would instantly bring about something different. Now, this is what appears to be behind Hegel's move from nothing back to being. We think of nothing, and furthermore, we think it as existing – «nothing *is* (exists) in our intuiting and thinking» or thinking, as it were, gives this nothing at least a semblance of existence. In effect, just by thinking of nothing, we have found something different from it, that is, the existence or being of nothing. (GW 21, p. 69, 11-17).

This second procedure is important, because only through it is Hegel ultimately capable of conjuring up differences. True, even the first procedure does result in differences – if we have something more substantial than mere nothing. Indeed, it is rather easy to get rid of extra content, while it is quite difficult to find content, when such is not given. Of course, one might wonder whether the second procedure is fair, when its result is existence only in thought. Yet, Hegel himself appears to be satisfied with the result that existence of nothing in thought, representation and language is different from nothing itself (GW 21, p. 88, 17-21). He perhaps just wants to show that as thinkers we can understand what the notion of existence means, even if nothing were given to us – if nothing else exists for us as thinkers, then at least our thought of this non-existence. Whatever the case, a clear

result of the second procedure is a discovery of a difference between nothing and its existence.⁶

Until now, we have met two of Hegel's various methodological procedures, abstraction and thinking as existent, and we are about to be introduced to a third procedure. If the first procedure provided us with the most abstract beginning (nothing) and the second procedure then discovered something clearly different from this beginning (existence of nothing), we might say that a third procedure reverses the direction of the second procedure and returns us back to unity. Before examining this third procedure more closely, we should at first look again what Hegel says about his method, in order to see that producing differences is not his only strategic goal.

4. The second strategic goal: strive for continuities

Hegel mentions that while the dialectical moment in the first stage of his method consists of developing the inherent differences of the beginning, the dialectical moment of the second stage (the recently developed difference) is to develop the inherent unity of these differences (GW 12, p. 245, 35 – p. 246, 3). Hegel is here not presenting a new procedure, but once again a new strategic goal: we are given a difference, and our goal is show that the supposedly different things are in some sense identical or at least continuous with one another.

What this new strategic goal strives for is a possibility to see, for instance, the difference between nothing and its existence as merely gradual. Ironically, this very goal, if achieved, would also produce new differences, namely, the difference between two viewpoints – one would be the original viewpoint, according to which a difference prevails, while the second would be the new viewpoint, according to which identity or continuity of supposed differences would be the important element. In other words, identity produced from difference differs in a sense from the original difference, even if this difference is a difference of viewpoints with a common topic.⁷

Just as with the strategic goal of finding differences, the goal of identification can be achieved through various methods or procedures. In this case we might speak

⁶ Of course, just a few lines later Hegel also notes that nothing is identical with being (GW 21, p. 69, 18-19), but here it is clearly just pure being which is identified with nothing. In effect, Hegel is saying that nothing coincides with a certain limit case of being.

⁷ This is in effect what happens when infinity is revealed as spurious, because of its difference from the standpoint of finity (GW 21, p. 127, 9-13).

of different criteria that the identification should satisfy – the more stringent criteria we have for accepting the identity of supposed differences, the more robust the unity will be. Here the aforementioned third procedure will work as an example.

5. Third methodological procedure: uniting finities or differences

The starting point of the third procedure is something finite, which means just «Something with its immanent limit», that is, something that is inherently differentiated from something else and paradoxically points out to something beyond itself (GW 21, p. 116, 10-11). Hegel asks us to consider what happens, when this seemingly paradoxical finite beginning is destroyed, i.e. replaced in some process (GW 21, p. 123, 25).⁸ Note that *this* process is not meant to result in the complete cancellation of all finity, but only in cancellation of one finite entity. Indeed, the result of *this* process is again something inherently different or «finite has not vanished in the vanishing», because the result differs from the starting point of the process; thus, the result of *this* process is also something finite and points to something different, although this new finite entity is different from the beginning of the process (GW 21, p. 123, 27-30).

The destruction of one finite entity has resulted in a completely new finite entity. In some sense nothing has changed – the state of finity in general has never stopped, or both the beginning and the end of the process are finite. Hence, we could now introduce a new process, that is, a process in which we interpret anew the first process, in which one finite entity was replaced by another finite entity. That is, we could conclude that the beginning and the end of the result of the first process are same (GW 21, p. 123, 30-32). The somewhat unexpected result of this second process or the change of viewpoint in regarding the first process is that the differences and thus the finity inherent in the original interpretation of the first process would be lost and we would be left with affirmative being, infinity or identity (GW 21, p. 124, 2-5).

The basic idea behind this third procedure is that BECAUSE (criterion) two seemingly different entities share some feature (here, finity), we can identify these entities or view them as mere aspects of one whole. What is pointed out is a certain

⁸ In fact, we might as well begin with either nothing or the existence of nothing, which we at this point think as being different from one another. When we stop thinking about one (for instance, nothing) and start thinking about the other (the existence of the nothing), we have experienced a thought process in which one state of thought ends and another begins.

relativism in identity conditions – we might as well ignore all seemingly intrinsic or qualitative differences and think of everything through monistic lenses, because all things share some features. The only thing lacking is motivation: why on Earth should we want to follow such an extreme change of viewpoint?

To answer the question of motivation better, we should merely examine what the cycle of three procedures can do. By abstracting from everything and by thinking this abstraction or nothingness as existing, we have stumbled on at least one existing entity, or at least one model of an existing entity. Now, because we can differentiate the existence of nothing from the nothing itself, that is, because we can take the existence of nothing as a new entity, we have examples of multiple entities. In fact, because we can continue this procedure and take the existence of any entity as a new entity, we can add indefinitely many entities to this virtual ontology.

In effect, I have just described the movement from unity to multiplicity, which Hegel calls repulsion. The third procedure now makes it possible to treat all of these multiple entities as virtually identical, that is, just like units with no essential difference – as Hegel says, every unit is just a unit like others (GW 21, p. 160, 15-16). The three first procedures thus give us materials for the production of quantities, which consist of an indefinite multiplicity of such units and which later serve as materials for simple mathematical operations.

In fact, this development and especially the step involving the third procedure of identification can be seen as a further example of the first strategic task: we were given qualitative differences and then were asked to provide examples of mere quantitative differences. Now, Hegel points out, the development to only direction is one-sided. We can abstract from all qualitative differences and focus on mere quantitative characteristics of groups of entities. Yet, we should still see whether we can produce new qualities from a system of mere quantities, because a second transition to opposite direction is crucial for creating an identity between two determinations: furthermore, Hegel emphasizes this remark by pointing out that it is of the utmost importance to scientific method (GW 21, p. 320, 21-29).

At first sight, Hegel's remark seems pointless, because a second transition seems like just another example of the first strategic task – we are given quantities and are asked to produce new qualities. Yet, it could also be seen as providing a new and more stringent criterion for the third procedure of identification and thus another example of the second strategic task. That is, by seeing that quantities can be produced out of qualities and qualities from quantities, we can assume that quantities

and qualities form a single continuity. If the move could be done only to one direction – say, quantities could be produced from qualities, but not vice versa – qualities would be irreducible to quantities or could not be described in terms of quantities, thus, no true continuity between the two could be assumed.

6. The fourth methodological procedure: observing (thought) processes

Final methodological procedure I shall introduce resembles the second, or thinking something as existent, in the sense that it involves nothing else but mere observation. Yet, while the second procedure involved observation of something static (nothing), in this final procedure we are observing processes and noticing their existence. The very first time this procedure occurs actually at the beginning of Hegel's logic. We have just observed how one can move from being to nothing through abstraction and from nothing to its own being by thinking it as existent. In effect, we have then also observed several examples of becoming or processes where something is replaced by something else (GW 21, p. 69, 24-26).

This observation of processes might seem a rather pointless procedure, but it actually serves the two strategic goals. Firstly, it clearly brings about differences, because processes are something different from more static structures, like being and nothing. Secondly, it is also useful for the goal of identification. This is especially evident when we look at the development of the understanding of the very processes occurring in Hegel's logic.

First, the processes are mere «becoming» or «transition» or events that just appear to happen (GW 21, p. 109, 25-28). Then, the processes become «reflection» or processes in which the beginning «posits» or grounds, explains and causes the end of the process (GW 21, p. 109, 20-25). Finally, the processes are revealed as development of «self-positing» or self-determining concept (GW 20, § 161, p. 177, 9-12). In effect, these changes in understanding of processes of Hegel's logic show a tendency towards seeing the processes and their states as a more unified totality – and here this unity means not just quantitative abstraction from differences, but a continuity of one line of development.

7. Why these procedures, why this strategy?

Even if the four procedures uncovered here are not all the procedures used in Hegel's logic, even the existence of so many alternative procedures shows that Hegelian methodology involves much more than a mere formulaic repetition of one main idea, such as negativity or self-reflection. Even the order in which Hegel uses these procedures is far from uniform.

Indeed, even the very first moves of Hegel's logic involve a complex web of different moves – while in the text of *Wissenschaft der Logik* the first processes of abstraction of nothing and taking nothing as existent are followed by the observation of these processes as examples of becoming, we might as well have moved straight to noting that the existence or being and nothing are different states or examples of *Dasein*. Sometimes a previous process or operation is repeated at different place (for instance, something similar to taking nothing as existent happens in the development of multiplicity from unity), but never as any mindless imitation of a simple rule.

Because of this variety of procedures, the task of making logic a unity is then left to the strategy. That is, the cause for following a certain methodological procedure is decided by the overall goal. This is not to say that Hegelian method would be subjective or not according to the nature of the topics investigated. Quite the contrary: there are too many natural paths taking us through same points, and Hegel just chooses one possible route going through all the relevant nodes of this web. Thus, he chooses to highlight on the processuality (becoming) of the moves from being to nothing and back, before commenting on the determinateness of being and nothing when compared to one another (*Dasein*), because he can thus emphasize the dependence of such a system of determinate states on the possibility of moving from one determinate state to another (in metaphorical terms, temporal movement is more essential than a static system of spatial situations).

The last, but perhaps the most daunting question concerns the purpose of the strategic goal: why should we care of finding differences out of any topic and of seeing continuities in all differences? What the strategy, if it succeeds, will show, in case of logic, is a system consisting of different alternative ontological structures and pathways or procedures for moving from one structure to another. Furthermore, this system of structures would have to be minimal in the sense that no matter from what structure we began, we could still construct the whole system by applying the various procedures again. Because the structure of nothingness was one that could be discovered through abstraction, no matter what the starting point, this goal would be

reached by beginning from nothing and trying to find what structures could be constructed⁹ from it.

This system would then be in a sense a system of pure categories – it would be a system of ontological structures that any subject with access to relevant procedures could in principle discover, even if she would not consciously think all of them. What this means in fact is that the subject in question should be at least able to abstract, think even of abstractions as existent, discover similarities and note changes in one's own thoughts. In fact, these procedures are clearly meant to characterize every possible thinker (no matter how these activities work on the level of individual psychology), and thus the system is meant to be a system of categories accessible to any possible thinker. In effect, the system offers a framework for common language shared by all thinkers.

But more important than the categories are the very procedures that help to build the whole system. The procedures or operations used in Hegel's logic are shared by all thinkers and thus they define what it means to be a thinker. By isolating these various procedures or methods, we gain an understanding of ourselves as thinkers – self-cognition is the final and highest goal of Hegel's logic.

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⁹ I am well aware that the word “constructed” might appear rather controversial, because Hegel appears to have rather negative view of constructions. A complete answer to this question would require a more thorough discussion, but I will for now just mention that Hegel himself called his method “way constructing itself” (GW 21, p. 8, 19-20) and at least in one lecture series described his method as true construction (V 11, s. 195, 573-575).