

Finitude and Infinitude

There is an obvious and immediate inconsistency in treating the finite and the infinite as two poles standing against each other, two ends of a continuum: to do so is to strip the infinite of its infinitude. Every *something* is definitionally finite, bounded in both time and space: comes to be at its birth, and comes to be at its edges. To set the finite against the infinite as something against something else is thereby to bound the infinite, to make it "just another finitude," so to speak—to render it an untruth, a "bad infinity." And "bad infinity" is that infinity which is proximally understood: the infinity of the *ad infinitum*, the interminable. For to declare that a given process does not terminate is to note its repeating of the same (finite) algorithmic steps in a manner that will not lead to termination, and so to represent infinity as a stack of finite blocks whose apex is simply always further than the eye can see. The word *interminable* indicates a negation in the proximal sense, but not a Hegelian negation, there being nothing affirmative about it; not a critique, interminability prompting or resolving no crisis in terminability. This discrete infinity presents itself as and in a swindle of sorts: what is discretely infinite is never something that one can actually *come to know* in any sense; one is simply told to take on faith that what one sees will go on forever. Any concept of discrete infinity, then, covertly imports with it a concept (a vulgar concept, that is, not a *Grenzbegriff*) of the thing-in-itself, or at least a concept with the same intolerable flaw as the concept of the thing-in-itself: its artificial positing of some fraction of nature which we cannot and do not know.

A more sustainable infinitude is needed; and Hegel's solution is what one might think of as *continuous infinitude*: that is, a rendering of infinitude immanent and therefore a making of it philosophically proper in some sense—not a swindle. This new concept is quite easily exemplified mathematically (whence my motivation for using the descriptors *discrete* and

continuous): the infinity of the set of all natural numbers is a "bad" infinity; the infinity of the set of all real numbers between zero and one is proper, being the infinity that constitutes an interval "finite enough" to present itself to us at once. (It is notable, of course, that even mathematically these are two different infinities, the latter being "bigger" than the former.) Hegel's own example is perhaps more philosophically profound: true infinity is evidenced in the "relation [of an entity] to itself in its transition and in the other";¹ true infinity is the finite entity's "attain[ing] its being-in-itself," "rejoin[ing] itself," in its termination, its death.² After all, what characterizes the finite entity in its finitude is its coming-to-an-end (equivalently, its coming-to-be); a finite entity is not finite unless and until it is resolved that it will have died. But a purely finite entity also cannot *undergo* death in any real sense, since at the moment of death it is no longer itself but something else: that is, it is correct for me to insist that *I will never die*, in the sense that at any point there is an *I* to speak of it has not yet died; death is always yet to come. Hegel gives the spatial equivalent of this argument: "something can be known, even felt to be a *barrier*, a lack only insofar as one has at the same time *gone beyond it*";³ the finite entity must at once remain within its spatial limits and extend past them. The declared finitude of the entity conceals an infinitude immanent to the entity, an infinitude which is the very act of reaching into the other, whether this reaching is conceived of as the entity's reaching past its limits—its being related to that which is other than it—or the unit interval's being in bijection with the set of all reals, this bijection perhaps metaphorically constituting its own relating to the other, its own reaching-past.⁴ True infinitude is not the infinitude to which the finite is opposed, but the infinitude which all finitudes betray upon inspection.

1 Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 95.

2 Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 21.123.

3 Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 60; quoted in Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 165.

4 I am not particularly happy with this metaphor, but it's orthogonal enough to the main direction of argument and does its job well enough that I'll leave it in for now.

However, true infinitude is *not* the finitude which all "bad infinitudes" betray upon inspection; true infinitude is intended as a *replacement* for "bad infinitude," not as a sublation of it.⁵ Elsewhere, Hegel in fact assigns the axiom which identifies the "finitized infinite" with the "infinite finite" to the fallen understanding, names this identification "scandalous."⁶ At very least it is made clear that there is no structural, topological, methodological equivalence between the dialectic consisting of being, nothing, and becoming and that consisting of the bad-infinite, finite, and true-infinite: the revealings, vanishings which take place in the former seem not at all paralleled by those taking place in the latter. Being vanishes into nothing and nothing into being the moment they are articulated (whether in the intellect or in the world): the concepts are *volatile*. Likewise, it is not difficult to conceive of becoming as "spontaneously generated" by this vanishing; that is, the vanishing of being into nothing, and of nothing into being, is not *to be explained by* becoming: becoming is simply and plainly *exhibited there*. In other words, the being, nothing, becoming triad is exemplary in that it presents a phenomenon that may be clearly phenomenologically described as taking place in the same way "in thought" and "in reality": its exposition parallels its conceptual form, which in turn parallels the affinities of the concepts themselves, their action independent of the observer. This exemplarity seems not to be present in the second triad, as we will see below.

It is worth first discussing exactly what the first two moments of this triad—whose third member must be true infinitude—are to be. The triad bad-infinite, finite, true-infinite seems most consonant with the facts of Hegel's exposition, as well as his broader aims, given that he argues from the inadequacy of the bad-infinite to the adequacy of the true-infinite, and that Hegelian dialectic is to be a method of arguing from inadequate concepts to adequate ones. But Hegel is

⁵ See Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 94.

⁶ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 21:132.

careful to specify that the bad-infinite is *not* sublated in the true-infinite, is nothing more than a failed attempt at sublating the finite;⁷ to take as axiomatic the self-consistency, the intelligence of a great thinker like Hegel—the notion, more precisely, that he knew what he was doing, that any glaring or critical error one finds is more likely an error on the part of the reader—this being really the only axiom I am comfortable regularly taking—is to discount the idea that Hegel is arriving at the truly infinite *via* this particular dialectic. Hegel also hints at a possible alternative dialectic triad, that of something, Other, and true-infinite as the reaching of the (finite) something into this Other. However, this dialectic movement presents its own difficulties. For one, both being and nothingness are perfectly fine starting-points for their respective dialectic motion, given that the vanishing of one into the other is the vanishing of the other into the one, thus suggesting a symmetry between the first two terms of the dialectic. But one cannot posit an Other before one posits a something; that is, a positing of a (finite) something—for Hegel, at least, it must be said; I do not think the following obtains at all—immediately mandates and indeed brings about the positing of an Other into which this something may reach, but a positing of an Other *cannot even take place* without the prior positing of a something for the Other to stake its Otherness upon. In addition, it is not entirely clear why the positing of a *particular* something and its Other ought to bring about true infinity as concept and not *a* true-infinity, nor is it clear that the above dialectic works when *something* is replaced by *something-ness* and *Other* is replaced by *Otherness*. (One objection: Hegel does, I think, hint at this approach in identifying determinate being, i.e. existence, with being-so, being *something*—reality⁸—but the difficulty lies in articulating *Otherness* as a universal rather than a particular, which Hegel does not even seem to attempt.) Finally, and most vitally, *Hegel at no point indicates that he is using*

⁷ Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 94.

⁸ See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 21:102.

this dialectic, making this particular maneuver; given that the rational structure of Hegel's exposition is actually to be the rational structure of the *Umwelt*, I think that claims of the type *Hegel meant to say [something] but did not do so* do not hold water: the system is the system *as it is presented*.

In either case, basic failures to parallel the architecture of the being, nothing, becoming dialectic are exhibited; I think that it is only fair to mark these failures as intended. We are then left with the problem: *what grounds does Hegel have to use two different "dialectical" procedures in the course of the exposition of his system?* One might attempt to take *dialectic* to indicate *critique of critique*—as I suggested it might be in my last essay—rather than the more peculiar threefold process which is typically said to be Hegel's; it does not seem, however, that the derivation of true infinity might even be said to have the architecture of a *critique of critique*. I believe this problem to be identical to, or at least answered by the same realization as, another pressing one I have come to in my reading of Hegel: *how does Hegel know where to stop his derivation?* The being, nothing, becoming dialectic is in itself a closed loop, a perfectly self-similar system seemingly adhering to all of Hegel's aesthetic commitments (I do not mean *aesthetic* as a pejorative; all good commitments are aesthetic commitments); the only reason to move beyond it is because one brings into the derivation some notion of what philosophy ought to be and do—a notion which is a facticity, a product of one's thrownness, perhaps—and finds this dialectic insufficient. It is accepted enough that what is remarkable in a sentence is not the words that constitute it but their arrangement and context both inside and outside the sentence, signs being interchangeable; it is not too different to assert that what is remarkable in a thought is the arrangement of "thought-content" within it, rather than the thought-content itself. A meaningful portion of what is remarkable in the derivation of a system, then, is where the

derivation ends, where the system declares itself entirely systematic—which seems in Hegel to evince an infiltration of the empirical into the system itself. I am sure Hegel will prove to be able to evade this line of argument; I am simply at the moment not quite sure how.