

Saman Pushpakumara  
The Tremendous Power of the Negative

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Saman Pushpakumara

# The Tremendous Power of the Negative

Hegelian Heritage  
in German, French, British and American  
Philosophical Traditions

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To the memory of the greatest Sri Lankan political economist  
SBD Silva (1925–2018)



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## Foreward

Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*)

## Abbreviations

- EPS I** Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline part I: Science of Logic*
- EPS II** Hegel, *the Encyclopaedia Logic: Part II of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*
- PS** Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*
- SL** Hegel, *The Science of Logic*
- EPM** Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*
- C** Marx, *Capital*
- ND** Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*
- BT** Heidegger, *Being and Time*



# Introduction

## The guiding question of this book

The main purpose of this study is to examine the reason why Hegel's idea of NEGATIVITY still attracts German, French and British-American philosophers nearly two hundred years after his death. Thus, we might ask whether Hegel's NEGATIVITY is still a living concept. A few years ago, Catherine Malabou published the book *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectics* (2005) in which she pointed out the same question. However, unlike the current neuro-science-discourse on the plasticity of the human brain, I see the power of Hegel's philosophy to arise from the NEGATIVITY inherent in the human mind itself.

The perplexing nature of the philosophically enquiring mind is such that it keeps coming back to Hegel's NEGATIVITY in order to pinpoint exactly what its elusive quality is. One of its characteristic features is that it contains an enormous capacity to reproduce ever new forms of self-negation which includes itself, and even Hegel himself. Thus, by negating Hegel we seem to confirm him. In other words, the central dynamic that underlies the various modes of post-and anti-Hegelian thought such as 'the negation of negation', 'the master-slave dialectics', 'the unhappy consciousness', 'the logic of desire', and even 'deconstruction', seems to be the same. Therefore, it is not surprising that NEGATIVITY has been described by Hegel in positive terms as a self-generative principle.

Initially, my interest in the power of NEGATIVITY arose from the following statement in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, [...]. (PS, § 32)

Here, Hegel identifies the historical subject with the power of NEGATIVITY. When we read philosophical trends and individual philosophers through the lense of this statement we may be able to detect whether and how Hegel's original notion of NEGATIVITY has undergone a transformation not only in form but also in essence. According to its original meaning, NEGATIVITY is a

self-mediating concept and as such a synonym for change; its aim is to dissolve any conceptual substantialisation in order to transcend all polar dualities.

At the micro-level, Hegel applied its logic to any form a determinate NEGATION might take, while at the macro-level, he understood the history of philosophy as an ongoing process of system-differentiation based on the same principle. Through his later encyclopaedic system, he attempted to sublimate the philosophies of his predecessors like Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, and Schelling without trying to abolish them. Instead, any particular partial representation of the history of Western philosophy should be located along two axes, a synchronic (simultaneous) and a diachronic (sequential) axis of totality.

Hegel thus saw the history of philosophy to be constituted by all the philosophies as its constituent parts which his system was designed to integrate. Its purpose was to achieve a total vision of the history of thought and only through this vision of totality would the limitations of all the previous philosophies become understandable. But there remained a gap, a qualitative difference between this new totality and the sum of its parts which Hegel sought to heal by means of the dialectic process itself that necessarily would include his own system.

While Hegel's predecessors lacked this panoramic awareness of totality, we may ask whether his followers and critics had a more inclusive vision of the history of philosophy. If we try to review the current totality in a similar way as Hegel from our vantage point of today, then we need to ask whether post-Hegelian philosophers have had the same self-awareness as Hegel through which they would be able to locate themselves and each other along these two axes.

Hegel's review of pre-Hegelian philosophies and their inadequacies has been well documented, for example by Hegel himself in his essay on the difference between Fichte's and Schelling's system (1801). What remains to be ascertained, however, is whether post-Hegelian philosophers represent insights that genuinely go beyond Hegel or whether these new developments merely exemplify disconnected facets of his system. Post-Hegelian philosophers have tended to see themselves above Hegel simply due to their later manifestation in time without considering perhaps that Hegel had already anticipated some of these developments and thus integrated them in his system ahead of historic time; for example, the French Hegelian discourse about the unhappy consciousness and the master-slave dialectic became a new totality for a while which limited the Hegelian discourse to these specific issues. Other



examples are Hegel's critiques of the Kantian a priori and logic and the mathematisation/quantification of the human sciences which analytic philosophy and positivistic research programmes are still continuing to promote despite Hegel's warnings.

More recently, Stepen Houlgate and Michael Baur have published *A Companion to Hegel* (2011) which covers a wide range of relatively new Hegelian themes without, however, giving an overview and some kind of assessment of their philosophical status in relation to Hegel himself. The collating of separate articles into one book without any attempt to identify the current state of Hegelianism in relation to Hegel may be read as symptomatic for today's silent acceptance of the fragmentation of the Hegelian spirit – the opposite polarity of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hegelian focus on the Absolute. It reflects the general trend towards further compartmentalisation of specialist academic fields which makes interdisciplinary communication across these specialisms increasingly difficult. When the analysis of increasingly smaller parts is all that remains of Hegel, then Hegel's hermeneutic dialectic of part versus whole is lost and Hegelianism is sooner or later doomed to dissolve itself into nothing.

It is important not to forget that Hegel regarded his project not merely as an academic exercise for specialist scholars of metaphysics but as part of a much larger educational programme through which a self-critical communal spirit would develop. This leads to a further question, which is whether post-Hegelian philosophers have shown a commitment to the same educational purpose, or whether as separate individuals they are merely responding to their immediate predecessors by way of a simple, i.e. external negation – an instinctual process of self-assertion that, in the name of reason, merely flips from one polarity to its opposite without internal mediation.

What distinguishes Hegel from both, his predecessors and followers alike is his identification of this internal mediation of historic consciousness. By historicising his philosophical ontology, Hegel has been the only philosopher in history who has written about both, the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy. According to him, both spheres are subject to the same NEGATIVITY as the only power that could develop the Spirit's self-awareness through which all dogmatic clinging to preconceptual and conceptual shapes of consciousness could be overcome.

## Towards a new Hermeneutic Approach to Reading Hegel

While reviewing the Hegelian literature, I became aware of a conspicuous lack of self-reflectivity with regard to this core-issue of internal mediation. Apart from the different foci on content, form, and emphasis, a careful reader will notice this gap. It stands in direct opposition to Hegel's own highly self-reflective style of writing, which is most clearly evident in the Preface and Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, as well as in his Introduction to the *Science of Logic*. This lack of an open, self-critical approach to interpreting Hegel as the philosophical father figure of the dialectics of NEGATIVITY of our time seems to be symptomatic for a proud but divided Hegelian tradition that has lost sight of the whole.

In fact, the most prominent Hegelians who I am presenting in this study, from Ludwig Feuerbach to Robert Brandom, have neither regarded themselves as 'faithful interpreters' of Hegel, nor as phenomenologists, but rather as philosophers in their own right who, in search for recognition, have asserted their own version of truth. In search for some answer to a contemporary religious, philosophical, or political issue they seem to have silently bypassed Hegel's meta-concept of NEGATIVITY. The following seven chapters are devoted to this dialectic between Hegel and Hegelianism, that is, how, over a period of two centuries, Hegel's meta-concept of NEGATIVITY has repeatedly been reinterpreted from various non-phenomenological and non-hermeneutic frames of reference to the point where it has lost its original power.

A hermeneutic reading of Hegel's work would, for example, seek to make the purposive nature of Hegel's dialectic clear by elucidating how Hegel's phenomenological process of self-differentiation meanders towards the overcoming of the gap that has arisen from the dualism between subject and object, without, however, falling in the abyss of the Absolute as an undifferentiated, static totality. Hegel thus offered perhaps the only real solution to Kant's problem of the antinomies. In contrast, traditional logic has seen itself as a 'hard science'; it is based on substance-thinking which implies identity and non-contradiction of its object. Its claim for universality shows that it cannot tolerate any alternative logic beside itself. During its rise to power, it has rejected the hermeneutic part-whole dynamic that refrains from imposing an 'objectivist', i.e. dualistic methodology onto its object, and variously labeled it as subjectivist, relativistic or metaphysical – all of which would at best be 'pre-scientific' ways of generating some preliminary knowledge.

A complete cognitive act that a hermeneutic reader seeks to achieve, however, requires not only a linguistic analysis of the constituent logical elements of language but also the reverse process of allowing a genuine organismic synthesis to form within the reader's mind – not just assuming that the new concept of the whole would simply be the sum total of its parts with merely a quantitative difference.

A hermeneutic approach that dialectically inter-relates the parts with the whole as they repeatedly undergo transitions between two evolving polarities seems to be the most basic method of understanding a text. In fact, a hermeneutic approach is so basic that it does not just contain an interpretive method but seems to reflect more fundamentally the negative ontological structure of consciousness, and indeed, of reality itself.

Given this understanding of the fundamental nature of hermeneutics, it can then be applied to the micro as well as to the macro-level, for example, to the whole of the Hegelian tradition in which the *Phenomenology* represents the foundational text whose core-concept of NEGATIVITY some Hegelians related to, more or less self-critically, from their own personal and political agendas that drove their responses at the time. If, as we will see, external interests override a purely hermeneutic interest that merely seeks to understand the dynamic nature of Hegel's concepts from within their own inner logic, then only certain elements of Hegel's text become highlighted while the rest remains in the background. But a partial view is always incomplete, distorted, and one-sided. Hegel himself emphasised that his truth is to be found only in the whole, which means the whole phenomenological process and its results. Thus, only an approach that is designed to conceptualise this whole would be able to access the truth of its negative essence.

Here we can see the long-term effects of the unfortunate break-away of logic from hermeneutics as the same basic pattern is still being reflected today in the so-called analytic-continental split. Thus, it is not surprising that even after 200 years of Hegel-Studies, dualistic misconceptions of his work abound. Since Descartes' time, methodological and epistemological reflections have been based on the presupposition that objective reality is always 'out there somewhere' at a certain distance from the reader as observer. Being fully identified with this perspective, it does not seem to occur to him that this presupposition has already created the gap a priori between himself and his object, the text. Thus, he tries to close it by employing and refining his methodological tools and strategies. In other words, having unconsciously created this conceptual gap in the first place he then tries everything possible to close it

while cleverly inventing further dualistic concepts. Unfortunately, the utter futility of this kind of approach has still not been recognised and acknowledged by positivistic epistemologists. Thus, the negative relation between the interpreter and the author, and the text as well as the secondary literature, has remained largely unspoken.

## Overview of the Seven Chapters

### Chapter 1: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

In the first chapter I am seeking to identify the standard from where I will then assess the Hegelian and anti-Hegelian philosophers considered in this study. Despite the complexity of Hegel's thought, it seems that a definite standard can be established through Hegel's meta-concept of NEGATIVITY as it appears to be the actual power that drives the dialectical process forward. By differentiating between different modes of NEGATIVITY such as abstract or simple NEGATIVITY, Hegel tries to elucidate the essence of his meta-concept which he calls 'absolute NEGATIVITY'. My reading of Hegel, which is based on his three most important works: the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), the *Science of Logic* (1812) and the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (1827), shows that this term was intended by him to not only NEGATE but also to supersede all other modes of NEGATIVITY since it contains a restless, self-originating power that seeks to negate even itself. Through his dialectics of NEGATION as his method of elucidation these three core-texts show that this NEGATIVE force represents his fundamental ontological principle whose implications point far beyond the Kantian epistemological problematic.

The reason why Hegel's dialectics of NEGATIVITY is distinctly different from a merely epistemic negation arises from his realisation that it represents not just an external contradiction between the cognising subject and its cognised object but rather an ontological self-contradiction within the subject itself since its NEGATIVE essence keeps generating ever new modes of self-contradictory historic constellations. The tragic of this ontological constitution of reality, however, is that while the subject purposively searches for a final harmony with its object, its NEGATIVITY simultaneously keeps sabotaging any positive formation of a synthesis.

## Chapter 2: Ludwig Feuerbach

In the second chapter I will concentrate on Ludwig Feuerbach's work because it represents the first independent and genuine critique of Hegel's ontology while simultaneously reflecting the post-idealistic *Zeitgeist* of transition from metaphysical system building to empirical science. As the most courageous thinker among Hegel's students of the 1830s and 40s, Feuerbach challenged the pervasive Hegelian dominance at German universities at the time by developing his own version of negativity based on Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Science of Logic*.

The chapter follows the three structural stages in the development of Feuerbach's thinking in relation to Hegel's concept of NEGATIVITY. It starts with Feuerbach's defence of Hegel against the anti-Hegelian criticism of the 1820s, which leads to a transitional period in which he begins to formulate his own philosophy. And finally, this transition results in a complete break with Hegel's philosophy which is marked by his major work *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

In this chapter, I am describing how Feuerbach turns Hegel's concept of Being as his most basic metaphysical point of departure into a real, i.e. non-metaphysical human being. By trying to bring Hegel's ontological approach 'down to earth', Feuerbach seeks to make a transition from metaphysics to empirical reality. Having gained insight into Hegel's ontological notions of alienation through externalisation and objectification, he then formulates his key idea of '*projection*' as his psychological term for the negation of Hegel's metaphysical Absolute which he interprets to be synonymous with the Christian idea of God. In this way, Feuerbach aims not to abolish religion as has often been thought but to 'humanise' it within his new framework of anthropology.

## Chapter 3: Karl Marx

The third chapter seeks to answer the question whether Marx really grasped the essence of Hegel's meta-concept of NEGATIVITY via his concept of the negative capacity of 'human labour'. The chapter starts with Marx' *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and focuses on its most important section: 'Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy'. Then the chapter highlights one of the most important places of this section which directly relates to Hegel's NEGATIVITY:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* – the dialectic of negativity as the movement and creative principle – is, first, that Hegel grasps the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of the subject, as alienation and transcendence of this alienation, and that he therefore grasps the nature of *labour*, and conceives objective man (true, because real man) as the result of his *own labour*. (EPM, 176 – 177)

While Hegel's principle of alienation remained an ontological condition of the Spirit, in Marx it turns into a capitalist mode of production that needs to be overcome. Here, Marx distinguishes between two negative phenomena, 'objectification' and 'alienation' – an important distinction that Hegel could not yet make. Having gained the necessary philosophical insights from Hegel's logic, Marx then turns his materialist critique against Hegel himself when he points out its real power; negation should not remain merely a philosophical principle but must become the weapon for negating existing reality. I will show how Marx identifies the negative capacity of the proletariat for changing the oppressive capitalist conditions. The final part of the chapter reflects Marx' later intellectual development where he moves from the negative capacity of labour to the negative dialectic of capital.

#### Chapter 4: Theodor W. Adorno

This fourth chapter gives an insight into Adorno's negative thinking which is quite unique in several ways while also sharing some common features with Hegel. Like Hegel, Adorno criticises Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena by arguing that the transcendental conditions of experience cannot be as distinct from each other as Kant claimed. As concepts, for example, the a priori categories of the faculty of understanding (*Verstand*) would be unintelligible if they would not be able to relate to something that is non-conceptual. Genuine experience is made possible by that which exceeds the grasp of traditional logic and sense perception. Adorno calls it 'the non-identical' (*das Nichtidentische*).

The non-identical marks the difference between his materialism and Hegel's idealism. Although he shares Hegel's ambition to work towards a speculative unity between thought and being, between subject and object, and between reason and reality, he denies that this unity can be achieved through Hegel's phenomenological journey. Logic has always imposed identities and unities upon its objects by suppressing or simply ignoring their uniqueness,