CHAPTER 8

Determination and Negation in the Doctrine of Essence

In the following I will address issues in the doctrine of essence that relate to the determinate negation. We will, firstly, encounter another example of Hegel's actual use of the term “determinate negation.” Then, secondly, we will enter into a treatment of the determinations of reflection as Hegel conceives them. This will serve to clarify Hegel's concept of opposition and contradiction, which has shown itself to be of particular importance when it comes to understanding the speculative determinate negation. We will also revisit the question of whether or not there is a final resolution of contradiction – one could also say a final speculative determinate negation – or whether the dialectical process of philosophical knowledge must be understood as never ending (and therefore possibly as an instance of a bad infinite, something Hegel most likely would seek to avoid). Finally, I will address and attempt to give sufficiently comprehensive answers to the two first main questions relating to the speculative determinate negation, namely how something negative can be positive, and how a contradiction can result in a concrete negation, and not an abstract nothing.

8.1 The Logic of Essence in General

By essence we usually understand the necessary characteristics of something, that without which it would be nothing, and, furthermore, what something is in itself, what its real nature is, as opposed to how it appears. Hegel's doctrine of essence is both a critique and development of this conception of essence. Firstly, he shows that this account of essence leads to a dialectical contradiction, i.e. the determination of essence contradicts itself through itself. Secondly, this critique forms the basis of a conception of the relationship between essence and appearance. Each determination turns out to be nothing beyond the other, both together forming a totality of a conceptual movement.

When investigating the determinations of being we saw over and over again that an initial determination shifted into its opposite and then entered into a unity with it, a unity that collapses and becomes a new determination. As far as we reflect upon this, we can already formulate the notion of essence as an underlying necessary ground (the traditional conception of essence):
The determinations of being are not what they appear to be, they change into their opposite, which, however, also implies a realization of their true nature, their true Ansichsein. As far as this Ansichsein is understood as something that is intrinsically related to its opposite, we have a notion of a comprehensive essence, an essence that shows itself as two interlinked determinations. This points to the difference between being and essence, namely that the determinations of essence are explicitly relational, while the determinations of being are only implicitly so.499

For an example of the relational framework of determination that is characteristic of essence we can look to the determinations of possibility and necessity. Each of these can be defined by each other using the opposite determination and two negations: Something necessary is something for which it is true that it is not possible that it is not, while something possible is something for which it is true that it is not necessary that it is not. However, an important general aspect of any traditional doctrine of essence is that of two opposite determinations one has some indefinite but intuitively graspable priority over the other. Essence has priority over being, the positive over the negative, necessity over possibility, inner over outer, the whole over its part, the absolute over its attributes, and so on. However, Hegel's doctrine of essence, in particular its dialectics, rests on the idea that any such priority is not maintainable. In other words, whenever priority is given to one of the determinations, it turns into its opposite. The prime example of this is how essence, when it is taken to be the true being of something, is itself made into a being. The point in Hegel's logic of essence is to show how essence is rather the whole structure that appears as the relationship of essence and appearance.500 First, essence appears as a being over against another being, of which it is the essence. Because it is this other being that makes essence into essence it is rather the other being that is essential. In this way the initial relation of priority between the determinations is reversed; essence is inessential, while that of which the inessential essence is the essence, is the real essence.

However, both the notion of essence and the notion of priority are left intact. Essence does not disappear as the guiding notion even though the priority is reversed. Furthermore, the reversed priority shows itself to be as equally unstable as the original priority. The other being was said to be essential, while its essence is inessential or had its nature fully in the being that it was the essence of. It is easy to see now that the essential other being is dependent on

499 Cf. TWA 8:228=Enz. I § 111Z.