

When Darkness Falls: Vision, Thought, and Contradiction in Hegel's *Science of Logic*

Quando a Escuridão Aparece: Visão, Pensamento e Contradição na Ciência da Lógica de Hegel

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Abstract: This is a short story about vision, thought, and contradiction and the role they play in the first half of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. The *Logic* begins with a descent, in this case, the fall from Being into Nothingness. Later, at nearly the exact middle of each text, there is a certain paradox in which everything is at stake, the category of contradiction. At this exact moment, thinking both fails and is birthed anew in a speculative guise. In this section, we engage some of Analytic philosophy's influential interpretations of Hegel's strange use of contradiction. In order to get there, we turn to a curious art work, James Turrell's *Pleiades*, as an aesthetic example of that first fall. We will then progress through the text, with thought and vision as our dual guide, at quite a quick pace, not slowing down until we enter Hegel's story of contradiction, where I will show the explosive nature of contradiction. This will allow us to see how Hegel harnesses the power of contradiction in order to generate the second half of the story of the *Science of Logic*. I begin with the descent of being into nothingness, the moment when darkness falls into pure black.

Keywords: Hegel. Logic. James Turrell. Being. Falling. Essence. Contradiction.

Resumo: Este é um conto sobre visão, pensamento e contradição, bem como sobre o papel que desempenham na primeira metade da Ciência da Lógica de Hegel. A Lógica começa com uma descida, nesse caso, uma queda do Ser ao Nada. Posteriormente, aproximadamente na metade de cada texto, há um certo paradoxo em que tudo está em jogo, a categoria da contradição. Nesse exato momento, o pensamento ao mesmo tempo falha e é renovado em um viés especulativo. Nessa seção, nos debruçamos sobre algumas das interpretações influentes do uso hegeliano da contradição. Para isso, voltamos a uma curiosa obra de arte, *Pleiades*, de James Turrell, como um exemplo estético dessa primeira queda. Progrediremos, então, através do texto com pensamento e visão como nosso

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duplo norteador em um passo relativamente rápido, sem desacelerar até encontrarmos a história de Hegel da contradição, onde mostro a natureza explosiva da contradição. Isso nos permitirá ver como Hegel invoca o poder da contradição para gerar a segunda metade da história da Ciência da Lógica. Eu começo com a descida do Ser ao Nada, o momento em que a escuridão emerge.

Palavras-Chave: Hegel. Lógica. James Turrell. Ser. Queda. Essência. Contradição.

The highest maturity, the highest state, which
anything can achieve is that in which its downfall begins

- Hegel, *Science of Logic*

INTRODUCTION

This is a short story about vision, thought, and contradiction and the roles they play in the first half of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. While it certainly does not pretend to be the whole story, it will contain a number of important movements in a larger ontological tale. The key to this story is a perhaps curious leitmotif: *falling*.

In order to appreciate the use of the falling leitmotif, we begin with a rather unusual artwork: James Turrell's *Pleiades*.² Although Hegel argues that truth on a higher level can only be revealed in the logical discourse of pure imageless thought, we appeal to art in order to gain momentum as we initiated our travels through Hegel's speculative thinking. Beginning at the site of Turrell's light installation, vision is our guide into thought. We then progress through Hegel's *Science of Logic*, with thought and vision as our dual guide, at quite a quick pace, pausing only in order to capture the necessary details of this story of speculative thinking and seeing. As we enter Hegel's story of contradiction, the pace will taper, which will allow us to appreciate how Hegel harnesses the power of contradiction in order to generate the second half of the story of the *Science of Logic*. Let us begin with the descent of being into nothingness, the moment when darkness falls into pure black.

² James Turrell, *The Pleiades*, 1983, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA.

BEING, NOTHING, THE PLEIADES

The *Pleiades* is a permanent art installation at the *Mattress Factory* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.³ In order to see the piece, vision takes an elevator to the third floor, turns left out of the elevator, and walks to the end of a very dim corridor. As soon as vision steps into that corridor, darkness begins to fall. Without the aid of sight, the only way to proceed is to grope along a narrow corridor by means of a thin handrail that runs up the slight embankment of the corridor. After a few steps, vision senses that it has entered an open space, maybe a room, and turns and rests on one of the two nearby chairs. From this position, it looks directly forward, staring off into “Nothing, pure nothing.” Vision is blinded by pure black. Nothingness has descended. All previous modes of determination slip away, unable to gain any traction. Vision is lost in “complete emptiness, absence of all determination and content – undifferentiatedness in itself” (Hegel, 1969, p. 82) It is not that vision has gained nothing, for nothingness is not-a-thing that can be acquired; still, it has certainly lost all sense of being. Pure being has passed over into pure nothing. Utterly alone in this absolute emptiness, vision sits quietly.

At this point, vision loses the ability to distinguish between the intrusion of its eyesight and the purity of what lies before it. There is no separation between subject and object, but merely the domain of vision itself, falling out in every direction at once. While it is still difficult to even talk about “a place” that lies before, the ground is set for the possibility of place determination.

Eventually, vision begins to pick up on something – *aliud*. Something is there, although it is difficult to determine where this something begins and where it ends. There is only coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. It seems a little red, maybe with some purple, even bluish. Yet it is not clear what color it is, if it is a color, or what shape it is, if it can even be said to have a shape. But there is definitely some *something*. If anything, it is more of a presence than a distinct object. And since there is something, there is something that is not something. At first, that which is not something is just other, just the beyond

³ The *Mattress Factory* is a wonderful contemporary art museum and laboratory, located on the North Side of Pittsburgh, that promotes installation, video, and performance work, with a special focus on site-specific productions.

that seems to float around, and sometimes through, the something. Soon, this indeterminate other becomes a second something that is other to that first something. Each something allows the other to be a something without being each other. Yet these “two somethings” still seem to flow into and out of each other (Hegel, 1969, p. 125). Each “negates itself” in becoming the other; each “alters itself” as it negates itself (Hegel, 1969, p. 119). “The otherness is at once contained in and also still *separate* from it” (Hegel, 1969, p. 126). The light seems to slowly emerge out of the blackness, beginning to form a rather nebulous shape, and then pass away again into blackness. This listless flow of something both negating and altering itself, after something else negates and alters itself, continues for some time. This is a process of *alteration*, of becoming-other, *alter*. “[S]ince these negations are opposed to one another as other somethings...this determinateness is *limit*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 126). The limit is the “*middle between the two...[the threshold] in which they cease*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 127). Despite the nebulosity of shape, the limit distinguishes where the globular light-mass *seems* to begin and end, for the something has only blushing edges that circumscribe it as a finite shape.

Beyond the light-mass, there is still nothingness, a deep, dark blackness that continues without end, seemingly on into infinity. The organs of vision now focus deeply on this boundary separating the finite light-mass and the limitless recess surrounding it. Yet again, there seems to be a continuous fluctuation between the finite light and the emptiness exceeding it. It becomes clear, amidst all this indeterminacy and ambiguity, that the two – the pulsating reds and blues that seems to rest at the end of an endless hallway and the drifting black space beyond – need each other for their own determinateness. The two are tied together as an infinite circle leading into and out of itself. Vision determines that a being stands forth.

THE LESSONS OF THE BEGINNING

We have used this aesthetic adventure in order to begin the first lessons of the *Science of Logic*. These lessons are meant to inaugurate an “intellectual training” that acts so as to disrupt thought, or vision in our case (Hegel, 1969, p. 94). This disruption is “the absolute act through which...we lose...something thoroughly familiar” (Hegel, 1969, p. 76). It is a process of wiping clean, of discarding all presuppositions and determinations, thereby

leaving only an open, infinite grid on which thoughts, concepts, and categories may appear and swim about. This act of disruption is the absolute opening move, where thought or vision turns on itself and considers only itself. Thought is thus “restricted to the way in which it [thought] enters into our knowing as *thought* and is enunciated as such...This emptiness is therefore simply as such the beginning of philosophy” (Hegel, 1969, p. 77-8). Like vision in Turrell’s *Pleiades*, thought begins in the pure black of an absolute night. Hegel makes the necessity of beginning in this way explicit, “the Absolute is the night, and the light is younger than it; and the difference between them, like the emergence of the light out of the night, is an absolute difference. Nothingness is the first out of which all being, all diversity of the finite has emerged” (Hegel, 1977, p. 93). The different forms of light that emerge out of the pitch-black corridor of the beginning are the various determinations of being. These variations cover all the ways in which being is sought and thought, all the possible qualitative, quantitative, and measurable determinations that could be applied to what is thought of as being.

This is the most important lesson of this whole logical training: *to learn to see speculatively*. Hegel begins with nothingness, with the collapse of being into nothingness, because it is the most difficult thought. Every thing that can be said, thought, or seen fails to grasp the empty contour of nothingness, for there is nothing to grasp. Thought begins to learn to think speculatively through the self-erasure of thought. The opening failure of thought is the first fall. This lesson, the way to think or see from the perspective of the absolute idea, is not easily learned. This is why Hegel begins with the Doctrine of Being, when thought has not yet learned the hard lessons of the fall of being. Hegel spends the first third of the book by forcing being to fall. Call it something, call it other, call it number or color – anyway it is seen, being cannot stand alone, it cannot be seen directly. It is only glimpsed as it falls away.

Keeping the *Pleiades* in sight, the ruddy and bluish light-mass is not visible directly. The light cannot appear as only light, but requires darkness. Yet the kind of eyes or form of thought that is necessary to fully understand the nature of this unity of diversity is visible only from a position slightly askew. Consider the name of this light installation: *The Pleiades*. Why this name and why is it important? The Pleiades is a cluster of stars located in the constellation of Taurus, commonly known as the Seven Sisters. Despite its

relative proximity to earth, it is nearly impossible to see by looking at it directly.⁴ Instead, the best way to see it is to look at it with eyes averted, out of the corner of the eye. Yet even from this position slightly askance, only those with the absolute vision can fully grasp the stars above. This is parallel between vision and thought: the kind of seeing required by Turrell's light installation is the same as the kind of thinking that is taught by Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Speculative thinking is a way of avoiding one-sidedness; it is an ability to think through, of, and with previously unthinkable or unseeable modalities. In the *Science of Logic*, it is impossible to think the absolute immediately, just as it is equally impossible to see *Pleiades* directly. In order for the Absolute Idea to be thought, the conditions for appropriate forms of thinking must be set. These conditions are the lessons of the Doctrines of Being, Essence, and Concept. Working through these doctrines thus shapes the available kinds of thinking and seeing. As Hyppolite says, such a sculpting of a form of speculative thinking is necessary in order to "avoid such one-sidedness...[W]e have to twist thought, we have to force it to look contradiction...and to turn it into a means of surmounting difference onto which the understanding holds" (Hyppolite, 1997, p. 97). Thought must now learn to pass from non-dialectical thinking and seeing to speculative thought and vision.

THE FORM AND FALL OF BEING

The first determinations emerge in the Doctrine of Being. Since thought began from absolute zero, the purified plane of nothingness, it is forced to learn to think anew. This is why thought is one with the first object of thought: being standing forth from nothingness.

Considering the different ways in which being is determined, thought simply confirms the determinations. Thought rests at the peak of each moment, content that it has grasped the truth of being when a single determination is seemingly justified. This justification takes the form of a resolution of the failure of a previous determination. For example, after the failure of the specifying or ideal measure to account for things that self-

⁴ The star cluster is the heavenly formations closest to earth, and this is why it is the first astrological shape of the cosmic distance ladder, the method by which the locations of all other stars are calibrated.

determine (such as chemical objects), thought rests assured that the new moment, the moment of real measure, can indeed account for the failure of ideal measure.⁵ After having justified the determination of this moment, thought becomes one with the freshly determined form of being. Thought replaces the form of being with itself. Yet as soon as thought has caught its breath at the comforting sight of the success of a new determination, the act of replacement senses movement below. With this movement, with the failure of the new determinate form of being to account for being in and for itself, thought begins to falter. Thinking starts to feel the weight of its misapplied determination, and so falls apart. The determination cannot account for what it claims to be able to account. As the determination fails, thought falls. Being does not stand still, but instead slides beneath the determinate forms. To put it crudely, as soon as the determination is applied to being, being kicks back. In this way, thought is tossed about, left oscillating uneasily, back and forth, between a determination and the ineluctable movement of nothingness beyond. It is as if the ground beneath its feet gave way without prior warning. Since thought cannot go on, it gropes for something grounded to grasp, and so must rise and determine again.

Thought thus returns to its object – being – and tries again to impose forms of determination on what refuses to be determined as one kind of determination or another. Thought learns that being is not a passive object subject to any determination whatsoever. This is the ultimate lesson of the Doctrine of Being: being cannot stand alone. Being cannot sit quietly because it is not self-subsistent. All determinations of being, in the Doctrine of Being, fail because being conceals a darkened foundation below, an indiscernible ground on which it sits. This means that being does not stand apart, but rests on some(thing) else, an essence.

Not only is the Doctrine of Being flush with instances of the failing and falling of determinations of being, but the first of two major movements in the *Science of Logic* – from the Doctrine of Being to the Doctrine of Essence – is itself a falling, although a falling of a different sort. As Being erased itself amidst the untenable cloud of felled determinations, dialectical reason recognized being for what it was: the shimmering surface of being beneath

⁵ Soon, however, thought quickly realizes that even real measure cannot account for self-subsistent beings that determine that which is measureless.

which lies a deeper truth. In response, speculative reason penetrates beyond the surface into the heart of truth in order to grasp hold of a touchstone. What it soon discovers, however, is that beneath the surface of being is not simply the lack of determinations, but something more, the greatest horror of nearly all logical systems: contradiction.

THE DOUBLE FALL OF ESSENCE

“Since knowing has for its goal knowledge of the true, knowledge of what is *in and for itself*,” thought must turn to what was not first available in being (Hegel, 1969, p. 390). What thinking through the different determinations of being reveals is an essential indeterminability subtending being. Being becomes the unessential reflection that shines forth because of some other feature, because of that which is not being, because of essence. Yet what thought discovers when it tries to approach the nature of essence is that it is fundamentally unapproachable. Essence cannot be present because essence erases itself prior to approach. Leaving being above and turning to the essence below reveals only emptiness. Essence is an origin that was never “there” or present with which to begin or end. The only thing that thought can do in this necessarily failed approach is to follow the movement inward, toward essence, a move that leads thought back to being, albeit now considered illusory. Essence is truly *not being* but always *having been* (*gewesen*), the negation of *what is* that gestures towards *what is not*. The discovery of Essence thus demands a recollection of what used to be but is no longer, of what used to stand forth in positive relief but has since fallen. Although being is not in and for itself, “essence is neither *in itself* nor *for itself*...[but] is for another...for the simply affirmative being [*das Seiende*] that remains confronting it” (Hegel, 1969, p. 390).

In this falling movement from the Doctrine Being to the Doctrine of Essence, thought fell below to the hollow halls of essence. But this very fall from being reveals a twist, whereby essence and thought are forced to reflect back into being. Essence, by its nature, posits being; it stands being up as merely immediate. At first, being is a “posited being [*Gesetztsein*]” by essence (Hegel, 1969, p. 400). Yet this very *positing* is also a *presupposing*. In positing being as merely immediate, essence equally necessitates being as that which can be posited (Hegel, 1969, p. 401). Second, being is

presupposed. In sum, (1) being is being only if essence posits it and (2) essence “is” (if it can be said “to be” at all) essence only if being is already there, seemingly prior to its own positing. Despite requiring the positing of being, thought recognizes that being can stand on its own, to some extent. This is recognized through external reflection, wherein being is both constituted by and against essence. Essence sets out being because being cannot stand up by means of its own power; yet being must already be standing if essence is that which stands being up.

Through this contradictory movement of falling and standing, thought reflects thought back into being, but now with the addition of having been mediated by essence. As soon as thought traces the arc of reflection into being, however, it is cast back into essence; essence ends up falling back into itself. There are thus three movements of the thinking of essence: (1) the recognition of a failed determination of being that falls into essence, (2) the indeterminacy of essence reflects back into being, and (3) the externally reflected being falls back into essence again. Since it is not possible to fall without first standing and vice-versa, each thought-thing is thus conflicted in the sense of *falling because of standing* and *standing because of falling*. Speculative thinking thus requires not mere submission to the sway of logic but the cultivation of the ability to fall, stand back up, and fall again. Only a speculative thinker or seer can countenance the continuous cycle of the fall of a determination and the reflection of essence back into being.

In the Doctrine of Being, thought follows the fall of determinations of being; thought is reduced to a different thought as determinations vanishes into more determinations. Yet the fall of thought and being, the first stage of speculative thinking and seeing, is followed by the reflection back into being. “You can only gain knowledge of what is not by watching what *is* disappear” (Carlson, 2007, p. 225). What fell from being is momentarily recovered through the reflection of essence into being, before falling back into essence again. The thought of essence is nothing more than the effacement of itself. This is why essence cannot be a determinate object of thought. We can never think *what essence is*, but are forced to think only about *what essence it is not*. There is thus another twist: with the thought of the unthinkability of the being of essence, essence acquires thought determination. What most threatens essence is the insistence on thought’s ability to think essence as it is in and for itself. The failure of non-speculative

thought is the immodest presumption that one already knows how to think. Due to such conceit, essence evades capture.

Turning back to Turrell's *Pleiades*, essence is not the type of thing that one can glimpse directly. Essence is like the flat vacuity of darkness that surrounds the pulsating light-mass that appears, after some time, in the *Pleiades*. As soon as vision crosses the limit separating the red and blue mass into the empty blackness beyond, vision is lost. The problem is that vision assumes that it will find something there, hidden in the darkness that subtends the light-something. In a sense, vision gets in the way of seeing. In reaching into darkness for something to see, vision blinds itself. This is why Hegel calls for a disruption to thought and vision: the "absolute act through which the ego purges itself of its content and becomes aware of itself as an abstract ego" (Hegel, 1969, p. 76). Any intervention by a predetermined form of thinking or vision, a knowing or seeing that presumes how to know or see, misses the movement of speculative logic. This does not mean that vision and thought are completely abandoned. Instead, the fall from being into essence and reflection back into being constitutes the very condition for thinking and seeing. This is the difficult trajectory of the "intellectual training" of the speculative thinker or seer.

In to this speculative training, thought learns what it means to think, as vision learns what it means to see. Thought or vision are thus poised between being and essence, freely falling from one side to the other. Thinking sees itself as simultaneously divided and unified, balanced between two movements: the movement of falling from being into essence and the movement of reflecting back into being. This stage of this training culminates with the thought of contradiction.

CONTRADICTION

It is clear that one of the ultimate lessons of the Doctrine of Essence is that "all things are in themselves contradictory [*Alle Dinge sind an sich selbst widersprechend*]" (Hegel, 1969, p. 439). All things contain within themselves terms in conflict: one and many, finite and infinite, quality and quantity, necessity and contingency, etc. This is what Hegel means when he says, all things "have the germ of decease as their being-within-self: the hour of their

birth is the hour of their death” (Hegel, 1969, p. 129). To die, then, is to fall. Yet death is not a simple resolve. From the fall, something new arises. The question is, then: What role does contradiction play in this fall and rise, this rise and fall?

First, some qualifying remarks. Many thinkers contend that Hegel completely disregards what Aristotle considers the necessary and fundamental law of thinking, speaking, and acting: the principle of non-contradiction (PNC). While Hegel certainly recasts thought in a speculative guise, such a bare accusation is misguided. Simply consider that how much time and consideration Hegel dedicates to working through and utilizing the power of what is considered traditional, mostly Aristotelian, formal logic. In speculative thinking, nothing is left behind (not even *nothing* is left behind); everything passed is integrated into thought. Also consider what Hegel is *not* doing: he is not trying to justify valid forms of inference (as in Aristotle), he is not trying to establish a universal theory of knowledge (as in Cartesianism), and he is not trying to caution against the illegitimate use of pure reason (as in Kant). Instead, he is focused on cultivating a distinct ontological practice: speculative thinking and seeing. This practice deploys contradiction in a sophisticated yet nontraditional (and easily misunderstood) manner. It is thus not surprising that Hyppolite considers Hegel’s speculative use of contradiction the “decisive point of Hegelianism, this *torsion of thought* through which we are able to think conceptually the unthinkable...[which] makes Hegel simultaneously the greatest irrationalist and the greatest rationalist who has existed” (Hyppolite, 1997, p. 102).

Given these qualifications, we can ask: How does Hegel utilize the concept of contradiction in speculative thinking and seeing? Consider where it appears in the *Science of Logic*. The thinking of contradiction occurs after the fall of two major concepts: identity and difference. For Hegel, these two concepts cannot be separated, but are necessarily intertwined. “Difference is therefore itself and identity” (Hegel, 1969, p. 417). For Hegel, identity involves the process of *identifying* – the process by which identity is abstracted from difference. Two things are identical only if there are two different things. In sum,

that which is different from difference is identity...Difference is the whole and its own moment, just as identity too is its whole and its moment. This is to be

considered as the essential nature of reflection and as the determined, original ground [*bestimmter Urgrund*] of all activity and self-movement (Hegel, 1969, p. 417).

Identity and difference reflect or fall into each other. They stand each other up and collapse as one. Identification is differentiation and differentiation is identification. By ignoring the necessary interrelatedness of identity in difference, and thus postulating the priority of the law of identity, previous thinkers have not seen that such laws “contain more than is meant by them, to wit, this opposite, absolute difference itself” (Hegel, 1969, p. 416). With speculative eyes, to see identity is already to see difference. It is a question of vision. The problem is that Aristotle and others tried to look at identity directly, assuming that it can stand alone. They did not appreciate that identity and difference stand and fall together, and necessarily so. Speculative seeing, by contrast, picks up on this dual collapsing and rising by looking at each from a position always askance. “From this it is evident that the law of identity,” at least for speculative seeing, “contains...*absolute inequality, contradiction per se*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 416). Correlatively, “[d]ifference as such is already *implicitly* contradiction” (Hegel, 1969, p. 431). Contradiction is the twisted knot connecting and separating identity and difference.

“Difference as such contains its two sides [diversity and opposition] as *moments...they fall indifferently apart*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 431). “Identity,” we have already seen how, “*falls apart within itself into diversity*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 418). In diversity, things pretend that they can stand alone, indifferent to each other. Indifferent to each other, diverse things hold no meaningful relation to each other. Yet speculative thinking soon sees that these diverse, seemingly indifferent things, are products of thinking itself. Although they seem to be unrelated, they are already related through thought. Each diverse thing has meaning as different from another diverse thing only in relation to the other. “The two therefore do not fall on different aspects or points of view in the thing, without any mutual affinity, but one throws light into the other.” (Hegel, 1975, p. 170-1). Diverse things become either like or unlike, both like and unlike. In fact, one thing can only be like another thing in some determinate way if it is unlike the other in determinate ways. This is how each thing gains its own determinations: each diverse thing is like itself, is characterized by self-likeness. Likeness and unlikeness are then

characterized as positive and negative. “This self-*likeness* reflected into itself that contains within itself the reference to unlikeness, is the positive; and the unlikeness that contains within itself the reference...to likeness, is the negative” (Hegel, 1969, p. 424). Yet again, the positive only is the positive in contrast to the negative, and vice-versa. This means that something cannot stand alone, as positive or negative, but can stand as such only in relation to the other. As Hegel writes, “although one of the determinatenesses of positive and negative belongs to each side, they can be changed round, and each side is of such a kind that it can be taken equally well as positive and negative” (Hegel, 1969, p. 426). A relation of opposition is a relation in thought. A propos of Turrell’s light installation, Hegel uses the example of light and darkness to make this evident:

light as such is reckoned as the pure positive and darkness as the pure negative. But light essentially possesses in its infinite expansion and in its power to promote growth and to animate, the nature of absolute negativity. Darkness, on the other hand, as the non-manifold or as the non-self-differentiating womb of generation, is the simply self-identical, the positive. It is taken as the pure negative in the sense that, as the mere absence of light, it simply does not exist for it, so that light, in relation with darkness, is supposed to be in relation, not with an other but purely with itself (Hegel, 1969, p. 437).

Putting aside questions of animation and generation for a moment, it is clear that light and dark both stand as negative and positive; both reflect the other out of and into itself; both include and exclude the other from themselves; both are “the whole, self-contained opposition” (Hegel, 1969, p. 431). Hegel says this explicitly: “in positing identity with itself by *excluding* the negative, it makes itself into the *negative* of what it excludes from itself, that is, it makes itself into its opposite” (Hegel, 1969, p. 432). In a strange speculative twist, seeing the positive as positive is equally seeing it as negative. While composed of difference and identity, the thought of contradiction is a “*single reflection*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 432). It is impossible to look at the positive or the negative directly. What is seen, instead, is a contradiction: the unity of positive and negative, being and non-being, what is and what is not, light and darkness, A and *not-A*.

Viewed this way, “opposition is not only foundered [*zugrunde gegangen*] but has withdrawn *into its ground*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 434). The opposition was the starting point, the “*prius*,” as he calls it (Hegel, 1969, p.

434). Yet as soon as the terms of opposition, positive and negative, begin to fall into each other, they destroy each other, and fall away into the ground – essence. The power of contradiction is thus reflected back into essence. Yet essence is not a thing, it is not thinkable; it does not stand alone but falls away from itself, reflecting into being. “The resolved contradiction is therefore ground, essence as the unity of the positive and negative” (Hegel, 1969, p. 435). Opposition proclaimed self-subsistence (*Selbständigkeit*), which literally means “the ability to stand on its own.” We see that the English word ‘subsistence’ and the German *ständigkeit* are variations on words implying standing. As opposition collapses into contradiction, it can no longer stand alone, but falls into essence. “Each of the self-subsistent opposites,” Hegel writes, “sublates itself and makes itself into its opposite, thus falling to the ground [*zugrunde geht*]...therefore, it is only in falling to the ground [*in seinem Untergange*]...that the opposite is really the essence that is reflected into and identical with itself” (Hegel, 1969, p. 435).⁶

Through contradiction thought falls into essence and emerges out of that impossible ground precisely because previous determinations failed and fell. Thought is able to think what is not or cannot be thought, and to think each in infinite proximity to each other. From the fall of thought into what Aristotle considers the unthinkable – contradiction – thought stands forth. This leads to an important point: in this fall, *contradiction is not simply resolved*. Rather, contradiction remains unresolved, churning as the unthinkable engine of thought. Contradictory terms fall only in order to stand up again. This is an important lesson of this speculative education: the retention of the generative power of contradiction is the most explicit reminder that objects of thought are simply that: thought-objects. Objects are not able to stand by means of their own power, but must collapse into the thinking that constitutes them. Thus, the identities of all previous determinations of reflection and being, harkening back to the pure being and nothing with which we began, are the result of a living contradiction that is contained therein. “The contradiction which makes its appearance in opposition,” Hegel writes, “is only the developed nothing that is contained in identity and that appears in the expression that the law of identity says *nothing*” (Hegel, 1969, p. 439). The

⁶ Hegel is clearly playing with language. For *Zu Grunde geht* or *zugrunde geht* can mean, “perishes, collapses, or founders” and also “goes to its ground” in the sense that it is brought back to its reason for being.

law of identity – $A = A$ – which cannot say anything other than A , contains contradiction at its very core, and so remains silent, tired of merely repeating itself.

Since all objects are contradictory, and thus fall and rise through their contradictory core, thought gains itself by losing itself. The lesson of contradiction in this speculative training is to realize the power to produce. Hegel writes, “contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only insofar as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge [*Trieb*] and activity” (Hegel, 1969, p. 440). Let us linger on the power of this claim.

THE PRINCIPLE OF EXPLOSION

Traditional logic says that from a contradiction, anything follows: *ex contradictione quodlibet*. That is, given a proposition that states that a sentence (A) and its negation ($\text{not-}A$) are both true, anything can be inferred. This is often called the *principle of explosion*. For ordinary, non-speculative logic, the appearance of a true contradiction is basically a death wish for consistent thinking, or even common sense. In “Book Γ ” of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle vehemently argued for the absurd implications of denying the principle of non-contradiction (PNC).⁷ While he conceded that it is impossible to prove directly, for it is indemonstrable, he spends a lot of time arguing for the necessity of assuming the PNC through *reducti* arguments or various forms of negative demonstration. This is why Aristotle called the PNC the “most certain of all principles,” or *firmissimum omnium principiorum*, as the Medieval theologians would put it (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b24).⁸

While pointing back to Aristotle, it is important to note the different conceptions of contradiction in ancient and modern logic, a point to which Paul Redding is admirably sensitive. Defending Hegel from negative responses to the rejection of the principle of non-contradiction, Redding notes that for Hegel “there is no one ‘law of non-contradiction’ that *could* be

⁷ Most of Aristotle’s arguments in support of the PNC are aimed at various Presocratics positions, such as Protagorean relativism and Heraclitean flux,

⁸ Graham Priest has an interesting response to Aristotle’s arguments for the PNC in Priest, G., 1998b, “To Be and Not to Be: That Is the Answer. On Aristotle on the Law of Non-Contradiction”, *Philosophiegeschichte und Logische Analyse*, 1: 91–130. Reprinted as Chapter 1 of Priest 2006.

affirmed or rejected as normative for all thought,” but instead at least two versions of the PNC: an ancient and a modern version (Redding, 2007, p. 204). It is important, Redding emphasizes, to remember “how the concept of contradiction changes between its ancient and modern expressions” (Priest, 1998b, p. 204) Laurence Horn’s *A Natural History of Negation* characterizes one dimension of this change: “we should be aware that any translation of the term logic operation of predicate denial into the one-place truth-functional connective of propositional (or sentence) negation cannot faithfully render Aristotle’s vision” (Horn, 1998, p. 21).⁹ Since Aristotelian logic considers terms, not propositions, the basic elements of reasoning, the reference is to the impossibility of contradictory predicates inhering in the same subject. In Aristotle’s words, “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect” Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b18–22).¹⁰ In order to avoid confusion with the modern concept of propositional contradiction, Redding points to what he considers Aristotle’s fundamental version of the ancient principle of non-contradiction: the “law of non-compossibility of contraries” (Redding, *Analytic Philosophy*, p. 209).¹¹

While Redding’s observation is true, the focus on maintaining logical consistency in thought, for both ancient and modern formal logic, means that “ordinary thinking...holds these two [contradictory] determinations over against one another and has in mind *only them*, but not their *transition*, which is the essential point and which contains the contradiction” (Hegel, 1969, p. 441). Content with sitting still, mere consistency or identity is dead, lifeless. It lacks the vigor needed for speculative thinking. “[I]dentity,” Hegel writes, “is merely the determination of the simple immediate, of dead being...Abstract self-identity is not as yet a livingness” or vitality (Hegel, 1969, p. 441). Speculative thinking, by contrast, affirms this transition, and so grasps and exploits the generative power of contradiction. Twisting the language of the

⁹ José Luis Bermúdez characterizes this difference in negation as a “distinction between predicate negation and sentential negation.” José Luis Bermúdez, *Thinking Without Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 140.

¹⁰ Redding points to Hegel’s account of Perception in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an example of issues arising from the Aristotelian position.

¹¹ Puzzingly, Redding’s use of the example of the impossibility of Socrates, as depicted in Plato’s *Symposium*, of being both ugly and beautiful, evinces a lack of awareness of the well-known concept of what the French call *jolie-laide* or “ugly-beauty,” the embodiment of contradictory predicates.

principle of explosion: *from a contradiction, movement follows*. This is another lesson of this speculative education: cultivating the capacity to think contradiction allows for the retention of the power for movement, for thinking, for seeing, and for life. The speculative thinker is able to harness the explosion at the heart of thinking and being: contradiction.

The structure of contradiction is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the structure of an actual explosion. Consider the four major phases of the controlled explosion that functions in a typical four-stroke internal combustion engine: (1) *intake*, (2) *compression*, (3) *power*, (4) *exhaust*.¹² (1) *Intake* phase: opposing terms takes-in each other into each other. The positive takes-in or internalizes the negative and the negative takes-in or internalizes the positive. (2) *Compression* phase: the two terms are pushed together, compressed into each of the opposing terms, thereby producing a contradiction in being. (3) *Power* phase: the contradiction is pushed down into essence, wherein thought tries to think the contradiction. Trying to think contradiction is the catalyst that sparks the unstable contradictory elements and produces an explosion out of essence into being. (4) *Exhaust* phase: from the contradiction at the heart of being that was compressed into its ground – essence – movement explodes forth. In short, contradiction is the cognitive combustion chamber that, sparked with thought, explodes thinking, being, movement, and life.

We now see the contradictory structure of Hegel's powerful insight: the seed of a thing's own destruction is equally the seed of its life. "Something is therefore alive only insofar as it contains contradiction within it, and moreover is this power to hold and endure the contradiction within it" (Hegel, 1969, p. 440). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel talks about the explosive power of contradiction as it is held and endured within Spirit:

...just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The

¹² Interesting for the question of the Deleuze's encounter with Hegel, Deleuze, in a discussion of Nietzsche's counter-dialecticism, implicitly admits that the danger of Hegelian dialectics is when negation and contradiction become a "motor" (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomilson, New York: Columbia UP, 1983, 191).

frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the fact of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world (Hegel, 1977, p. 7).

When a child leaves the warm, safe world of the womb and the air streams into its lungs for the very first time, or when that nearly audible burst of light that surges forth out of the sun, darting across the earthly horizon – this is the explosion of contradiction. Contradiction is that instinctive urge, that internal combustion, that power to burst forth into the world. As Hegel says, only “when the manifold terms have been driven to the point of contradiction do they become active and lively...receiving in contradiction the negativity which is the indwelling pulsation of self-movement and spontaneous activity [*Lebendigkeit*]” (Hegel, 1969, 442).¹³ Contradiction is able holds in absolute proximity two unstable elements, to destroy them and to birth them anew. Speculative thinking harnesses the power of contradiction because speculative thinking approaches contradiction from a position always askance, amidst the mediation cloud arising from the explosion.

Yes, from a contradiction anything follows, and that is the point: everything we can think comes from and by means of contradiction. Interestingly, one of those things is life itself, which can be defined, at least initially, as the ability of something to move itself. “Motion,” Hegel writes, “is *existent* contradiction itself” (Hegel, 1969, 440). This does not mean that contradiction is directly present, for it is unthinkable, unable to stand alone, but is closer to the power phase of the internal combustion engine. Yet existent objects stand forth (are exhausted) as existent because of the driving force of the contradiction within. Through the very impossibility of holding down contradiction in a single thought, existence bursts forth. Each particular determination leads thought back to the production of that determination through a series of conflicting relations. “It is said that contradiction is unthinkable; but the fact is that in the pain of a living being it is even an actual existence” (Hegel, 1969, 770). We can now see the overall trajectory that leads from traditional, non-speculative thinking or seeing to speculative thinking or seeing: “the true inference from a finite and contingent being to an absolutely necessary being...is from a being that...is

¹³ *Lebendigkeit* contains the sense of life, of vivacity and vitality.

only in a state of collapse and is *inherently self-contradictory*" (Hegel, 1969, 443).

TWO MOVEMENTS IN THE ANALYTIC RETURN TO HEGEL

Recent movements analytic philosophy have returned to Hegel in very interesting ways, and it is important to consider these returns. One of the most interesting ways this has occurred has been through an engagement with Hegel's rejection of the principle of non-contradiction. If nothing else, Redding notes, "what the recent analytic philosophical questioning of the law of non-contradiction has done has been to open a space in which Hegel's discussion of contradiction might be taken seriously" (Redding, 2007, p. 203). Two prominent figures lead this return to Hegel: Robert Brandom and Graham Priest. While Brandom rejects Hegel's embrace of contradiction, Priest embraces Hegel's rejection of non-contradiction. Let us see how.

Brandom's strategy, on this point, is to try to save Hegel from himself. "[F]ar from rejecting the law of noncontradiction," Brandom writes, "Hegel *radicalizes* it, and places it at the very center of his thought" (Brandom, 2002, p. 179). Denying Hegel's repeated insistence on the omnipresence of contradiction, Brandom turns to the concept of mutual incompatibility. For Brandom, mutual incompatibility is synonymous with the concept of determinate negation. "The concept of material incompatibility, or as Hegel calls it 'determinate negation,' is his most fundamental conceptual tool" (Brandom, 2007, p. 180). Further, Brandom links material incompatibility to the process of entailment. Brandom takes "material *inferential* relations (mediation, *schließen*) to be grounded in material *incompatibility* relations (determinate negation, *ausschließen*)" (Brandom, 2007, 193). Contrary to the universal entailment of the principle of explosion, determination of mutually incompatibility entails only certain types of relations. Arguing that Hegel does *not reject but instead "radicalizes"*¹⁴ the principle of non-contradiction, Brandom details how the mutual incompatibility or material exclusion that follows from the law of non-contradiction "induces" certain consequence relations at the exclusion of

¹⁴ In a footnote he says that this radicalization allows Hegel to "then reject the merely formal principle in the sense that he does not take it to be an adequate expression of the crucial relation of *determinate* negation" (Robert Brandom, 2007, p. 381n3).

others. In sum: Hegel's radicalization of the law of non-contradiction in the form of mutual incompatibility entails to material exclusion, which in turn entails a distinct series of implications. The advantage of Brandom's claim that Hegel radicalizes the principle or law of non-contradiction is that it saves Hegel from charges of collapsing logical discourse into untenable absurdities. The disadvantage is that it discounts, for the sake of logical consistency, some of the clearest and most definitive dimensions of the Hegel's project. In addition to erasing Hegel's ardent and repeated rejection of the principle of non-contradiction and his blatant exploitation of the contradictoriness of everything, it also recasts the *Science of Logic* as a text of traditional formal logic, rather than a text on ontology. Hegel explicitly rejects this reduction of his *Science of Logic* to the traditional forms of logic in the "Preface to the Second edition":

Although the practice of these disciplines [of formal logic] had been universal and customary, in the case of logic down to our own time, its interest in their speculative side has been just as universally and customarily restricted. It is the same material which is repeated over and over again, whether it is thinned out to the point of trivial superficiality, or whether the ancient ballast is freshly trotted out and dragged to new lengths, so that, through these habitually only mechanical efforts, no gain could be had for the philosophical content (Hegel, 1969, 11).

While Brandom revises Hegel's position in order to save him from charges of logical absurdity, Graham Priest openly embraces contradiction as an important, if not essential, feature of philosophy. Calling it *dialetheism*,¹⁵ Priest locates himself in what he considers a long tradition stretching from the Presocratics (Heraclitus and Protagoras) to the Neoplatonists and Medievalists (Plotinus and Nicholas of Cusa) to Hegel. Contrasted with *trivialism*, the position that views *all* contradictions as true, *dialetheism* assumes a more moderate position that considers only a small, very specific set of sentences as true contradictions. Rejecting the difficult

¹⁵ Priest and Richard Routley were inspired to coin this term after reading Wittgenstein's description of the famous Liar sentence ('This sentence is not true') as a Janus-headed creature facing both truth and falsity (Wittgenstein, 1956, IV.59). *Di-aletheia* (or two-truths) is thus meant to be a two-faced truth, simultaneously affirming the truth of truth and falsity. For the whole story, see Priest, Routley, and Norman, 1989. Elsewhere, Priest call *dialetheias* "semantic gluts" or "paradoxical sentences [that] are both true and false." (Graham Priest, 1995, p. 57-66.)

position of tolerating the contradictoriness of everything, the dialetheist rejects the “illicit slide from ‘some’ to ‘all’” and so tolerates only *some* contradictions (Priest, 1998, p. 422. The key to this this small set of dialetheiac sentences is that their entailment is not explosive “If an explosive logic is used,” Priest writes, “then truth would be reduced to triviality” (Priest, 2000, p. 308). Instead, what follows from a dialetheia is not inconsistency but *paraconsistency*.¹⁶ The advantage of non-explosive entailment is that it considers some inconsistency informative.

While Priest’s position does resonate with the Hegel’s own, Priest still misses at least three key features of Hegel’s thinking about contradiction. First, Priest thinks that the movement pushing the Hegelian edifice forward is the *resolution* of various contradictory states. By contrast, we argue that it is the very lack of resolution, the retention of the generative power of the conflict at the heart of contradiction, that moves thought onwards. Secondly, Priest claims that the *central* theoretical notion of contradiction in...Hegel is precisely the logical one,” contrary to interpretations of Hegel that see contradiction used in more than simply a logical sense (Priest, 1989/90, p. 391). Without ignoring the fact that Hegel’s *Science of Logic* ends with conceptuality, not logicity, Priest’s own predilection for the centralization of logic in his philosophical project prevents a reading of Hegel on his Hegel’s terms. For Hegel, contradictions are everywhere; for Priest, “the statistical frequency of true contradictions in practice is low” (Priest, 1989, p. 423). While Brandom correctly highlights the importance, if not the prioritization, of the role of negation in Hegel, Priest is overly taken with the inherent promise of truth, unabashedly declaring such a position in a passage that is quite non-Hegelian: “truth trumps falsity,” he writes, “Truth is, by its nature, the aim of cognitive processes...It is constitutive of truth that that is what one

¹⁶ This is not to say that paraconsistency and dialetheism are identical. There are varieties of such positions, spanning the spectrum from weak to strong to dialetheism. The main difference separating these positions has to do with domain application. Weaker paraconsistent logics restrict inconsistency to theoretical models, while stronger versions apply true contradictions, to some extent, to the real or actual world. On this schema, we would call Hegel’s position an extremely strong paraconsistency insofar as it applies to all worlds, theoretical, possible, actual, etc. See Berto, 2007, Ch. 5, and Priest, Beall and Armour-Garb, 2004, p. 6.

ought to accept. Falsity, by contrast, is merely truth of negation. It has no independent epistemological force” (Priest, 1989, p. 421).¹⁷

Third, the most important issue that Priest overlooks is the fundamentally formative and educative nature of the *Science of Logic*, if not all of Hegel’s text. When reading Priest, we witness the sophisticated articulation and defense of a well-established position, one which he is not eager to change but is adamant to defend. Ready to conscript anyone who might help him secure the borders of dialetheism, Priest enlists Hegel because Hegel says something interesting about contradictions. When reading Hegel, by contrast, we, the readers, undergo a transformative process in which we are supposed to learn how to think speculative. Rather than reading the master discourse of a single, upright standing position, reading the *Science of Logic* carries us through that vertiginous feeling of falling, again and again, as we learn how to think. In sum, thinking dialetheically is a matter of standing up tall and defending one’s logical territory, but thinking speculatively is a process of falling down, repeatedly, and learning from it each time. To play off the subtitle of *Dr. Strangelove*, if the lesson of *Phenomenology* is “How we learned to stop worrying about epistemology and just act,” then the lesson of *Science of Logic* is: How we learned to stop worrying about logic and think speculatively. The moral of the lesson on contradiction is not simply to overcome formalized logic, not to disregard the standards of formalized reasoning, but to think or see in a way that is not restricted by such constraints on thought. It is not impossible to think a contradiction, as is evinced in any of the classic paradoxes Priest cites. If it can be formalized as an impossible thought, it can be thought. It is just that it is considered thinking an impossible thought. One of the defining hallmarks of speculative thought is that everything is actual. If it is thought, then it is actual; it is actual insofar as it is actually thought. It is no coincidence that the next major section of the *Science of Logic*, after contradiction, is “Actuality.”

¹⁷ For a clear indication that Priest does not either value or understand the importance of negation in Hegel, see Priest, 1999, pp. 101-20, in which he claims that, “[h]istorically, its [negation’s] behavior may not have been terribly contentious. At least until this century” (101). Interestingly, while this whole text claims to investigate what negation *is*, it mentions Hegel only twice, and both of these merely passing references.

CONCLUDING MOVEMENTS

To conclude this story, let us follow some of the final movements of the *Science of Logic* in order to see how speculative thinking harnesses the power of contradiction. Earlier we observed that “[s]omething is alive *only insofar as it contains* contradiction within it” (Hegel, 1969, 440). As we argued above, from contradiction, movement follows. But there are many kinds of movement, three among them: (1) mechanistic movement, (2) chemistic movement, and (3) vitalistic movement.

(1) Some kinds of movement occur through external interaction among mechanistic objects, wherein the explosive tension that generates movement is located outside the respective objects and is only realized when the objects actually touch. In such mechanistic movement, the respective objects are “indifferent to *determinateness*,” and thus are not completely self-determining (Hegel, 1969, p. 727). Mechanistic determinations are thus externally produced not internally generated, which is why such indifferent objects stay the same through mechanistic interaction.¹⁸ In short, this is the character of mechanism: movement comes from “the manifest *contradiction* between the complete mutual indifference of the objects” (Hegel, 1969, p. 714). (2) Other kinds of movement occur among chemistic reactions, where the explosive tension that gives rise to chemistic movement and change is located mostly internally. While a chemistic object, like a mechanistic object, “lacks self-subsistence, it spontaneously tenses itself against” other chemistic objects (Hegel, 1969, p. 728). In short, in the movement of the chemistic object, contrary to mechanistic movement, “the *determinateness*, and consequently the *relation to other* and the kind and manner of this relation belong to its nature” (Hegel, 1969, p. 727). While mechanistic objects are pushed together by an external compulsion, “each of the [chemistic] objects is posited as self-contradictory...it is only by an *external compulsion* [*Gewalt*] that they are held apart from one another” (Hegel, 1969, p. 728). Hence, after a chemistic reaction, the chemistic objects do not stay the same, but change internally. (3) Still yet other kinds of movement occur through life, wherein the explosive tension is fully contained within a living being. A living being can move and guide itself through its interaction with external objects.

¹⁸ Think about the traditional example of the billiard balls smacking against each other. The billiard balls stay the same through the mechanistic interaction.

Since it is not completely subject to the force of other bodies, it reacts to exteriority according to its own determinations. This is why the self-caused movement of living things is expressed in terms of desire, the internal “tension of unsatisfied want” (Mure, 1950, p. 266). A living thing is thus able to consume external objects, make those objects into itself, and produce more of itself; it is fraught with the power of “self-determination” (Hegel, 1969, p. 770).

In sum, if something is alive, then it contains and endures a contradiction. But the converse does not hold. If something contains a contradiction, it is not necessarily alive. For there are many kinds of movement: the indifferent movement of mechanistic objects, the inferential movement of a syllogism, the self-guided movement of a living thing, etc. What is perhaps most common to all these types of movements is the movement of falling, the movement of a determination falling into another, a positedness falling into essence, a man falling to the ground. Yet each time a thing or an idea falls down, it stands back up, albeit in a different guise. This is why, at the very beginning of the logic, when being collapsed into nothingness, thought stood right back up in the form of becoming. This is thus perhaps the lasting lesson of this intellectual training in speculative thinking or seeing: *a light will always shine forth even when darkness falls.*

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