

“An Exposition of the First Triad of
Categories of the Hegelian Logic—Being,
Non-Being, Becoming”

[4 February–22 May 1953]
[Boston, Mass.]

This is the last of six essays that King wrote for a two-semester seminar on Hegel taught by Brightman and Peter A. Bertocci.¹ Brightman became ill after the second

196 1. For the other four extant essays, see King, “The Development of Hegel’s Thought as Revealed in His Early Theological Writings,” 1 October 1952; “The Transition from Sense-Certainty

22 May
1953

meeting; he never recovered from his illness, and Bertocci replaced him.² The seminar studied many of Hegel's major works in chronological order. During the second semester they concentrated on Hegel's Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences and Philosophy of Right, although they may have read The Philosophy of History as well. In this essay, which is largely derived from W. T. Stace's *The Philosophy of Hegel*, King discusses a section of the Lesser Logic in the Encyclopedia. Bertocci commented at the end of the paper, "B+, despite a misunderstanding of logics—see above!"

In this report it is our purpose to discuss the first triad of the Hegelian Logic—Being, Non-Being, Becoming. Before entering this discussion directly, however, it might be well to devote a few paragraphs to Hegel's conception of the categories and his divergence from the Kantian conception.

The categories began their history, so far as modern philosophy is concerned, in the system of Kant.³ The categories were for Kant, like space and time, pure forms without content or matter, prior to all experience, and not given from any external source but contributed to cognition by the mind itself. These categories were also universal and necessary.⁴ But with all their importance, Kant insisted that the categories were limited to phenomena. They did not apply to the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*). The thing-in-itself was not a cause, or a substance; it was neither

to Sense-Perception in Hegel's Analysis of Consciousness," 15 October 1952; "The Transition from Sense-Perception to Understanding," 29 October 1952; and "Objective Spirit," 4 February–22 May 1953; all in MLKP-MBU: Box 115.

2. Peter A. Bertocci (1910–) studied with Brightman at Boston University and received his B.A. from Boston in 1931, his M.A. from Harvard University in 1932, and his Ph.D. from Boston University in 1935 (at the same time as his good friend L. Harold DeWolf). Bertocci taught at Bates College from 1935 to 1944 before returning to Boston University as a professor of philosophy. After Brightman's death in 1953 Bertocci became Borden Parker Bowne Professor of Philosophy. His publications include *The Empirical Argument for God in Late British Thought* (1938); *The Human Venture in Sex, Love, and Marriage* (1950); *Free Will, Responsibility, and Grace* (1957); *Personality and the Good: Psychological and Ethical Perspectives*, co-authored with Richard M. Millard (1963); *The Person God Is* (1970); and *The Goodness of God* (1981). See his autobiographical article, "Reflections on the Experience of 'Oughting,'" in *Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 209–219.

3. W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 69: "The categories began their history, so far as modern philosophy is concerned, in the system of Kant."

4. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 42: "They are, like space and time, (1) pure forms without content or matter, (2) prior to all experience, and (3) not given from any external source but contributed to cognition by the mind itself. These categories are also universal and necessary."

197

22 May
1953

quality nor quantity.⁵ These concepts applied only to phenomena, not to noumena. So for Kant the categories were mere subjective forms of thought, not objective ontological entities.⁶ It was at this point that Hegel went beyond Kant. The categories for Hegel were more than epistemological principles of knowing; they were ontological principles of being.⁷ They were not merely the necessary and universal conditions of the world as it appears to us, but they were the necessary and universal conditions of the world, as it is in itself.⁸ Reason, the system of categories, is self-explained and self-determined, dependent only upon itself. This means that it is real. Therefore, “the rational is the real and the real is the rational.”

The task which Hegel undertakes in the *Logic* is, therefore, this: to give an account of the first reason of the world; to show that every single category necessarily and logically involves every other single category; and finally to show that all the categories, regarded as a single whold, constitute a self-explained, self-determined, unity, such that it is capable of constituting the absolutely first principle of the world.⁹ Kant had named twelve categories. But he made no effectual attempt to deduce them from one another. Actually there was no reason why he should do so, because the categories were for him only epistemological forms of the mind, not objective ontological entities. But the fact remains that he did not deduce them.¹⁰ When we come to Hegel, however, the pic-

5. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 42: “The categories cannot apply to the thing-in-itself. The thing-in-itself is not a cause, or a substance; it is neither one nor many; it has neither quantity, quality, nor relation.”

6. Bertocci placed a “¶” after this sentence to suggest that a new paragraph should begin.

7. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, pp. 60–61: “They were not ontological principles of being, but only epistemological principles of knowing.”

8. Bertocci circled “in itself” and wrote a question mark in the margin.

9. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 83: “The task which Hegel undertakes in the *Logic* is, therefore, this: to give an account of the first reason of the world; . . . and finally to show that all the categories, regarded as a single whole, constitute a self-explained, self-determined, unity, such that it is capable of constituting the absolutely *first* principle of the world.” See also Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 82: “He shows that every single category necessarily and logically involves every other single category.”

10. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 82: “Kant had named twelve categories. But he made no effectual attempt to deduce them from one another. There was no reason why he should do so, because the categories were for him not an ontological principle of explanation of the universe, but merely subjective epistemological forms of our minds. But the fact remains that he did not deduce them.”

22 May
1953

ture is different. Just as in formal logic the conclusion flows necessarily from the premises, so in Hegelian logic the categories are logically deduced from each other.¹¹

Now as we turn to a discussion of the first triad of the Hegelian Logic we see this principle at work. Hegel begins with the category of being. Being is not chosen as the first category merely by chance or caprice. It is chosen because it is the highest abstraction, that which is common to every conceivable object in the universe. There are many objects of which it would not be true to say that they are green, or that they are material, or that they are heavy. But whatever object in the universe we choose, it must always be true to say it is. Being, therefore, must be the first category.¹² This Being which Hegel is speaking of as the first category is the "Pure Being" that we have to think, not any particular sort of being, such as this desk, this book, that chair.¹³ "Pure Being makes the beginning: because it is on one hand pure thought, and on the other immediacy itself, simple and indeterminate; and the first beginning cannot be mediated by anything, or be further determined"*. In a word we are dealing with being in general, stripped of all determination. To get a clearer view of what Hegel means we may use the example of any concrete object, say this table. This table is square, hard, brown, shiny. Abstract from all these qualities, and we are left with "This table is."¹⁵ Such being is absolutely indeterminate and featureless, completely empty and vacant.¹⁶

* Wallace, LOH, 158.¹⁴

11. Bertocci underlined and questioned the phrases "necessarily," "from the premises," and "logically deduced from." He asked in the margin: "But what does logic mean to Hegel?"

12. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 87: "The highest possible abstraction, that which is common to every conceivable object in the universe, is the concept of being. . . . There are many objects of which it would not be true to say that they are green, or that they are material, or that they are heavy. But whatever object in the universe we choose, it must always be true to say of it that it is. Being, therefore, must be the first category."

13. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 90: "It is the pure category that we have to think, not any particular sort of being, such as this pen, that book, this table, that chair."

14. King incorrectly cites the translator as author. He in fact quotes G. W. F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel: Translated from the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, 2d ed., trans. William Wallace (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), p. 158.

15. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 87: "This table, for example, is square, hard, brown, shiny. . . . Abstract lastly from the hardness, and then from the squareness, and we are left with 'This table is.'"

16. Bertocci underlined the phrase "emptiness turns out to be" and asked, "Is this deduced?"

22 May 1953 This vacuum, this utter emptiness turns out to be not anything. Thus we inevitably find ourselves in the antithesis, viz., Nothing. Emptiness and vacancy are the same as nothing.¹⁷ "Being, as Being, is nothing fixed or ultimate: it yields to dialectic and sinks into its opposite, which, also taken immediately, is Nothing."* Being, therefore, is seen to contain the idea of nothing. But to show that one category contains another is to deduce that other from it.¹⁸ Hence Hegel had deduced the category Nothing from the category Being.¹⁹

* Wallace, LOH, 161.

Now since Being and Nothing are identical the one passes into the other. Being passes into Nothing. And conversely, Nothing passes back into Being; for the thought of nothing is the thought of emptiness, and this emptiness is pure Being. In consequence of this disappearance of each category into the other we have a third thought involved, namely, the idea of the passage of Being and Nothing into each other. This is the category of Becoming.²⁰ "Nothing, if it be thus immediate and equal to itself, is also conversely the same as Being is. The truth of Being and of Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming."† Thus we have three categories. We began with Being. From that we deduced Nothing. And from the relation between the two we deduce Becoming.²¹ Being is the thesis. Nothing is the antithesis, and Becoming is the synthesis. The synthesis of this triad, as in all other Hegelian triads, both abolishes and preserves the differences of the thesis and antithesis. This two-fold activity of the synthesis is expressed by Hegel by the word aufheben, which is

† Wallace, LOH, 163.

17. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 90: "This vacuum, this utter emptiness, is not anything. . . . Emptiness, vacancy, is the same as nothing."

18. Bertocci circled "category contains another" and wrote a question mark in the margin.

19. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, pp. 90–91: "Being, therefore, is the same as nothing. And the pure concept of being is thus seen to *contain* the idea of nothing. But to show that one category contains another is to deduce that other from it. Hence we have deduced the category nothing from the category being."

20. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 91: "Since they are identical the one passes into the other. Being passes into nothing. And conversely, nothing passes back into being; for the thought of nothing is the thought of emptiness, and this emptiness is pure being. In consequence of this disappearance of each category into the other we have a third thought involved here, namely, the idea of the *passage* of being and nothing into each other. This is the category of becoming."

21. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 92: "Thus we have already three categories. We began with being. From that we deduced nothing. And from the relations between these two we deduce becoming."

sometimes translated “to sublata.” The German word has two meanings. It means both to abolish and to preserve.²² In short, the thesis and the antithesis both die and rise again in the synthesis.²³

2 June
1953

Herein we see one of Hegel’s original contributions to philosophy. The older view was that opposites absolutely exclude each other. We could only say $A = A$ (the canon of identity) and never that $A = \text{not } A$.²⁴ But Hegel came on the scene with an explanation of how it was logically possible for two opposites to be identical while yet retaining their opposition.²⁵

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22. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 106: “The synthesis of a triad both abolishes and preserves the differences of the thesis and antithesis. This two-fold activity of the synthesis is expressed by Hegel by the word *aufheben*, which is sometimes translated ‘to sublata.’ The German word has two meanings. It means both to abolish and to preserve.”

23. Bertocci marked these two sentences and commented, “This isn’t deduced.”

24. Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 96: “Hitherto it had always been assumed that, logically speaking, a positive and its negative simply excluded each other. . . . It had always been assumed that we can only say A is A , and that we can never under any circumstances say A is not- A .”

25. Bertocci questioned the phrase “was logically.” Stace, *Philosophy of Hegel*, pp. 95–96: “He explained and showed in detail how it is logically possible for two opposites to be identical while yet retaining their opposition.”