

# CONTRADICTION AND SUBLATION : HEGEL ON DIALECTIC

The objective of this paper is to formulate Hegel's dialectic by emphasizing on its two operative terms, namely, 'contradiction' and 'sublation.' It is proposed to be achieved in the following manner : Part I : Hegel's critical assessment of Kant's transcendental dialectic, Part II : To explicate the fundamental principles of Hegel's dialectic out of their implicit application in his main works, and finally, Part III : To evaluate Hegel's dialectic in terms of Logical Atomism and Positivism.

Before I come to Part I of the paper, I would like to explain that 'sublation' translated from the German term *aufheben* has remained problematical. It may be pointed out that in common German parlance, *aufheben* does mean 'abolition,' 'cancel out,' 'doing away with something,' 'overcoming,' 'leaving something aside for future use' and so on. None of these renderings fit into the much more technical and precise sense in which Hegel has used the term *aufheben*. Michael George's<sup>1</sup> translation of *aufheben* into 'sublation' and 're-integration,' though archaic, connotes something of the philosophical significance of *aufheben*. 'Sublation' means to resolve into a higher unity and 're-integration' has the meaning of bringing again into a wholeness that which is fragmentary. The deduction of categories from one another in the *Science of Logic*, to anticipate a later discussion, shows that all lower categories are sublated into the higher ones and they have a direct reference to the wholeness.

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The more cumbersome compound 'to transcend and preserve' is perhaps nearer an adequate rendering of the meaning of *aufheben*, but I shall prefer 'sublation' to any other translation of the term *aufheben*.

# I

Hegel acknowledges Kant's transcendental dialectic as his greatest contribution to philosophy; both for its basic distinction between 'understanding' and 'reason,' and for its insights into the nature of our attempt to apply our concepts to the absolute unconditioned. Hegel writes :

"These Kantian antinomies still remain an important part of the critical philosophy; they principally effected the fall of the previous metaphysics, and may be looked on as a chief transition to modern philosophy; for they in particular assisted to produce a conviction of the invalidity of the categories of finitude by examining their content; and this is a more correct method than the former method of subjective idealism according to which their only fault is supposed to be that they are subjective and not that which they are in-themselves." <sup>1</sup>

Hegel appreciates Kant's refusal to go along the lines of Hume and to abandon universality and necessity in human cognition. Though Kant adopts the view of the empiricists that all our knowledge 'begins' with and terminates in sensibility, yet, he warns, our knowledge does not 'originate' from sensibility. Empiricists have failed to demonstrate that there lies much in the things which is not given in sensation, is not as such directly manifest. It requires the use of 'understanding' and 'reason.' These views, rooted in Kant's philosophy, represent one of the most important aspects of Hegel's dialectic. But I

shall argue that though Hegel's extension of Kantianism is constructed upon a foundation that has already been laid by Kant, it is a foundation whose radical implications are never fully understood or developed by Kant himself. Far from being content with Kant's rejection of metaphysics, Hegel proceeds to build a new metaphysical system based on his own exposition of 'understanding,' 'reason' and 'dialectic.'

Hegel's philosophy accepts and further develops the distinction manifested in Kant's philosophy between 'understanding' and 'reason.' In Kant, 'reason' is never in immediate relation to an object. It is 'understanding' that holds sway in his epistemology. For Hegel, the function of 'understanding'—through the process of abstraction—is to present contradiction between individual and universal, identity and difference, and so on. And the realm of 'reason' seeks to unify that which the 'understanding' has divided. 'Reason' shows that the function of 'understanding'—to define things in terms of their 'isolation'—constitutes a process of abstraction. The function of 'reason' is to make manifest the 'concrete' relation in which an idea, concept or thing subsists. Kant argues that the function of 'reason' is to draw a limit to the extent of the categories of 'understanding.' Hegel's criticism of Kant's concept of 'reason' consists in the fact that while recognizing its dialectical characteristics, 'reason' fails to overcome the antinomies between finite and infinite, simple and complex, freedom and causality, conditioned and unconditioned. Speaking of these antinomies, say, of the antinomy between finite and infinite, Hegel remarks that its essential defect in its traditional forms is that it posits the finite as something existing on its own and then tries to make the transition to the infinite as something different from the finite. Hegel, however, regards 'reason' as the indispensable corrective to the deficiencies of 'understanding'. In the process

of unifying the opposites, 'reason' *sublates* the finite and its negation, so that they are revealed as moments of a more inclusive whole. This 'wholeness' in which the contradictions are sublated, Hegel terms as the 'Absolute,' the 'Truth'. Hegel says:

"The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end, is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature."<sup>3</sup>

The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however, does not adequately furnish the whole dialectical process through which the knowledge of the Absolute Truth is possible. Its foundations are given in the *Science of Logic*. Hegel's Logic deals with not only the general forms of thought—with the notion, the judgement and the syllogism—but also it expounds the structure of Being—as—such, the most general forms of Being. His Logic is, therefore, both an epistemology and an ontology. Epistemologically, Logic presents categories by means of which we do our thinking. Ontologically, Logic expounds the Being, the Absolute Truth as quoted above from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The strikingly new interpretation of Hegel's Logic consists in his attempt to incorporate dialectic into it. It requires two lines of argument: the first showing that a given category is indispensable; the second showing that it leads us to a characterization of reality which is somehow contradictory. Hegel, in fact, fuses these together. This makes Hegel's Logic fundamentally different from Kantian logic. The categories, in Kant's formulation, are valid if they were correctly formed and if their use was in conformity with the ultimate laws of thought and the rules of syllogism—no matter what the content to which they

were applied. Contrary to this procedure, Hegel's Logic and with it his dialectic is always dynamic and expresses dynamics of objective reality as well. With this I come to the second part of the paper.

## II

Hegel's dialectic is basically motivated by the negative or contradictory character of the categories. As stated in Part I, Hegel's categories denote and deal with the reality. So the dialectic operating in reality is basically the dialectical nature of the categories. There are two terms which are operative in Hegel's dialectic. These are : (i) contradiction, (ii) sublation or *aufheben*. In fact, these are not two separate terms but mutually interdependent and under certain circumstances they pass into each other. Let me first explain Hegel's position on contradiction. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel emphasizes by saying :

"...everything is inherently contradictory, and in the sense that this law in contrast to others expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things. It is one of the fundamental prejudices of logic as hitherto understood and of ordinary thinking, that contradiction is not so characteristically essential and immanent a determination as identity. Nevertheless, if it were a question of grading the two determinations and they had to be kept separate, then contradiction would have to be taken as the profounder determination and more characteristic of essence. For, as against contradiction, identity is merely the determination of the simple immediate, of dead being; but contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity." <sup>4</sup>

Contradiction, for Hegel, is internal to each term. That is why every term, whether a concept or a reality, develops. Hegel continues, "...internal self-movement proper, instinctive urge in general...is nothing else but the fact that something is, in one and the same respect, self-contained and deficient, the negative of itself. Abstract self-identity is not as yet a livingness, but the positive, being in its own self a negativity, goes outside itself and undergoes alteration. Something is therefore alive only in so far as it contains contradiction within it and moreover is this power to hold and endure the contradiction within it."<sup>5</sup>

Hegel concludes near the end of the *Logic* that there is nothing, whether in actuality or in thought, that is as simple and abstract as is commonly imagined. "Nothing exists as just brutally given and simply possessing one or two fully positive characteristics. Nothing exists that is just first and primary and on which other things depend without mutual relation. People intend to think about such things, but they cannot really succeed in doing so unless they stay on the level of imaginative pictures. Imagining that such things exist is possible only as long as we are ignorant of what is actually present. What appears at first simple and immediate is actually complex and mediated."<sup>6</sup> Mediation (*Vermittlung*) and mediated (*Vermittelt*), and the opposites, im-mediacy (*Unvermittlung*) and im-mediate (*Unvermittelt*) are key terms through which Hegel explains not only contradiction but also sublation and dialectic. Let me clarify these terms.

To 'mediate' is to be in the middle, to connect two extremes. Everything, Hegel states, is mediated, that nothing exists as 'immediate' first. In the *Logic*, 'mediation' will involve the gradual development of categories to a point where there is nothing that is posited as first and independent. In Hegel's dialectic, the thesis is always regarded as 'im-mediate' or as characterized by 'immediacy'. The second term, the anti-thesis,

is 'mediate' or 'mediation.' The third term, the synthesis, is the merging of 'mediation' and emerging as a new 'immediacy.' And this process goes on.

The synthesis of a triad both abolishes and preserves the differences of the thesis and the antithesis. This activity of the synthesis is expressed by Hegel as *aufheben* or sublation which is the other operative term of Hegel's dialectic. It may be seen as manifesting three distinct but mutually interrelated moments. "First, it has the moment of 'transcendence,' in which it goes beyond a 'limit' or 'boundary'; secondly, it is 'negation' of this first negation, this 'limit,' in which it is, 'overcome' or removed; and thirdly, it is the moment of 'preservation,' in which what has been 'gone beyond' or transcended is brought again into a new relation." These three moments of sublation, though distinct, form a unitary process of Logic which is differentiated into its various components only for the purpose of helping an 'understanding' of the process itself. The very process by which a category 'passes beyond itself' and posits another category to which it is intimately related is, at one and the same Logical moment, the process by which it 'transcends' its limited abstract self-identity, 'negates' that identity and emerges into a connected unity or nexus, in which it is preserved as an intrinsic part of some greater whole. The differences between the first and the second member of each triad are sublated by the third. This, however, requires sufficient explanation and necessary substantiation. For this purpose, I shall take up the categories of Being, Nothing and Becoming, and bring out the various ways in which dialectic is operating in the formulation of the categories of Being and Nothing, and their sublation in the category of Becoming. The same process is applicable to the rest of the Hegelian categories.

As a matter of fact, the more general and more abstract concept is always prior to the less general and less abstract. And this principle not only decides for Hegel that the first category is Being, but also determines the order of the subsequent categories. Moreover, every logical deduction is essentially based on the principle that the subsequent must be contained in the antecedent. The breach of this principle in formal logic is what is called the fallacy of *illicit* process. There cannot be anything present in the conclusion which is not present in the premises. This is really the old principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*. I'll try to show that this is just as true of the Hegelian Logic as of the humble formal logic.

Hegel, first, formulates the category of Being as a pure indeterminate immediacy with no differentiation either within itself or relatively to anything external. To substantiate this definition of Being, I wish to take up an example, say, this table. We have to abstract from all its qualities whatever, its squareness, brownness, hardness, even its very tablehood. We have to think of its mere 'issues', its being, what it has in common with every other object in the universe. Such Being has no determinations.

But how can we deduce any other category from this Being? How can a 'mediation' be found in the Being which is a complete emptiness?

The solution to this problem constitutes the central principle of Hegelian dialectic. It rests upon the discovery that it is not true, as hitherto supposed, that a universal absolutely excludes the differentiation. Hegel states that Being, though absolutely indeterminate, contains its own opposite—the mediation—hidden within itself, and that this opposite has to be extricated or deduced from it and made to do the work Being, as a vacuum,



is the same as Nothing. The absence of everything is simply nothing. Hegel writes :

" Nothing, pure Nothing : it is simple equality with itself, complete emptiness, without determination or content... Nothing, therefore, is the same determination (or rather lack of determination), and thus altogether the same thing, as pure Being " <sup>8</sup>

Thus, Being is seen to contain Nothing. And to show that one category contains another is to deduce the other from it. The second category—Nothing—is not brought in by Hegel from anything external to Being. It is deduced from the first category, and this means that the first contains the second, and is shown to produce it out of itself. This is how Hegel incorporates dialectic into Logic to express the entire deductive process of the categories used to signify specifically the sublation of one category into its opposite and thus it breaks down the absolute distinction set up by Kant between simple and complex, and so on.

However, the deduction of Nothing from Being and their identity, Hegel cautions, is not immediate. This identity is possible through a mediation and it is the category of Becoming that mediates between Being and Nothing. Becoming is the category that sublates Being and Nothing into itself. This is the first triad in Hegel's Logic.

Just as it is true that the higher categories contain the lower ones; similarly, it is also true, in another sense, that the lower categories contain the higher ones. If Becoming is deduced from Being, then Being must contain Becoming. Conversely, Becoming must contain Being because it is deduced from Being. This is the dialectical principle known as 'the unity and the struggle

of opposites'. So, Hegel remarks that Being contains Becoming *implicitly*, and Becoming contains Being *explicitly*. The first term in a triad is called by Hegel 'in-itself' or *an sich*, that is to say, *implicit*. The third term is 'in and for itself' or *fur sich*, that is to say, *explicit*.

What is true of the first triad is true of the entire series. The dialectic of Hegel performs the function of getting out of each category what is not in it. The view that 'is' and 'is not' exclude each other is the view of what Hegel calls the 'understanding' as distinct from the true view which is the view of 'reason'. At the level of 'understanding', two opposites like the one we have cited above, Being and Nothing, absolutely exclude each other. At the level of 'reason', it is shown that Being and Nothing exclude each other in as much as the supplement each other. Their exclusion is not absolute. What is absolute is their mutual supplementation. The result of their supplementation is a growth, a development, the emergence of the category of Becoming in which Being and Nothing are not annihilated but assimilated. This is another principle of Hegel's dialectic known as 'the negation of negation'.

Just as Being is implicitly Becoming, so Becoming is implicitly the next synthesis. In the next synthesis, we find that Becoming expresses itself in the moment of a 'determinate being' which is further expressed as below :

- ( i ) as determinateness, such as quality,
- ( ii ) as determinateness transcended : quantity,
- ( iii ) as quantity qualitatively determined : measure.

Quality, for Hegel, is the internal self-determination which is identical with the being which it determines. Quantity is a determination which is external to what it determines. The com-

bination of quality and quantity is found in what Hegel calls as measure. Quality, when fully developed through repulsion and attraction, passes into quantity and *vice-versa*. This unity is called by Hegel as measure. This is a new category and a new sphere. Measure is the synthesis of the spheres of quality and quantity as the thesis and the antithesis respectively. With this synthesis we arrive at another principle of Hegel's dialectic known as 'the transition from qualitative changes to quantitative changes and *vice-versa*'.

We have so far explicated three laws of Hegel's dialectic; namely, (i) unity and struggle of opposites, (ii) negation of the negation, (iii) transition from quality to quantity, and *vice-versa*. These three laws of dialectic are operating in the whole process of Hegel's deduction of categories.

If, therefore, we understand by Hegel's dialectic as a gradual explication and development of the 'connectedness' of the categories of Logic, then dialectic is operating in our thought alone. But such a dialectical nexus of concepts is not itself sufficient to account for our knowledge of the objective reality. Dialectic must come out of thought and confront the world which is given. That is to say, it must have a relation to the objective world of matter into which man daily finds himself thrown.

Hegel very clearly recognizes this fact and in the subheading 81 of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, he writes :

"Everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic. We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient; and this is exactly what we mean by that Dialectic of the finite, by which the finite, as that which in itself is other than itself, is forced beyond its own immediate or natural being to turn sud,

denly into its opposite ... All things, we say—that is, the finite world as such—are doomed; and in saying so, we have a vision of Dialectic as the universal and irresistible power before which nothing can stay however secure and stable it may deem itself. We find traces of its (Dialectic's) presence in each of the particular provinces and phases of the natural and the spiritual world. Take as an illustration the motion of the heavenly bodies. At this moment the planet stands in this spot, but implicitly it is the possibility of being otherwise the planet brings into existence by moving. Similarly, the 'physical' elements prove to be Dialectical... It is the same dynamic that lies at the root of every other natural process and as it were forces nature beyond itself. "9

The above passage sufficiently demonstrates that the laws of dialectic are not only operating in our thought but are also the fundamental features of the change and development taking place in the material reality. So, the dialectic has this dual function to perform; viz., to show that dialectic is operating in human thought and that simultaneously it is operating in the objective reality. But as an absolute idealist, Hegel regards the dialectic of thought as primary and the dialectic of reality as secondary, as an externalization of the dialectic of thought. This is evident from the fact that Hegel first formulates the principles of dialectic in the sphere of Logic—the concepts and categories—and then introduces those laws of dialectic to the world outside. With this, I wish to come to the concluding part of the paper.

### III

Hegel's dialectic and his philosophy as a whole is largely ignored by the philosophers in English-speaking tradition in the present century, until quite recently, with the efforts of T. H.

Green, Bradley and McTaggart, it could gain its popularity. One of the reasons of it—to avoid Hegel—may be the fact that Hegel's dialectic presents a counter-thrust to any form of Positivism and Analytic philosophy. The philosophies of Russell, earlier Wittgenstein and Ayer are the revivals and revitalizations of an essentially old philosophy. It is the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley and David Hume. In the Preface to First Edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer writes, "The views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume."<sup>10</sup>

Like the empiricism of Berkeley and Hume, Russell, earlier Wittgenstein and Ayer take it for granted that all our knowledge of the world is derived from sense-experience (in fact, Russell uses the term 'sense-data' and Ayer calls the same as 'sense-contents'). The basic characteristics of the sense-data are that they are undialectical, unconnected, completely separate from one another, or, as Russell calls it, "... absolute pluralism because while maintaining that there are many things, it denies that there is a whole composed of those things. We shall see, therefore, that philosophical propositions, instead of being concerned with the whole of things collectively are concerned with all things distributively."<sup>11</sup> Like Hume, Russell and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* reject causal relation in the sphere of sensible-world. In fact, Russell and Wittgenstein convert Hume's empiricism and neutral monism into the semantic one. Both Russell and earlier Wittgenstein regard language as the only subject-matter of philosophy and the method of philosophy is the analysis of the complex propositions into the simpler ones or atomic propositions. This is an empiricism based on propositions and judgments, instead of on 'impressions' and 'ideas' as in Hume. This is indeed an important advance beca-

use propositions are complete units of thought, whereas impressions, like terms or separate ideas, are incomplete fragments. Similar is the case with Ayer also. He too regards the subject matter of philosophy as language. And the function of philosophy consists in analysing and clarifying the concepts which figure in the everyday, and also in scientific use of language.

Thus, from Hume to the present-day Logical Atomists and Logical Positivists, the basic principles of these latter philosophies have been the ultimate authority of the fact and observing 'the immediate given' has been the method of analysis and verification. They induce thought to be satisfied with the facts, to renounce their transgression beyond them, and to bow to the given state of affairs.

Contrary to this procedure, Hegel's dialectic clearly shows that facts themselves possess no authority. They are 'posited' by the subject that has mediated them with the comprehensive process of their development. Verification rests, in the last analysis, with the process to which all facts are related and which determines their content.

To substantiate this point, I would like to bring out the distinction between 'reality' and 'actuality' in Hegel's idealism. Without the grasp of this distinction, Hegel's philosophy as a whole is meaningless in its decisive principles. Hegel, in fact, does not declare that 'reality' is reasonable, but reserves this attribute for a definite form of reality, namely, 'actuality.' Thus, says Hegel in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." "Actuality is that in which the discrepancy between the possible and the real has been overcome. Its fruition occurs through a process of change, with the given actuality advancing in accordance with the possibilities implicit in it. As stated in Part II, 'contradiction

is the basis of all movement and 'sublation' is the basis of all development. And these together are the operative terms of Hegel's dialectic. A given 'actuality' moves, because of some contradiction, because it strives to express its potentialities. A given 'actuality' develops because the lower stage is not annihilated but assimilated in the higher stage. What is actual is rational because it is the actuality of an entity that undergoes through the whole process of growth—the reality of an entity. And the whole process of growth or development of every 'actuality' is always dialectical and in it alone consists its distinction from mere transpassing of facts of Logical Atomism and Positivism.

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NOTES

1. Michael George; "Marx's Hegelianism : An Exposition" incorporated in *Hegel and Modern Philosophy*, ed. by David Lamb, London : Croom Helm, pp. 119-142.
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3. Hegel; *Phenomenology of Spirit* tr. A. V. Miller, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 11.
4. Hegel; *Science of Logic* tr. A. W. Miller, Book Two, London, 1969, p. 439.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 439-40.

6. David Kolb ; *The Critique of Pure Modernity-Hegel, Heidegger and After*, Chicago : The University Press, 1986, p. 46.
7. See No. 1, *op. cit.*, *Ibid.*, p. 123.
8. See No. 2, *op. cit.*, *Ibid.*, p. 94.
9. Hegel ; *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, tr. William Wallace, London, 1892, second revised edition, p. 150.
10. A. J. Ayer ; *Language, Truth and Logic*, Penguin Books, 1976, p. 41.
11. Russell ; " On Scientific Method ", in his book, *Mysticism and Logic*, Penguin, London, 1954, p. 107.
12. Hegel ; *Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox, London : Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 10.