Hegel on Infinite Judgments

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant adds a third type of qualitative judgment to the table of categories: the “infinite judgment” (KRV B95-B99). While negative judgments, for Kant, simply negate a predicate, infinite judgments affirm a non-predicate. For Kant, “the rose is not red” would be a merely negative judgment, while “the rose is non-red” would be the infinite judgment, because it affirms something, that the rose is “non-red.” Hegel offers an alternative account of infinite judgments, distinguishing two different types of infinite judgments – the positive and the negative. Although the status of Kantian infinite judgments was widely debated at the beginning of the 20th century, Hegel’s theory of infinite judgments has largely fallen into obscurity.

This paper sketches out a Hegelian account of infinite judgments, comparing Hegel’s view in the two *Logics* to Kant’s position in the first critique. By looking at this particular issue in Hegel’s theory of logic, I hope not only to shed some light on Hegel’s texts, but to cultivate a deeper appreciation for Hegel’s contributions to the history of logic, helping us better understand Hegel’s style of reasoning by looking at one of the most important instruments in Hegel’s toolkit.

1. Transcendental Logic, Logical Quality, and Kantian Infinite Judgments

Before diving headfirst into Hegel, let me provide some general background. Hegel develops infinite judgments in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*. By including infinite judgments in his account of qualitative judgments, Hegel follows Kant’s table of judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. To understand Hegel’s account, we need to look at (a) Kant and
Hegel’s approach to logic, (b) the concept of a “qualitative judgment” or “logical quality,” and (c) Kant’s account of infinite judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

(a) *Transcendental and Speculative Logic*

In Kant and Hegel, we find a way of thinking about logic that simply isn’t taught anymore, leaving many readers trained in 20th century logic at a loss when it comes to making sense of Hegel. When thinking about Hegel today, we must choose between two options: either (a) we inject Hegel with a strong dose of 20th century logic, hoping this will strengthen the vitality of his arguments and immunize him against the criticisms of Anglo-American audiences, or (b) we learn to think in the older style of reasoning, embracing a more pluralist attitude to logic, engaging with Hegel in his own terms.

The former approach appears in Robert Brandom’s *A Spirit of Trust*. In this massive manuscript (which should be coming out in book form next year), Brandom transposes Hegel into an analytic key, understanding Hegel’s subjective logic in terms of pragmatist semantics (“deontic normative relations”) and the objective logic through modal realism (“alethic modal relations”). Brandom’s work represents a major milestone for both analytic philosophy and Hegel, and may indeed (as Richard Rorty claimed) push analytic philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian phase. Although I think Brandom strays significantly from Hegel on several key points (which is fairly common in the analytic commentary tradition, which often seeks to improve or revise arguments into a more contemporary form), *A Spirit of Trust* makes major strides forward when it comes to expressing German idealist notions in terms of analytic

---

1 Brandom has made the 2013 and 2014 draft available on his website, and can be found at the following link: http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/spirit_of_trust.html.
philosophy. We find similar marriages of Hegel and analytic philosophy in the works of Robert Pippin, John McDowell, Markus Gabriel, and Sebastian Rödl.

Although these approaches to Hegel are admirable for their clarity and precision, they often require (as Fredric Jameson nicely puts it) “a modest lowering of the volume of Hegel’s dialectical claims.” I would like to turn Hegel’s volume up to eleven. So instead of recasting Hegel in 20th century logic, I would like to embrace the older style of thinking, interpreting Hegel within his own logical and conceptual framework. Accordingly, we need to understand some of the differences between 20th century logic and the logic used by Kant and Hegel.

Let’s begin by looking at Kant. As Robert Pippin points out, Kant offers “a judgmental, not a propositional, logic.” Unlike 20th century logicians, who are concerned with propositions, Kant deals primarily with judgments and syllogisms. At the same time, Kant understands logic as a theory of thinking. He does not (unlike Husserl and Frege) distinguish the “act of judgment” as a separate activity from thinking. Moreover, Kant doesn’t simply aim to establish the rules for proper or valid thinking, but the possibilities of “thinking as such.” Pippin explains: “Kant does not understand logic as rules for well-formed formulae and rules for truth-preserving inferences. His theory of logic is a theory of thinking.” Thus, Kant’s critique doesn’t simply include theoretical judgments, but extends into the sphere of morality and aesthetics as well. Pippin contrasts Kant’s transcendental logic with the Port Royal Logic, writing: “Contrary to Port Royale, not ‘following’ those rules [of logic] is not thinking poorly or thinking irrationally. It is not thinking at all.” Nothing, for Kant, falls outside the scope of transcendental logic.

---

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
While Kant offers a “transcendental logic,” Hegel offers a “speculative logic.” While Kant’s transcendental logic covers the possibilities of subjective thinking as such, Hegel’s speculative logic covers possibility as such, describing both the possibilities of subjective thinking and the structure of objective reality in-itself. For Hegel, this goes beyond simply stating that our concepts match objects. Instead, objects themselves possess the structure of concepts, judgments, and syllogisms. So Hegel will say things like “animals have the structure of a syllogism,” which doesn’t simply mean that our syllogistic inferences about animals match the way things exist in themselves, but that animals in-themselves consist of two terms united by a middle term, i.e. the structure of a syllogism. We will see some more examples of this later.

The abstract form of a judgment, for Hegel, is “the singular (subject) is the universal (predicate).” Hegel writes: “A proposition of this kind is expressed in every judgment” (EL §166). Propositions about “states” and “singular actions,” by contrast, are not judgments, because they do not involve universality. In the judgment, the subject and predicate appear distinct, yet are expressed as identical.

(b) Logical Quality

According to Aristotle, there are two ways of making claims. We can either affirm a predicate of a subject (e.g. “the rose is red”) or negate a predicate of a subject (e.g. “the rose is not red”). Any judgment, Aristotle holds, has one of these two logical qualities: affirmation (kataphasis) and negation (apophasis). Thus, Aristotle lists two types of qualitative judgments: positive judgments and negative judgments (De Int., 17a26-a37). Affirmation and negation, for Aristotle, form the

\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
two “logical qualities.” The *Port Royal Logic* follows Aristotle, listing affirmation and negation as the only logical qualities.

Throughout the history of philosophy, however, various thinkers have proposed alternative accounts of logical quality. Some reduce affirmation and negation down to a single logical quality. Others add a third or even a fourth type of quality beyond affirmation and negation. To understand this better, let’s look at some examples.

First, we might propose that all judgments involve only one type of logical quality: assertion. Frege, for example, denies any qualitative distinction between affirmative and negative judgments, arguing that both affirmation and negation involve assertions. Frege writes: “For logic at any rate such a distinction is wholly unnecessary; its ground must be sought outside logic.” I believe most analytic philosophers follow Frege in this regard, as does Husserl. I will leave aside the question of whether we should subscribe to this account of logical quality. However, this shows that we can give a plausible account of logical quality with *less than two logical qualities*. We should note, however, that, for Kant and Hegel, we cannot seek anything “outside logic” (as Frege puts it), since for them (to slightly modify Williamson’s famous paraphrase of McDowell) the logical “has no outer boundary.” Transcendental or speculative logic, accordingly, cannot avoid accounting for logical qualities.

---

10 Ibid.
On the other hand, we might give an account with more than two types of logical qualities, adding a third (or even a fourth) quality beyond affirmation and negation. In addition to infinite judgments (the topic of this paper), additional logical qualities might include:

a. The non-assertive judgment: A judgment that neither affirms nor denies a predicate.

b. Dialethism: A judgment that simultaneously affirms and negates a predicate.

c. The neither/nor judgment: The negation of both a predicate and its contrary.

We might utilize these additional logical qualities for a number of reasons. Non-assertive judgments, for example, appear in Pyrronian skepticism. Likewise, early modern thinkers debated whether Cartesian doubt (which neither affirms nor denies) involves a third type of logical quality, and whether such doubts were compatible with the Port Royal Logic. Likewise, dialethism and neither/nor judgments appear in Indian logic, as well as in Neoplatonic writers like Pseudo-Dionysius. So there are a number of reasons, beyond Kant’s transcendental aims, for including qualities beyond affirmation and denial.

(c) Kant’s Account of Infinite Judgments

Although “infinite judgments” stem from the Aristotelian commentary tradition, they are most famously articulated by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. Here, Kant introduces “infinite judgments” to account for ambiguities surrounding affirmative statements about negative predicates. While an affirmative judgment affirms a predicate and a negative judgment denies a predicate, an infinite judgment affirms a non-predicate. Kant illustrates this by contrasting the proposition “the soul is not mortal” (negation) with the claim “the soul is non-mortal” (infinite). The latter judgment, Kant says, makes an affirmation, rather than a negation, placing the soul “in the unlimited sphere of non-mortal beings” (KRV B97). The judgment is “infinite” insofar as
“the soul is one of the infinite number of things that remain when I take away all that is mortal” (KRV B97). By calling the soul “non-mortal,” we place it into the category of non-mortal things. Rather than affirming “immortality” or denying “mortality,” the infinite judgment posits the soul as something other than mortal. Although in general logic, Kant thinks, the negative judgment and infinite judgment are equivalent, in transcendental logic, which considers “what is thereby achieved in the way of addition to our total knowledge” (KRV B97), they are distinguished.

So to review, Kant and Hegel offer theories of judgments, not of propositions. Unlike the *Port Royal Logic*, their logics deal with the possibilities of thought, not merely the rules of valid thought. Unlike Kant, Hegel’s logic describes not only the subjective possibilities of thought, but the ontological possibilities of reality itself. For Kant, infinite judgments represent a third type of logical quality in addition to affirmation and denial. While denial involves the negation of a predicate (“the rose is not red”), infinite judgments involve the affirmation of a non-predicate (“the rose is non-red). As we turn toward Hegel’s account of infinite judgments, we should keep Kant’s account in mind.

2. Hegel’s Theory of Infinite Judgments

Hegel’s account of infinite judgments differs from Kant’s in two important respects: First, Hegel develops the infinite judgment dialectically, deriving it from the affirmative and negative judgments. Second, Hegel lists two different types of infinite judgments: positive and negative.

Let’s look first at this dialectical development, starting at the affirmative judgment. In the affirmative judgment “the rose is red,” Hegel thinks, we identify the rose with an immediate sensible quality. This judgment, while “correct,” doesn’t give a complete account of the rose, since “the rose is not merely red” (EL §172 A). Thus, we develop the negative judgment, “the
rose is not red.” Yet this negative judgment also fails, since if the rose isn’t red, it must be some other color. Yet the rose (a plant) is not a color. Thus, we make the infinite judgment: “a rose is non-red.” (This infinite judgment, in turn, develops into the judgment of reflection, and the judgments continue developing until the judgment becomes the syllogism, and so on.)

Having glimpsed the dialectic at work, let’s look at Hegel’s two types of infinite judgments in detail.

a) Negative Infinite Judgments

The negative infinite judgment involves the negation of a category mistake. As an example, Hegel lists “the understanding is not a table.” While it’s true that the understanding (a cognitive faculty) is not a table (a piece of furniture), this judgment remains absurd and nonsensical. The understanding isn’t simply “not a table,” but isn’t even the same kind of thing as a table. Negative infinite judgments, Hegel writes, “deny the class as a whole, and not merely the particular mode” (EPM §499). Likewise, while the statement “the table is not red” involves the denial of a predicate, Hegel’s example “Spirit is not red” involves the infinite negation of a predicate, since “there is no longer any relation between the subject and predicate at all” (EL §173 A). Why are these judgments “infinite?” They are infinite insofar as, by negating a category mistake, they negate the infinite amount of things that fall within the category.

In the subjective sphere, Hegel writes: “These judgments are correct or true, as the expression goes, but in spite of such truth they are nonsensical and absurd” (SL 642). The negatively infinite judgment negates “the whole extent of the predicate,” removing “any positive relation between it and the subject” (SL 641), setting aside the very form of judgment itself.
In the objective sphere, however, things are different. Remember that logic, for Hegel, doesn’t simply articulate the possibilities of subjective thinking, but the structure of reality itself. Accordingly, there exist, for Hegel, events in the objective world with the structure of an infinitely negative judgment. Let’s look at two of Hegel’s examples of objective infinite negations.

In the legal sphere, Hegel argues that a crime is “an objective example of the negative infinite judgment” (EL §173 A). A crime differs from civil litigation. Civil disputes, Hegel says, can be settled by affirmation and denial. The crime, however, overturns the very notion of law itself. Hegel writes: “The crime is the infinite judgment that negates, not merely the particular right, but the universal sphere as well, negates right as right” (SL 642). Let’s look at a rather trivial example of a person cutting in line. When standing in line, we might dispute about where the line begins, who was in line first, or who should be next. Such a disagreement can be settled by judgments of affirmation or denial. The person who cuts, by contrast, doesn’t simply negate someone’s place in line, but overturns the very idea of standing in line. They completely disregard the principle behind the formation of lines, placing themselves above lines in general, and thus exercise a negative infinite judgment. A criminal, likewise, overturns the possibility of any legal settlement, placing themselves above the law, negating the very idea of law itself.

In the sphere of nature, death has the form of the negative infinite judgment, while illnesses and injury involve merely negative judgments. “In illness,” Hegel writes, “it is merely this or that particular life-function that is denied” (EL §173 A). A broken arm, for example, denies a person the use of her arm. In death, by contrast, something ceases to exist. Rather than negating a particular aspect of life, the entire category of life is negated. As the negation of a category, death is an objective example of an infinite negation.
In summary, the negative infinite judgment involves a category mistake. In the subjective sphere, it always involves an absurdity or error. In the objective sphere, however we do find examples of negatively infinite judgments. These include the crime, which overturns the notion of law itself, and death, which removes something entirely from the category of the living.

\textit{b) Positive Infinite Judgments}

Now let’s turn to the positive infinite judgment. In the \textit{Lesser Logic}, Hegel gives two examples of such judgements: “A lion is a lion” and “Spirit is Spirit” (EL §173). These judgments, for Hegel, are not tautological. Instead, Hegel writes: “the individual is hereby \textit{posited} as continuing itself \textit{into its predicate}, which is identical with it” (SL 642). As we saw earlier, the abstract form of the judgment, for Hegel, is “the \textit{singular} is the \textit{universal}” (EL §166 R). The judgment “a lion is a lion” posits the identity of the singular lion with the category of lions. Since the subject and predicate are in different positions with respect to one another, “universality and singularity distinguish themselves within [the judgment], but at the same time they are identical” (EL §167). In the judgment “a lion is a lion,” Hegel thinks, “the universality no longer appears as \textit{immediate}, but as a \textit{comprehension} of distinct terms” (SL 642). Such a judgment, for Hegel, involves “the reflection of individuality into itself” (SL 642). When we posit “a lion” (singular subject) as “a lion” (universal predicate), we posit the subject as existing within its own category. But why would we make this kind of judgment?

Let me illustrate the positive infinite judgment using an example from everyday language. Let’s say we have an absent-minded friend named Sarah. We lend her a library book, which she promises to return, but (being absent-minded) misplaces the book, and forgets to return it. Knowing her to be absent minded, we’re disappointed she forgot to return the book, but more disappointed in ourselves, as we should have known better. After all, “Sarah is Sarah,”
what can you expect? In the statement “Sarah is Sarah,” we elevate the individual to the level of a universal, positing this singular person as a class of its own. At the same time, a gap emerges between Sarah the subject and Sarah the predicate, making it possible to say things like “Sarah isn’t herself today.” When we say, “I’m not myself today,” we posit ourselves as a universal (positive infinite judgment) and then negate this class (negative judgment). The infinite judgment, accordingly, avoids an excluded middle, positing an identity, but maintain a gap between subject and predicate.

Hegel identifies the infinite judgment with “the negation of the negation” (SL 642) and “das Urteil, das sich selbst aufhebt” or “self-sublating judgment” (PS ¶344). How does the statement “Sarah is Sarah” involve a double negation? Let me illustrate this using another example from everyday language. Let’s say that our friend has painted a mediocre painting. Wanting to remain honest, yet save her feelings, we say “that painting isn’t bad.” We haven’t, however, called the painting “good.” Even more snarky, we might make the passive-aggressive comment “that painting isn’t non-beautiful.” In this passive-aggressive comment, we negate the Kantian version of the infinite judgment, denying a non-predicate. Likewise, saying “Sarah isn’t non-Sarah” exploits the lack of excluded middle, proclaiming Sarah to be none other than herself. Accordingly, the Hegelian positive infinite judgment is equivalent to the negation of the Kantian infinite judgment.

In review, we have looked at Hegel’s two types of infinite judgments. The negative infinite judgment involves the negation of a category mistake. While an absurdity or error in the subjective sphere, negatively infinite judgments, for Hegel, can occur in the objective sphere (a crime and death, as we saw, were two examples of such objective negatively infinite judgments). The positive infinite judgment, by contrast, involves positing something as falling into its own
category. Rather than a meaningless tautology, the positively infinite judgment elevates the singular individual to the level of a universal while at the same time preserving a gap between subject and predicate.

3. Conclusion

Infinite judgments are a third type of logical quality beyond affirmation and denial. For Kant, infinite judgments involve the affirmation of a non-predicate. They are “infinite” insofar as they extend to the infinite range of things that remain after we exclude everything of the predicate. Hegel, by contrast, lists two types of infinite judgments: positive and negative. Negative infinite judgments, for Hegel, involve the negation of a category mistake. Instead of denying a particular predicate within a category, negative infinite judgments deny the category itself. The positive infinite judgment, by contrast, elevates the individual to a category of its own. Such judgments, for Hegel, involve combining the negative judgment (not predicate) and the Kantian infinite judgment (non-predicate). Positive infinite judgments posit the individual as “nothing other than herself,” yet maintain a gap between subject and predicate.