Hegel and Narcissus:
A Study of Desire and the Absolute

by Lucas Fain

The Absolute: what does it want? I pose this question to Hegel’s Logic, but not without reservation. A question formulated in this way has a certain ambiguity, or fortunate indeterminacy. If taken properly, by which I mean with a sense of imagination and intellectual rigor, a question such as this should open us up to deeper, more interesting questions. Indeed, the question itself implores to be questioned. For why should the Absolute want anything at all if it is taken strictly in the Aristotelian sense of eudaimonia, that which is complete and self-sufficient? And deeper still, are we speaking of “the Absolute itself,” or the “concept of the Absolute?” I leave this open for the moment. But by calling attention to the formulation through which we address the Absolute, we gain the advantage of inoculating ourselves against the temptation to reduce our inquiry to a search for the “truth,” or whatever one might prefer to advocate in its place, when, in fact, a correct expression of the question itself may be of far greater philosophical value.

Of course, the question of the Absolute and its many permutations: the One, the Whole, the Unlimited, Totality, Infinity, Eternity, lest we forget God, is one of the foundational questions of philosophy. What do we call the Absolute? How do we call it, and on what ground? Or is it even there for us to call out to? These questions all belong to a philosophical legacy that, with due respect to the Eastern tradition, may be traced rather neatly from Parmenides to Heidegger et al. It is a tradition marked by its steadfast desire to comprehend the true, ontological structure of reality, or the limits of our ability to know any such truth whatever it might be. Within this tradition, Hegel stands out as perhaps the most prominent champion of the Absolute, for he understood himself to have articulated the very essence of its being. Indeed, the totality of his work could be viewed as a meditation on this very topic and its manifestation in (or as) his triadic system: Logic—Nature—Spirit. Although Hegel, ever indebted to the logos of virtuous circularity, would argue that an analysis of any one aspect of this triad would inevitably reveal its reflection in its two other counterparts, in what follows I have chosen to focus on the Logic. My reason for this stems from a desire to know Hegel in the most radical way; and in the Logic it seems to me that Hegel is at his most radical, which is to say his most fundamental.

One could say that Hegel’s Logic is the engine that drives his philosophical system. As we shall see, it is here that he would find the strength to overcome certain limitations that were imposed on philosophical thinking by the errant trust many of his predecessors had in some basic principles of logic. To that end, Hegel took a special interest in the principle of contradiction, and a review of his thought on the subject, especially as it concerns his argument with Kant, will occupy a good deal of what follows. However, since we are in pursuit of understanding the nature of a peculiar desire—the desire belonging to the Absolute—we will not only need to produce an analysis of Hegel’s Logic in order to understand what this Absolute is supposed to be, but we will also require an analysis of desire. To desire, of course, is to presume a lack, an absence, or a discontent. Consequently, we will want to know what kind of deficit the Absolute is supposed to satisfy. And we will want to know how the Absolute is supposed to satisfy it. To that end, I want to begin with a study of the supreme counterexample to the satisfaction of desire. I am speaking here of the tale of Narcissus—the story of a youth who could not escape the rapture of his own image, and ultimately suffered the most devastating consequence. By approaching Hegel through a study of Narcissus, I hope to illuminate what I consider to be one of the most difficult aspects of his thinking: specifically, how his notion of the Absolute, which may be characterized as the expression of a certain “totalizing wish,” is supposed to overcome the principle of contradiction, thereby disclosing a profound insight into Hegel’s understanding of truth and the ontological structure of reality—or “what is.”
The image of Narcissus bent over a pool of perfect water, enraptured by his own image, is unforgettable. But what, exactly, was it that he wanted?

Not recognizing himself
He wanted only himself. He had chosen
From all the faces he had ever seen
Only his own. He was himself
The torturer who now began his torture.¹

While it may be clear to any observer that Narcissus appeared to have desire for only himself, it is not so clear that this is what Narcissus actually desired.

He plunged his arms deep to embrace
One who vanished in agitated water.
Again and again he kissed
The lips that seemed to be rising to kiss his
But dissolved, as he touched them,
Into a soft splash and a shiver of ripples.
How could he clasp and caress his own reflection?
And still he could not comprehend
What the deception was, what the delusion.²

Narcissus could not grasp the fact of his own delusion. True, he recognized his desire for his own image, for he wondered how he could “clasp and caress his own reflection.” At one point, he even claimed to have seen through his reflection. He exclaimed: “You are me. Now I see that … But it is too late. I am in love with myself.”³ Yet despite this moment of recognition, he refused to believe that his own image was just that—merely, an image of himself. Rather, instead of recognizing his image merely for what it was, it seems that he was compelled to invest it with a greater meaning. Beyond desiring himself. Beyond desiring the image of himself. It seems he desired the image of another in the image of himself.

You may recall that Narcissus was always running away from others. He was renowned for his beauty, but he kept all of his admirers at a distance. “None dare be familiar, let alone touch him.”⁴ One might even say he was in denial of difference; that he wanted no part of others, or of otherness in general. So in one sense, we could say he desired a life of monadic isolation or absolute indifference. And in another, he desired precisely to tear himself from this singular existence so that he could join himself with the obscure object that would cure his longing.⁵ It is a supreme irony, therefore, that Narcissus, who never wanted anyone, would become enraptured by his own image as an image of what he was not. That is, insofar as every desire can be thought in terms of a lack, what he saw in his reflection was not himself, but rather a peculiar lack in himself that he desired to fill. And, as we well know, it was this obsession with the absolute otherness of himself that ultimately spelled his doom. The question that lingers, however, is: “Why?” Why was Narcissus compelled to desire the image of another in the image of himself? What was the source of his delusion, and what prevented its cure? These are essentially questions about the relation of self to other, or of identity to difference. More to the point, these are questions about the nature of desire: the desire for another, the desire for self, the desire for another in the image of oneself, and the desire for oneself in the image of another. In each of these instances, we are speaking generally of a desire for something to identify itself through a relation to another. This is also the major topic of discussion in Hegel’s Logic, and for this reason I think a joint study of Hegel and Narcissus may be of particular value.

In what follows, I want to suggest that Hegel’s philosophy can be considered essentially a philosophy of desire. This is to say that Hegel’s philosophy and its culmination in the Absolute tells us a story about the pursuit of the ultimate satisfaction: the ultimate filling of the ultimate lack. This stands in stark opposition to the tale of Narcissus, which told us the story of the ultimate lack and its impossible satisfaction. Thus, with this contrast in mind, we will want to discover how and to what degree Hegel’s Absolute may be said to achieve the ultimate satisfaction. As a matter of preperation, however, we will be required to lay out in detail the basic scheme of Hegel’s Logic. And to that end, I want to begin by situating Hegel in opposition to Kant so that we may understand a major impetus for his philosophical enterprise.

². Ibid.
³. Ibid., 76.
⁴. Ibid., 70.
⁵. Ibid., 76. “What I want, I am. / But being all that I long for — / That is my destitution. / Why can’t I get apart from my body? / This is a new kind of lover’s prayer. / To wish himself apart from the one he loves.”
II

It is difficult, if not impossible, to adequately grasp Hegel’s notion of the Absolute without a significant amount of groundwork in the foundational aspects of his system. It is a system that is notoriously circular, and complicated by its encyclopedic magnitude. In what follows, however, I have tried to cut as direct a path as possible. Nevertheless, we will be required to tread through some difficult terrain. In preparation, we will need to first say something about the man whose shadow looms longest over Hegel, if only as a consequence of his historical proximity and importance for the German Idealist tradition to which Hegel belongs.

I am, of course, speaking of Immanuel Kant, who, in his pursuit of the ground and limit of all possible knowledge, was impelled by his invention of the transcendental subject to posit a noumenal world completely cut off from the limits of human knowledge. For the dictates of his Copernican revolution, Kant taught that knowledge was produced, at the most basic level, through a procedure of judgment in which sensible intuitions were subsumed under the pure concepts of the understanding, thereby limiting the possibility of knowledge to whatever can be given in intuition. Kant also argued that sensible intuitions could only gain significance first as appearances, which meant that the supersensible noumenal world from which they supposedly arose could never be known “in itself.” In this way, Kant partitioned human being from the Absolute (qua true ontological structure of reality) by severing the world of possible knowledge from its noumenal origin—or, more comprehensively, by severing Thinking from Being. We could say that for Kant the call to the Absolute yielded only the echo of appearance, behind which lurked a vast unknown. As we shall see, however, Hegel will demonstrate that Kant’s strict dualism rested ultimately on his confidence in the principle of contradiction. And it will be on this point that Hegel will attempt to think beyond his venerable predecessor in order to grasp what Kant considered impossible.

The principle of contradiction, as formulated by Aristotle, states: “It is impossible for the same thing both to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing.” Or more concisely, “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time.” In traditional logic this theorem may be formulated to read: “It is not the case that both \( P \) and non-\( P \) (where \( P \) is any proposition).” For Kant, this principle would constitute the logical core of his transcendental philosophy, and as such it would compel him to maintain a fundamental separation between Thinking and Being. In order to demonstrate this point, we will be required to produce a sketch of Kant’s treatment of judgment, for judgment describes the very activity of Thinking that Kant separates radically from Being.

Briefly stated, Kant instructs that all knowledge is produced by a synthesis of intuitions and concepts. The distinction between these two is reflected in the structure of his Critique of Pure Reason in which we find a division between a “Transcendental Aesthetic” and a “Transcendental Logic.” This division, in turn, is reflected in his fundamental thesis that all possible knowledge requires (1) the presentation of an external world of appearances that are received by a subject in the form of sensible intuitions—namely, at bottom, the pure forms of space and time, and (2) the subsumption of these intuitions under the pure concepts of the understanding, which are located in the human intellect. According to Kant, the subsumption of sensible intuitions under the pure concepts vis-à-vis the transcendental subject (or unity of apperception) produces a judgment. A judgment, in other words, consists essentially in the relation of intuitions to concepts. It is the mediate, synthetic vehicle by which all knowledge of objects becomes possible. Since my intention here is not to reproduce Kant’s critique of traditional metaphysics, nor is it to pursue an explicit critique of Kant’s theory of judgment, what has been stated here should suffice for our purposes. It is worth noting, however, that Kant emphatically states that the pure concepts of the understanding can never have a “constitutive” use. That is, they can never be taken in themselves by pure reason to produce objectively real metaphysical knowledge of the world. Rather, their function is purely “regulative.” Their purpose is only to shape our experience of the world by giving logical or objective form to our intuitions, which can be nothing other than sensible.

So judgment, for Kant, describes the root activity of Thinking itself, and it is consequently the basic formal structure—i.e., the building block—of all possible knowledge. This is meant to include predicative,

6. Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B XXVI. “Even if we cannot cognize these same objects [i.e., objects of experience] as things in themselves, we at least must be able to think them as things in themselves. For otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears.”
8. Ibid., 1006a1.
10. Note: My account is necessarily brief. A thorough explanation of Kant’s theory of judgment would have to distinguish between a pure form of intuition and a pure manifold of intuition, as well as between a pure and an empirical manifold of intuition. It would also have to include a discussion of the peculiar synthetic activity that relates the form of intuition to the concepts of the understanding.
cognitive, moral, and aesthetic judgments. For example, “Socrates is aged, enjoys provoking young men, is honest, and has a face only a mother could love.” Each assertion respectively marks a corresponding kind of judgment. But as a judgment each asserts that “this” is “that,” and therefore operates in accordance with the principle of contradiction: S is P; therefore S is not at the same time non-P. The unity of subject with predicate by means of the copula “is” constitutes a temporal determination of S. Thus, Socrates could not be at once a child and aged, dull and provocative, corrupt and honest, beautiful and ugly.12 However, by entrenching the basic formal structure of all possible knowledge in judgment, we find that for Kant truth hinges on the principle of contradiction, for whatever may be considered true or “what is” must be formulated in terms of the discursive structure: S is P. Moreover, for Kant “truth” must be restricted to Thinking qua judgment for the very reason that it is produced by the relation of intuitions to concepts, and has no access to things in themselves. Such is the essence of Kant’s subjective idealism, which, by restricting the possibility of knowledge to the conditions of the human intellect, denies the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever about Being, or the “in itself” of the non-subjective noumenal world. For Kant, this means that any attempt to go beyond the subjective (i.e., cognitive) limits of possible knowledge would defy the principle of contradiction, and therefore must be considered invalid. Stated concisely, if truth is limited to Thinking (as defined by the Kantian theory of judgment), then truth cannot include both Thinking and non-Thinking. Yet it is on this very point that Hegel will initiate his criticism of Kant in an effort to think the unity of Thinking and Being—hence, the Absolute—that Kant eschewed.

III

Hegel’s challenge to Kant consists in nothing less than an attempt to reformulate the question of the Absolute by revisiting the question, “What constitutes truth?” His critique is centered on the fact that Kant’s transcendental philosophy reduces truth to Thinking by locating the pure concepts of the understanding, and therefore the conditions of all possible knowledge, in the human intellect, thereby severing any access whatsoever to Being, or noumenal things in themselves. Indeed, it is for this very reason that Hegel will argue that knowledge, as Kant conceived it, cannot contain the truth.13 As we shall see, the “truth” for Hegel will not be conditioned by the separation of phenomena from noumena, Thinking from Being. Rather, it will embrace them as one. In order to accomplish this, however, Hegel will need to overcome the limiting effects of the principle of contradiction, which, for Kant, necessarily levers Thinking apart from Being.

When reading Hegel’s criticism of Kant, or what he refers to generally as “Critical Philosophy,” it is important to understand that Hegel’s argument stems from his conviction that Kant did not go far enough in his effort to detail a science of truth.14 Hence, Hegel’s intention is not to supplant the logic on which Kant’s philosophy is based. Rather, it is to subsume and reach past it in order grasp a greater, absolute truth. Hegel’s ability to articulate this greater truth will turn on his critique of Kant’s subjective idealism. This is because, as we have seen, Kant’s theory of judgment and therefore his conception of truth is limited to the apprehension and cognition of phenomena by a transcendental subject who is partitioned from the so-called noumenal world. As we know, however, this distinction between phenomena and noumena is a product of Kant’s invention of the transcendental subject—his privileged locus of all possible knowledge. Hegel’s task, therefore, will be to overcome the limiting effects of Kant’s subjective idealism by demonstrating that a division between phenomena and noumena, Thinking and Being, is a direct consequence of Kant’s confidence in the principle of contradiction on which his subjective idealism is based. It is in this vein that Hegel once remarked,

The sickness of our time, which has arrived at the point of despair, is the assumption that our cognition is only subjective and that this is the last word about it. But truth is objective, and this truth ought to be the rule governing everyone’s convictions, so that the convictions of a single mind are bad insofar as they do not correspond with this rule.15

12. Note: In the Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), §§36–9, Kant argues that aesthetic judgments have universal validity insofar as they are “distinguishable,” or “satisfactory” for one and all. As such, it is possible to see how Kant’s confidence in the principle of contradiction can be traced throughout his philosophical enterprise, for even the pleasure one takes in beauty, in contradistinction to the mere gratification of the senses, is considered subject to this principle.

13. Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, trans. T. E. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), §47. See also §24 Addition 2. Hegel distinguishes between two notions of “truth.” “In the ordinary way, what we call ‘truth’ is the agreement of an object with our representation of it. We are then presupposing an object [i.e., a noumenon] to which our representation is supposed to conform. In the philosophical sense, on the contrary ‘truth’ expressed abstractly and in general, means the agreement of a content with itself.” Broadly speaking, the former corresponds to a Kantian conception, whereas the latter describes Hegel’s revolution.


In short, Hegel intends to grasp the Absolute by privileging “objective truth” over and against Kant’s subjective idealism. Or stated differently, whereas Kant locates the logical core of his philosophy in a foundational principle, the principle of contradiction, Hegel will demonstrate that all such principles have a place within a greater philosophical system—the system that is the Absolute.

Hegel’s first step in destabilizing Kant’s confidence in the principle of contradiction can be found in the crucial distinction he makes between the understanding and reason. Hegel notes, “When we are discussing thinking we must distinguish finite thinking, the thinking of the mere understanding, from the infinite thinking of reason.” Here we note that by “finite thinking” Hegel is referring to the Kantian theory of judgment on which the possibility of knowledge and therefore truth is supposed to be grounded. He then continues, “Taken in isolation, just as they are immediately given, the thought-determinations are finite determinations. But what is true is infinite within itself; it cannot be expressed and brought to consciousness through what is finite.”

If we look again at the logical structure of judgment, we can see what Hegel means when he says it is “finite.” A typical judgment will correspond to the structure: S is P. For instance, “Socrates is mortal.” This judgment is isolated and finite because, taken in itself, it describes a singular identity of subject (Socrates) and predicate (mortal), and, indeed, it defines the subject wholly in terms of its predicate. Consequently, a particular, isolated aspect of the subject is taken for the whole. This would be true even if we tried to rigorously divide and collect all of Socrates’ various attributes in an effort to construct a complete dioretic analysis of who and what Socrates “is.” Yet, no matter how many predicates we could associate with Socrates, the logic of judgment in itself will give us no indication of how we should begin the process of dividing and collecting these predicates, let alone provide us with any way to know if our analysis is complete. Judgment, therefore, can never provide us with an adequate picture of the whole—that is, the essence of a thing, and as such Hegel will argue that truth will always escape the logic of judgment. To this end he observed,

16. Ibid., §28 Addition.
17. Ibid. See also §§40–44, “The thought-determinations or concepts of the understanding [employed by Critical Philosophy] make up the objectivity of the cognitions of experience. In general they contain relations, and hence synthetic a priori judgments (i.e., original relations of opposed terms) are formed by means of them” (§40).
18. Ibid., §169. “The subject only has its explicit determinacy and content in the predicate; and hence, taken on its own, it is a mere representation or an empty name. [...W]hat the subject is is expressed only in the predicate. What else it may be, as something concrete, does not concern the judgment (cf. §31).”

The older metaphysics was concerned with the cognition of whether predicates of the kind here mentioned could be attached to its objects. However, these predicates are restricted determinations of the understanding, which expresses only a restriction, and not what is true....Genuine cognition of an object, on the other hand, has to be such that the object determines itself from within itself, and does not acquire predicates in the external way [i.e., via judgment]. If we proceed by way of predication, the spirit gets the feeling that the predicates cannot exhaust what they are attached to.

Not only does the logic of judgment, according to Hegel, fail to account for the whole, and therefore the truth, but upon closer inspection of the structure of judgment itself one finds that it is intrinsically self-contradictory. This contradiction may be made visible through an analysis of the ambiguous relation between subject and predicate in the logical form of a judgment. Indeed, Hegel needed only to analyze the etymology of “Urteil” (“judgment”) to make this point. Literally, “Urteil” means “original division.” Accordingly, in a judgment the copula “is” bridges the “original divide” between subject and predicate. But this original division is an artificial or merely conceptual one: it assumes a distinction between subject and predicate over and against the ontological whole from which these distinctions are derived. Consequently, a subject, in its actuality, may be thought as a concrete whole in which its predicates are always already internal to it. One might then say that the activity of judgment “lifts out” a predicate from this concrete whole, thereby exploiting this predicate in relation to the whole from which it came. In this sense, the activity of judgment makes a predicate, which was once internal to a concrete whole, external to that whole, thereby subsuming or covering over that whole by particularizing it in relation to its exploited predicate. Simply put, the logical structure of a judgment does nothing to tell us how a subject relates to its predicates. It doesn’t tell us if a predicate is supposed to be internal or external to its subject. But as we know from the principle of contradiction, it is not possible for a predicate to be internal and external, both at the same time. Yet it seems one could argue that is exactly the case. A predicate could be considered at once internal insofar as it is intrinsic to its subject, and external insofar as it assumes the function of identifying its subject. This ambiguity is a direct result of the logical structure of judgment, which posits an original divide between subject and predicate. And this is the crux of
Hegel’s argument: ontologically speaking, no such divide need be invented if one wants to ascertain the truth.

So the finite thinking of the understanding, here exemplified by the logical structure of judgment, is unable to grasp the truth (i.e., the concrete, ontological whole) because its very structure is intrinsically self-contradictory, and therefore can never adequately grasp the relation of something to itself, or what it is in and for itself. To push the point one step further, we may note that Hegel considers the logical structure of a judgment self-contradictory for the very reason that its form contradicts its content. Phrasing the issue in this way enhances our understanding of Hegel’s critique of judgment (vis-à-vis Critical Philosophy) as inadequate to truth by demonstrating the need for a rational or dialectical analysis of “what is.” Essentially, Hegel is arguing that any statement that purports to articulate truth can only become meaningful if it takes into consideration the full, dynamic context of the whole. The whole, therefore, should be dialectically reflected in the content of a true statement—or, as Hegel says, the truth ought to consist in the “agreement of a content with itself.” But the form of a judgment, as a result of its predicative structure, provides us with only a partial picture of the whole, and indeed distorts the meaning of the whole by supposing that the identity of a subject is attributed universally to its predicate. As a result, the entirety of a subject is made to agree with only an aspect of itself rather than with itself in its totality. Thus we can say a judgment is self-contradictory because it purports to articulate truth, but its form is inadequate to the task, yielding only “correct” but otherwise untrue statements.

Not only does Hegel’s criticism indicate that the logical form of a judgment is intrinsically self-contradictory, but it also implies that the principle of contradiction on which the logic of judgment is grounded is also self-contradictory insofar as it relates to claims about truth. As we have just seen, the copula “is” in judgment functions as a statement of identity, thereby subsuming the singularity of a subject under the universality of a predicate. What a subject is in itself, however, exceeds the limit imposed on it by the predicative structure of judgment. As such, the principle of contradiction—S is P; therefore S cannot at once be P and non-P—is shown to be an inadequate rule for the expression of truth. For S (as itself) is not universally P, which is to say that the content of S exceeds the form of the judgment. To use one of Hegel’s favorite examples, we may introduce the judgment: “This rose is red.” Our point here is that “this rose” is not merely “red” as the abstract judgment, “This singular is a universal,” indicates. Rather, it may also be thorny, fragrant, etc. Hence, the rose is also non-red. S (as itself) is at once P and non-P. So the principle of contradiction is, in this context, revealed to be intrinsically self-contradictory. The truth exceeds the limit imposed on it by the principle of contradiction.

Incidentally, we may now recall that Kant’s subjective idealism has its foundation in the principle of contradiction. It was on the basis of this principle that Kant, by locating the conditions of all possible knowledge in the human intellect, was compelled to partition phenomena from noumena, Thinking from Being. The result made judgment, or what Hegel called the finite thinking of the understanding, the foundational structure of all possible knowledge. Yet, we have just demonstrated that judgment is inadequate for the expression of truth. For Hegel, this suggests that any attempt to adequately grasp truth—or, what was earlier called “objective truth”—will require that we go beyond Kant’s subjective idealism. Indeed, we must aspire to the infinite thinking of reason. For reason, which has the capacity to “apprehend the unity of the determinations in their opposition,” allowed us to grasp the intrinsically self-contradictory structures of judgment and the principle of contradiction. What we now require is an analysis of how, exactly, Hegel thinks these structures are mediated. What is the relation between the particularity of judgment and the universality of the whole such that they can be taken together as a mediated totality that reflects truth? It is to this end that we now advance our discussion of the Absolute.

IV

A characteristic difficulty intrinsic to any discussion of a particular section of Hegel’s philosophical system runs tandem with his insistence that any one “part” must be considered in terms of the greater “whole.” To this end, Hegel has described his philosophical system as a whole that presents itself as a “circle of circles, each of which is a necessary moment, so that

22. Ibid., §171. This point is articulated well by Robert Pippin in “Hegel’s Metaphysics and the Problem of Contradiction” in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart, 248–51. Here Pippin also cites Russell’s complaint that Hegel confuses the “is” of predication with the “is” of identity. On the contrary, however, it is clear that this is not the case. Hegel is concerned only with articulating the rational structure of reality as it is in and for itself, rather than with merely analyzing what properties may happen to belong to a particular individual, independent of this greater dynamic structure. That is, as Pippin points out, rather than asking what properties a thing may have, Hegel is asking what a thing is such that it may have properties.
26. Ibid., §82.
the system of its peculiar elements constitutes the whole Idea—which equally appears in each single one of them.” The difficulty, however, can be in knowing which circle to focus on, and how to cut into it such that one may do justice to Hegel’s thought without distorting the overall contour of his system. It is for this reason that I have chosen to concentrate on the problem of logical contradiction. First, because the Logic may be considered the engine that drives the system. Second, because a characteristic feature that runs through the entirety of Hegel’s thought is his persistent identification of contradictions, and consequent description of their mediation. This process of mediation, as we shall see, is necessarily dialectical, which is to say that seemingly irreconcilable dualities like the ostensibly Kantian division between Thinking and Being must be grasped as mutually dependent. Such is generally the case when two opposed propositions about the same object must be affirmed with equal necessity. At stake is the task of explaining how these oppositions are supposed to be dialectically mediated such that together they may constitute a coherent whole, which is ultimately expressed as the self-explanation of the Absolute.

By way of introduction to the general structure of Hegel’s Logic we find: “With regard to its form, the logical has three sides: (α) the side of abstraction or of the understanding, (β) the dialectical or negatively rational side, [and] (γ) the speculative or positively rational one. These three sides do not constitute three parts of the Logic, but are moments of everything logically real; i.e., of every concept or of everything true in general.” Hegel goes on to tell us that each of these moments reflects itself in its counterparts; and in this way the three taken together may be considered the whole or the “essence” of truth. Thus, in order to outline the logical parameters of the Absolute, we will be required to offer a brief description of each moment. As a matter of prescription, however, let me say that the structure of the Logic will follow the general pattern: identity—difference—sublation.

Thus, we begin with the first moment of the Logic, the side of abstraction or of the understanding, which is governed by the principle of identity (A=A). Now it is important to know that Hegel employs this principle in two ways. First, to express a moment of “absolute indifference” or “pure immediacy.” Second, to express a moment of “simple self-relation” or “inward reflection.” In the first instance, the principle of identity expresses the completely undifferentiated, indeterminate quality of pure being. In the second, it regulates the activity of the understanding, “which grasps everything finite as something-identical-with-itself, [and] not inwardly contradicting itself.” Hegel also describes this as a moment of “formal” or “abstract identity” in which “the manifold determinacies are drawn together into One.” As such, this first moment of the logic denotes the whole prior to its predication (or negation) through the activity of judgment. However, Hegel is keen to point out that this abstract identity is itself contingent on difference. Indeed, the very fact of difference is the condition of the possibility for identity to exclude what it is not. In this way difference makes identity possible. Otherwise everything would be universally undifferentiated—a monadic, Parmenidean One.

Now the second, dialectical or negatively rational side of the Logic may be expressed through an analysis of difference. Hegel describes this moment generally as the self-sublation of finite determinations of their own part, and their passing into their opposites. Hegel also refers to this side of the Logic as “the nullity of everything finite.” He writes, “the dialectic, on the contrary, is the immanent transcending, in which the one-sidedness and restrictedness of the determinations of the understanding displays itself as what it is, i.e., as their negation.” In other words, as a moment of negation, difference is revealed as an immediate distinction in opposition to identity, but it is a distinction that is achieved by the passing over of identity into difference. To this end we could say, for example, that negation brings the finite into relation (via contradistinction) with the infinite. Or, as Hegel writes,

Something becomes an other, but the other is itself a something, so it likewise becomes an other and so on ad infinitum.

...This progress ad infinitum does not go beyond the expression of contradiction, which the finite contains, [i.e.,] that it is just as much something as its other, and [this progress] is the perpetual continuation of the alternation between these determinations, each bringing in the other one.

31. Ibid., §80 Additon.
32. Ibid., §113.
33. Ibid., §§84–88.
34. Ibid., §113.
35. Ibid., §113.
36. Ibid., §81.
37. Ibid., §81 Addition 2.
38. Ibid., §81.
39. Ibid., §§93, 94.
Expressed in logical terms, this means that in contradistinction to the principle of difference (¬A ≠A), we will find that A will necessarily pass over into A, and vice versa. This dialectical relation between A and ¬A may be observed through an analysis of the principle of the excluded middle: “A must be either +A or ¬A.”40 Here, +A and ¬A are completely opposite and indifferent to each other. But the dialectical or negatively rational side of difference informs us that A as it is in itself—that is, the “essential A”—which is neither +A nor ¬A underlies the very possibility of its expression as positive or negative. Hegel’s example is worth repeating: “If +W means 6 miles in the westerly direction, and + and −sublate each other, then 6 miles of road or of space remain what they were, with or without the antithesis.”41 The abstract concept, 6 miles, underlies any positive or negative expression of it. Hence, the dialectically negative side of difference demonstrates the principle of the excluded middle to be self-contradictory: A can be both +A and ¬A. The neutral term mediates the relation between positive and negative. Or as Hegel puts it, “the negative is also positive within itself.”42 In-themselves, each positive moment is distinct and self-identical. Yet, their identity is achieved for-themselves through a negation of positivity. Hence, difference may be expressed dialectically as a negation through which positive and negative are grasped as mutually dependent, yet external to each other.

Sublation, finally, is expressed in the third moment of the Logic as the speculative or positively rational. Hegel writes, “The speculative or positively rational apprehends the unity of the determinations in their opposition, the affirmative that is contained in their dissolution and in their transition.”43 Accordingly, sublation embraces the independence of identity and difference while at the same time grasping their mutual interdependence. In logical terms this means that the affirmation of A is intrinsically ¬A, but as ¬A, it is precisely the same as A. In this way, A and ¬A are held in a mutually affirming dialectical relation whereby the possibility of identity is necessarily conditioned by difference, and the negation of this relation upholds the internal self-relation of the two. Hegel ultimately embraces this sublation as the “ground” or the “law of thought,” which he describes as “the unity of identity and distinction [i.e., difference, Unterschied]; the truth of what distinction and identity

have shown themselves to be, the inward reflection which is just as much reflection-into-another and vice versa.”44

To put this another way, we may recall our earlier study of Hegel’s critique of Critical Philosophy. There we began with an analysis of the finite thinking of the understanding, which was aligned with Kant’s subjective idealism and his theory of judgment. To that end, we found that any determination could, in Kantian terms, only be related to another through its relation to a transcendental subject; consequently, at this level all determinations were considered externally related. They could not reflect themselves into each other. Later, in our study of Hegel’s analysis of difference, we observed the immanent, reflexive negation of polar opposites, which enabled us to overcome the strict Kantian gap between subject and object by grasping the mutually dependent relation between the two. Now, in this final moment of sublation, we observe the identity of identity and difference. In a rather dense passage Hegel explains,

What is indeed given is that something becomes another, and the other becomes another quite generally. In its relationship to an other, something is already an other itself vis-à-vis the latter; and therefore, since what it passes into is entirely the same as what passes into it—neither having any further determination than this identical one of being an other—in its passing into another, something only comes together with itself; and this relation to itself in the passing and in the other is genuine Infinity. Or, if we look at it negatively: what is changed is the other, it becomes the other of the other.45

What Hegel means by “becoming the other of the other” may be understood as the definitive moment of sublation whereby what was once considered absolutely other, may now be grasped as intrinsically related to a greater whole. We may characterize the scene as follows: first, on the heels of a moment of finite negation, something defines itself dialectically through its relation to another. But then recognizing this to be the case, it also discovers its own otherness with regard to the other through which it negates itself, and as such recognizes that it is identical to its other insofar as the two define themselves through each other. This is precisely what Hegel, in the third moment of the Logic, calls the “negation of negation,” or sublation (Aufhebung).46 It is important to assert, however, that this is not a static relation. Rather, it is thoroughly dynamic and, according to Hegel, teleological. The verb aufheben, from

40. Ibid., §119.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., §82.
44. Ibid., §121.
45. Ibid., §95.
46. Ibid.
which the term Aufhebung is derived, means “to lift up” or “to preserve” as well as “to clear away” or “to cancel,” gives us the first indication of this dynamism, for its very meaning is fraught with dialectical tension. Aufhebung never stands still. Insofar as it indicates preservation (i.e., of identity), it undermines this moment via negation. Yet, in the interest of building ever greater unities, Aufhebung negates this negation to enact an even grander moment of preservation. In this way, the moment of sublation is supposed to manifest itself as intrinsically purposive or teleological, restlessly aimed at sublating ever greater unities of identity and difference. Indeed, Hegel writes, “purpose itself is the sublation, the activity which negates the antithesis in such a way that the purpose posits it as identical with itself. This is the realizing of the purpose.... It has concluded itself with itself alone and has preserved itself.”

V

At last, with a schematic of Hegel’s Logic ready at hand, we are in a position to consider the meaning of the Hegelian Absolute. By way of introduction, I want to briefly comment on the distinction between Thinking and Being that we earlier associated with Hegel’s criticism of Critical Philosophy. This should provide us with an element of closure, if such a thing is possible, to the Kant-Hegel debate that has remained consistent throughout this investigation. Following these remarks, I will move directly to a discussion of desire. This discussion will include an explanation of a certain “totalizing wish” that I want to suggest may be considered the driving force behind Hegel’s philosophical system. I also want to suggest that this totalizing wish may be found in the peculiar narcissistic desire for the other as it appears in the image of oneself. Finally, through this study of the totalizing wish in its respective Hegelian and narcissistic configurations, I will address our foundational question: The Absolute: what does it want?

The partition between Thinking and Being, you will recall, was aligned with the Kantian separation of phenomena from noumena. This division was contingent on Kant’s subjective idealism, which reduced Thinking to the intellectual and sensible conditions of knowledge, thereby disallowing any cognition of Being, or the nonsubjective, noumenal “in itself.” But as Hegel demonstrated, the detachment of Thinking from Being is merely the result of the Kantian confidence in the principle of contradiction. And as we have seen, Hegel demonstrated the principle of contradiction to be intrinsically self-contradictory, and inad-
equate to the task of grounding or articulating truth. Instead, for Hegel, the principle of contradiction appears as a moment within a larger logical system that embraces the sublation of contradictions as its fundamental purpose. Accordingly, truth, for Hegel, is aligned with the infinite thinking of reason, which has the capacity to grasp the whole in and for itself as an internally self-differentiating unity. In this way, Thinking and Being may therefore be considered two moments within a greater speculative whole, rather than two mutually external oppositions that describe the Kantian epistemological framework. The question that remains, however, concerns how the dialectical relation between Thinking and Being is mediated. And the answer, we shall see, may be found in the Hegelian notion of the Concept (der Begriff).

Not to be confused with the concept akin to formal logic, the speculative Concept is the whole; “in its identity with itself it is what is in and for itself determinate.” This is another way of saying that the Concept is itself the identity of identity and difference. We may explicate it generally in terms of the sublation of Thinking and Being as follows: in the first logical moment, we may align the pure, undetermined immediacy of Being with the abstract structure of identity (A=A). Next, in the second, dialectical moment we may express the negation of Being by thinking as the instantiation of difference (A is expressed as either +A or ¬A). Here we could also say that Thinking determines a particular aspect of Being through the negative activity of judgment (S is P). For instance, in Hegel’s example of the rose, we began with the purely immediate Being of the rose as it is in itself, as yet undetermined by judgment. Thinking then negates the abstract identity of the rose (via judgment) by asserting a particular aspect of it—i.e., “This rose is red.” Then, in the final speculative or positively rational moment, we come to grasp the sublation of Thinking and Being as the negation of this negation or as the identity of identity and difference whereby the Concept—the rose—is recognized as a unified, internally self-differentiating expression of itself. The Concept, in other words, may be characterized as the internal self-unfolding of the whole through a dialectically mediated relation of Thinking and Being. Indeed, the Concept is in and for itself the dialectical process of development described by the Logic: identity—difference—sublation. Or as Hegel writes, “Conclusion itself with itself in this way from its being-in-itself by means of its difference and through the sublation of this difference, the Concept is the realized Concept; i.e., it is the Concept that contains the positedness of its determinations within its being-for-itself.” As such, the Concept instantiates itself by making whatever is

47. Ibid., §204.

48. Ibid., §160.
implicit but as yet indeterminate in itself explicit and concrete for itself. And in this sense the Concept is the self-explication of itself as the internally self-differentiating totality of identity and difference, or the absolute reflection of contradiction. Thus, it is by means of the general sublation of Thinking and Being that the form of human thought and the ontological structure of reality are shown to be governed by the same rule of law. This rule of law is the dialectical Logic, made concrete in the Concept: the one totality that lies under the banner of the Absolute.

Hegel's definition of the Absolute is clear and distinct: "The Absolute is the universal and One Idea, which particularizes itself in the act of judging into the system of determinate ideas—which whole being consists, nonetheless, in their returning to the One Idea, i.e., into their truth."\(^50\) Now earlier I suggested that Hegel's philosophy could be characterized as a philosophy of desire that is guided by a specific totalizing wish. In what follows I also want to suggest that the Absolute may be considered the ultimate aim of that wish. In the first place, it is possible to view Hegel's philosophy as a philosophy of desire because it seeks out contradictions with the restless aim of sublating ever-greater dialectical unities. In this sense, Hegel's Logic expresses a desire for totality—namely, the realization of the Absolute, which at once asserts the dialectical unfolding of the speculative whole as the identity of identity and difference, as well as the rule of law by which this dialectical totality becomes completely determinate and transparent to itself: The Absolute, in other words, expresses both the form and content of the speculative whole, or the absolute truth, which may be described generally in terms of the dialectical triad: Being—Thinking—Concept.\(^51\)

Now the realization of the Absolute depends on its becoming transparent to itself. This process was described above as the negation of negation whereby something passes over into another through a process of sublation, and subsequently comes to recognize itself through its relation to that other. In our study of Narcissus, however, we found that his peculiar ailment could be described by a failure to recognize the other as identical to himself. Indeed, this failure of recognition may be cast precisely in terms of a failure of sublation, which accounts for the narcissistic denial of difference. On this point it is useful to cite one of Freud's famous remarks: "A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love."\(^52\)

Love, it seems to me, is one way of understanding the Hegelian Aufhebung, for it should be no great stretch to say that in love as in sublation one defines oneself through one's relation to another, and that this relationship assumes the form of an identity of identity and difference. What Freud refers to as a "strong egoism," however, is analogous to the narcissistic denial of difference, which may be observed in the first moment of Hegel's Logic—namely, the pure, undifferentiated moment: \(A=A.\)\(^53\) Subsequently, the possibility of love is contingent on the recognition of difference, or the negation of this "strong egoism," which is concomitant with a disruption of the seemingly placid narcissistic solipsism. The failure to "break through" the narcissistic situation, however, coincides with the peculiar narcissistic ailment, which may be described as a yearning for an object of impossible sublation. That object is nothing other than the image of oneself as something ideal and entirely other than oneself. In the case of Narcissus, that ideal object could never be sublated precisely because it was already a part of himself. That is, it was at once a part of him yet interminably alien to him for the very reason that he could not consciously identify it as intrinsic to himself. What resulted was a characteristically narcissistic compulsion to sublate an other—namely, his image—which would forever defy sublation. And consequently, in the moment of recognition when he found in his reflection the only object he could deem worthy of sharing his beauty with, he became locked in a desire for the impossible—namely, to tear himself from himself so that he might become other than himself, and in this way embrace himself and love himself as the other might love him.\(^54\) But, as the story goes, his failure to effectively sublate the other ended in his doom. Provided this, it seems an opportune moment to recall that Narcissus' name, derived from the Greek "narkē," means to grow stiff or numb. Narcissus was enraptured by an ideal other in the image of himself. But his failure to sublate that other and his subsequent failure to

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53. An exegesis of the Freudian notion of "primary narcissism," an analog of the so-called "strong egoism," would be useful to further this point. However, this is not an easy term to use proficiently without first working through some of its various connotations in the Freudian corpus—an endeavor that I am afraid would take us too far off course. Nevertheless, we should note that primary narcissism first appears in Freud's classic essay of 1914, and, generally speaking, it denotes an early stage of psychical development in which a child takes itself as its own love-object before turning its libido outward to the external world. As such, primary narcissism describes a state of relative indifference to the external world, and therefore may be taken as analogous to the first moment in the Hegelian Logic: \(A=A.\)

54. Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," 98. "[T]he aim and satisfaction in a narcissistic object-choice is to be loved."
know love ultimately ended in a form of anti-dialectical stasis and, eventually, death.

We are thus returned to our initial question: The Absolute: what does it want? Much like the narcissistic desire for oneself as an object of impossible sublation, the Absolute may also be characterized by a desire for self insofar as the Absolute may be thought as the agent of its own self-realization. That is, in the case of the Absolute the desire for self is seen as a desire for self-transparency vis-à-vis a peculiar totalizing wish whereby the Absolute is both that which directs the dialectical process of self-realization, and the end toward which this process aims. We observed this in Hegel's description of the Absolute as the ultimate expression of the form and content of the identity of identity and difference, the ultimate law that governs the dialectical unfolding of reality or "what is" in accordance with the triad: Being—Thinking—Concept. But here we need to ask, "What is implied by this absolute sublation?" Hegel writes, "in its passing into another, something only comes together with itself; and this relation to itself in the passing and in the other is genuine Infinity ..."[T]he Infinite is the affirmative, and it is only the finite which is sublated."55

Now determination, for Hegel, is always the result of negation. And in the second moment of the Logic, negation ultimately devolves into a "negative infinity since it is nothing but the negation of the finite...the finite arises again in the same way, so that it is no more sublated than not. In other words, this [negative] infinity expresses only the requirement that the finite ought to be sublated."56 So it seems that while negative infinity signals the oscillatory contradiction of finite and infinite ad infinitum, genuine Infinity, on the other hand, seems to assert a pure affirmative in excess or as part of the ultimate negation of negation. And consequently, this seems to imply that there is room within Hegel's Logic for an Infinite that resists negation.

Stated differently, we might ask if this genuine Infinite could be specified as an element of radical nothingness. But then we would be left with a question regarding the relation of this radical nothingness to the Hegelian Absolute, which desires the complete determination of the whole qua actual content of the Concept. In other words, we would be compelled to inquire if the genuine Infinite is supposed to be inside or outside the Absolute, for if we are to take seriously Hegel's claim that the Absolute is the ultimate expression of a completely transparent speculative whole—"the universal and One Idea, which particularizes itself in the act of judging into the system of determinate ideas"57—that it would seem that the genuine Infinite should be intrinsic to the Absolute. However, if it is intrinsic to the Absolute, it should also be subject to determination as part of the speculative whole (even if it is only formally determined). Yet, it seems that this is precisely what Hegel wants to deny. That is, it seems he wants to maintain an element of radical nothingness or pure positivity that resists sublation.58 And if this is truly the case, then we must admit that Hegel's Absolute is, in the very end, an impossible object of desire, for this element of radical negativity is destined to remain beyond the grasp of Aufhebung. This begs the question: is the Absolute ultimately condemned to repeat the error of Narcissus? Does the Absolute ultimately desire to sublate an object of impossible sublation—namely, the genuine Infinite that resists negation because it is already a part of the Absolute, yet interminably alien to it for the very reason that the Absolute is unable to identify the genuine Infinite as intrinsic to itself?

The answer to this question is not immediately clear. On the one hand, narcissism presupposes a denial of difference. Hegel's system, by contrast, desires the sublation of difference. Yet each case expresses a totalizing wish. The narcissist desires to remain indifferent to otherness, and to be complete unto himself. The Hegelian desires absolute transparency and identity with the other (qua identity of identity and difference).

57. Ibid., §213.
58. Asserting that Hegel wants to maintain an element of "radical nothingness" or "pure positivity" may be viewed by some as a controversial point. Opponents might cite, for example, §237 where Hegel writes, "Since there is no passing-over within the absolute idea, no presupposing, and no determinacy at all that would not be fluid and transparent, this idea is for itself the pure form of the Concept, which intuits its content as itself." However, although it is true that within the absolute idea everything that is determinable is supposed to be made determinate and transparent, I want to point out that this does not preclude an element of indeterminacy from entering the picture. If there is confusion on this point, I suggest that it stems from Hegel's insistence on the notion of the pure form of the Concept, which is instantiated by making whatever is implicit but as yet indeterminate in itself explicit and concrete for itself. Given only this, it seems that the pure form of the Concept must be made completely transparent to itself on all accounts. But this reading would ignore the distinction between that which has the capacity to be determined, and that which does not. Moreover, the difficulty of understanding the place of radical otherness—i.e., the indeterminable—in relation to Hegel's Logic is compounded by his reference to the pure form of the Concept as the "One Totality" (§§242–43). Upon close inspection, however, the meaning of "One Totality" is not self-evident; it does not automatically imply absolute transparency. Rather, it only indicates the making transparent of whatever has the capacity to be made transparent. Nevertheless, it is true that absolute transparency qua One Totality is the Hegelian object of desire. But, as we find in §95, the Absolute is conditioned by a genuine Infinite—an affirmative—that holds itself out beyond the grasp of sublation. Hence, an absolutely transparent One Totality may be the object of Hegelian desire, but it may also be an impossible object. To that end, Hegel may be guilty at times of repressing the discovery of a radical otherness that resists sublation in favor of exalting the notion of the Absolute. Further research involving a comparison of Hegel's major works would be required to verify this claim. But I would remind the reader that here we are investigating Hegel's mature philosophical system, and that despite whatever its earlier incarnations may indicate (i.e., as in the Phenomenology of Spirit where the notions of "absolute knowledge" and the "end of history"—gain prominence) there seems, on this reading, clarity room for an otherness that resists sublation.
Now the narcissistic desire is disrupted by the intrusion of an unsublatable other—the other in the image of himself that is at once a part of him, yet irretrievably alien to him. Likewise, the Hegelian desire is also disrupted by the intrusion of an unsublatable other—the genuine Infinite that is at once a part of the Absolute, yet irremediably alien to it. Thus, it seems the narcissist and the Hegelian both suffer from a certain failure to metabolize an element of radical otherness that is at once alien and a part of themselves. In the case of Narcissus, however, this desire for an object of impossible sublation was turned inward. This inward-turned desire is marked by the characteristically narcissistic denial of difference and subsequent failure to love—a failure that ultimately condemned him to stasis and death. For the Hegelian, however, the desire to sublate the radical other was turned outward as a teleological compulsion to sublate ever greater dialectical unities. Such may be the very essence of love. But since the Absolute is, in the last analysis, an impossible object, it seems the Hegelian is condemned to love without end. This leaves us with a final thought: the wish for totality can never be satisfied, for if the genuine Infinite were ever truly sublated, that would surely signal the death of the Absolute, or else the advent of a pure *eudaimonia*—the kind of which Aristotle reserved for the gods.

59. In the clinical literature, narcissism may be understood in terms of a deficit model: “There is something missing from their inner lives...narcissistically organized people may feel privately fraudulent and loveless...[feelings of] shame and envy are recurrently stymied.” Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 168–88. Note: I would have liked to say more about the mechanisms by which desire may be turned “inward” versus “outward.” However, my purpose in this paper has been primarily to analyze the respective Hegelian and narcissistic structures. Further analysis of the mechanisms that may activate these structures would be pursued best under another title.

Bibliography


