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HIST 1333: Hegel and Marx

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‘Tarrying with the Negative’: A Transformation-Centered Reading of Hegel’s Dialectic

[Prompt 1]

Prompt: Hegel's concept of the dialectic might be characterized as a practice of testing our claims (or the claims of Spirit) to see if they survive the challenges of skepticism. Is this an adequate characterization? What (if anything) does it miss about Hegel's dialectical method?

Essay:

Whether he is analyzing topics in self-consciousness, absolute knowing, or social structures, Hegel's philosophy is centered on the dialectic. But what is this dialectic? One common perspective is the Survival reading of the term, where the dialectic is characterized as "a practice of testing our claims (or the claims of Spirit) to see if they survive the challenges of skepticism." **While this Survival reading captures the centrality of skepticism in the process of the dialectic, it misrepresents its function: skepticism does not merely test claims in hopes that they will remain intact but rather drives their transformation through a process of negation and sublation**. In this essay, I will first dive deeper into this Survivalist reading and what it gets right, before proposing a more adequate Transformation reading of the dialectic. Finally, I will explore the ongoing nature of transformation in the dialectic and consider cases where claims may seem stable—only to reveal that transformation remains essential even there.

The idea of skepticism is central to both the Survival and Transformation Readings of the dialectic but is itself a term that has different meanings under different contexts. Skepticism as an overarching concept refers to the idea of questioning the validity of a claim that has be said to be correct by proposing an objection or different viewpoint. For example, if one is a moral skeptic, they question whether moral judgments and ethics can have any objective basis or whether moral claims are instead merely expressions of subjective attitudes. However, we will focus primarily on Hegel's philosophy within *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is largely considered with epistemology, or how we know what we know, rather than morality. Thus, we will take skepticism in this essay to refer to epistemological skepticism. This means the interrogation of

knowledge claims and conceptual frameworks. To illustrate the difference between these types of skepticism: moral skepticism might involve questioning whether stealing is inherently wrong (challenging a moral claim), while epistemological skepticism might involve questioning whether we can ever truly know what another person is thinking (challenging what we can know with universal certainty).

With this framework for thinking about skepticism in mind, we can further dissect the Survivalist reading. This reading defines the dialectic as, "a practice of testing our claims (or the claims of Spirit) to see if they survive the challenges of skepticism." For Hegel, Spirit or Geist, refers to the collective rational consciousness that develops through history and surfaces through human thought. In this view of the dialectic, one starts off with a particular claim, perhaps about the world or consciousness, and this claim is often referred to as one's *thesis*. Once the thesis is defined, the next step of the Survivalist's reading of the dialectic is to challenge this thesis with skepticism. As discussed earlier, this means stating potential concerns with the thesis, sometimes through defining a different viewpoint – this opposition is often referred to as the *antithesis*. Then, the Survivalist reading says one must consider whether our claims can survive this skepticism, creating a binary notion of either survival or death. If a claim is deemed to survive, then this means our initial thesis can come up with a rebuttal to address the concern adequately without compromising its structure. On the other hand, if it is deemed to die, then the claim is unable to address the skepticism, and thus is seen as not valid.

This Survivalist reading accurately reflects the centrality of skepticism in Hegel's concept of the dialectic. Hegel is not alone in his use of questioning to produce stronger claims. Much earlier, Socrates introduced the idea of Socratic dialogue, where a teacher introduces a universal question, and then probes the provided responses from the students through questioning until a

consensus response is reached. Similarly, Hegel views the process of the dialectic as a movement from the particular to the universal. One must state a claim and then continually put skeptical pressure on it, encouraging repeated refinement towards a stronger claim. The goal of this process of the dialectic is define "what knowing is", in such a way where "the truth is Whole " (*Phenomenology,* Section 29 & 20). This refers to the ideal of absolute knowing, or a state of universal knowledge that encompasses all particular knowledge within it.

However, even though it recognizes the importance of skepticism, the Survivalist reading is inadequate in how it characterizes the impact of skepticism within the dialectic. Specifically, we move away from the Survivalist reading where skepticism serves to test the validity, or survival, of a claim, and instead define a Transformation reading, where skepticism drives the transformation of our claim into a new claim. Once skeptical pressure has been placed, the goal is not to see whether our claims can survive, but rather we want to see how the claim can change as a result. We have our thesis and our antithesis, but instead of acknowledging one or none of these as true, we aim to use both to create a new claim, the *synthesis*. Hegel specifically calls this synthesis, *determinate negation*, which is the product after transforming a claim with its negation, fulfilling the difficult task of "blending judgement and comprehension" (*Phenomenology*, Section 4). In this process, we do not aim to completely destroy the original claim but instead refine it to create a stronger version which harnesses a thorough understanding of both the original and the negation. To illustrate this, consider the analogy of the sculptor and marble: the sculptor doesn't simply destroy the marble block but strategically negates parts of it to reveal a more refined form. Each cut represents a determinate negation that both removes excess material and simultaneously preserves the essential form within. Similarly, in Hegel's

dialectic, each negation both eliminates inadequacies in our thinking while preserving and elevating what remains valid into a more comprehensive understanding.

Rather than hoping our claims can withstand skepticism, we should be embracing the challenges of skepticism and the subsequent transformation that it makes possible. Hegel states that Spirit should not "shrink from death," as Spirit "wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself" (*Phenomenology*, Section 32). What he is emphasizing here is the necessity of breaking our claims into their component parts and then piecing a subset of these parts back together again, transforming into a new claim. Through this process of dismembering our truth, we can better comprehend our original claims and more deeply learn their structure, which allows us to make judgement calls about which components should remain included and which components are weaker. This process "frees" us "from one-sidedness," or binary thinking, where the thesis survives or dies (*Phenomenology,* Section 2*)*. Instead, it allows us to consider a more nuanced third synthesis where the thesis and antithesis update and transform their understandings, creating a new end resolution.

We can only get to this process of learning and reflection by encountering an opposition force, which skepticism provides. If our claims were to remain intact and treated as whole, completed forms, we would simply have a surface level understanding of our arguments. In this process of disintegration, we can look within our claims and "illuminate the features" of the interior (*Phenomenology,* Section 12). Before this, parts of our claim were obscured, but now we can look at the reasoning more clearly at them and understand how it can best be transformed. To emphasize how essential negation is to the path of the dialectic, Hegel critiques the structure of mathematical proofs, as "knowing moves forward along the line of equality" rather than opposition (*Phenomenology*, Section 45). These proofs tend to start with a statement, and then

propose logical moves to other statements, by stating that these statements that follow are equal to the previous one. But Hegel does not think that equality alone allows us to have a complete view of existence, or as complete a view of existence as is necessary to achieve truth. Within a mathematical proof, we proceed from statement to equal statement again and again, until we arrive at some end that is equal to the original beginning. But then, does not the validity of this end depend on the validity of the beginning? And how can we verify this beginning without comparing it to an alternative? Thus, this practice of skepticism is not just an afterthought on the quest for Truth, but the core of the quest itself.

However, this skeptical pressure and negation does not necessarily have to come from a separate entity. Within Hegel's dialectic, determinate negation operates through the inner reworkings of the concept itself, a process known as *immanent critique*. Immanent critique refers to the evaluation of a system using the internal standards and logic of that system itself, rather than applying external criteria. Hegel criticizes mathematical knowledge precisely because "the movement of mathematical proof does not belong to the object but rather is an activity external to the matter" (Phenomenology, Section 42). Unlike mathematical proof, where verification comes from external procedures, philosophical development involves probing the interior of a concept, by “beget[ing] and travers[ing] its own moments,” until it reveals its own limitations (*Phenomenology,* Section 47). These tensions are not imposed from outside but emerge as the concept attempts to maintain its integrity while being thoroughly examined. This probing of the interior disrupts the apparent completeness of the concept, showing how it cannot remain intact when its implications are fully explored. This internal dynamic further reinforces the Transformation reading, as it shows how concepts necessarily transform themselves through their own inner workings rather than merely surviving or failing external tests.

Even within the Transformation reading, certain claims might appear immune to dialectical change—particularly what Hegel distinguishes as 'historical truths' from 'philosophical truths.' Historical truths (like 'Harvard was founded in 1636' or 'Hegel was born in Stuttgart') concern particular existences and remain largely unchanged by skeptical pressure. As Hegel notes in the Phenomenology, such truths are 'immediately known' through historical claims or sense-certainty and concern only 'the This of sense,' which is a fleeting particular (*Phenomenology,* Section 40 & 113). Philosophical truths, by contrast, concern universal concepts and relationships that transcend particular instances. The dialectic properly operates on these philosophical truths, which can never be fully captured in a single formulation. While historical truths may resist transformation because they refer only to isolated particulars, philosophical truths necessarily undergo transformation through skeptical engagement precisely because they aim to comprehend universality. This distinction reinforces rather than undermines the Transformation reading, as it clarifies which domain of knowledge requires dialectical movement.

Another case where claims might appear to survive skepticism occurs when, after repeated cycles of negation and sublation, transformations become increasingly subtle—creating a surface-level appearance of stability. This asymptotic development can be understood through an analogy to machine learning classification. A classifier improves by updating its parameters when it encounters errors, gradually approaching—but never reaching—perfect accuracy. This improvement occurs because there will always be new, previously unseen data points that might challenge the model's current parameters. Similarly, philosophical claims never reach a final, immutable form, but rather continue to undergo transformation, however minimal, with each new application of skeptical pressure.

The dialectic, like the learning algorithm, never reaches a final, absolute truth. Instead, it undergoes continuous refinement with each cycle of skepticism and synthesis. What appears as "survival" is merely a moment in an ongoing transformative process. As Hegel notes, "the power of spirit is only as great as its expression, its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition" (*Phenomenology*, Section 10). Just as a model's strength depends on the breadth and quality of its training data, the vigor of our claims depends on the range of skepticism they encounter.

This asymptotic progression reflects Hegel's view that philosophy emerges from historical conditions. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, he writes that "philosophy... is its own time comprehended in thought" (21). Rather than being a sense of inflexible rules that remain static throughout the course of existence, Hegel views philosophy as being closely intertwined, if not dependent, on tangible happenings. Philosophical claims are born from events grounded in the real-world and then iteratively refined. Thus, as human existence progresses and grapples with new social structures and technologies, we may use these encounters to provide new perspectives to fuel fresh skeptical pressure on our claims, allowing them to adapt as we do. Major historical shifts—like the French Revolution that so influenced Hegel—generate new forms of skeptical thinking capable of transforming seemingly stable philosophical claims. As Hegel says, “spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward” (*Phenomenology,* Section 11). Thus, we cannot mistake momentary stability for permanent validity; the degree of transformation a claim undergoes depends on the specific historical skepticism applied to it, which necessarily changes as our world changes.

In this essay, we have moved away from a Survivalist reading of Hegel’s dialectic, focusing instead on the Transformation reading. Within this new reading, the dialectic does not

simply test claims to see if they survive skepticism. Instead, the dialectic uses skepticism to reveal how claims must be transformed through contradiction and synthesis into claims that progressively approach the true. This process is never complete, as new perspectives, grounded in the real world, will continually challenge and refine our understandings.

References

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