CONTRADICTION OR NON-CONTRADICTION?
HEGEL’S DIALECTIC BETWEEN BRANDON AND PRIEST*

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Abstract. The aim of the paper is to analyse Brandom’s account of Hegel’s conception of determinate negation and the role this structure plays in the dialectical process with respect to the problem of contradiction. After having shown both the merits and the limits of Brandom’s account, I will refer to Priest’s dialetheistic approach to contradiction as an alternative contemporary perspective from which it is possible to capture essential features of Hegel’s notion of contradiction, and I will test the equation of Hegel’s dialectic with Priest dialetheism.

1. Introduction

According to Horstmann, «Hegel thinks of his new logic as being in part incompatible with traditional logic». The strongest expression of this new conception of logic is the first thesis of the work Hegel wrote in 1801 in order to earn his teaching habilitation: «contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi». Hegel seems to claim that contradictions are true.

The Hegelian thesis of the truth of contradiction is highly problematic. This is shown by Popper’s critique based on the principle of ex falso quodlibet: «if a theory contains a contradiction, then it entails everything, and therefore, indeed, nothing […]. A theory which involves a contradiction is therefore entirely useless

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as a theory. In a logical system containing true contradictions, everything is true as well as false. This system cannot say anything scientifically relevant.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way to look at Hegel’s philosophical picture. Robert Brandom, in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, claims: «far from rejecting the law of noncontradiction [...] Hegel radicalizes it, and places it at the very center of his thought». In this paper I will try to explain the meaning of this claim and to clarify the extent to which it proves to be a good account of the role contradiction plays in Hegelian dialectic. I will not provide a detailed critical analysis of all aspects of Brandom’s semantic interpretation of dialectic. I will simplify Brandom’s account, in order to focus on the way Brandom explains the structure of determinate negation and on the role this structure plays in the dialectical process with respect to the problem of contradiction. After having shown both the merits and the limits of Brandom’s account, I will refer to Priest’s dialetheistic approach to contradiction as an alternative contemporary perspective from which it is possible to capture essential features of Hegel’s notion of contradiction, and I will test the equation of Hegel’s dialectic with Priest dialetheism.

2. Brandom’s account of determinate negation and contradiction

Brandom clarifies the three sides of dialectic as follows:

a) First, the side of abstraction or of the understanding. In this first conceptual step «one grasps the property as im-

mediately contentful. It is just the thing it is, brutally there»⁶. This immediate conception of a determination corresponds to its atomistic conception. The conceptual content of the determination in question is self-subsistent, determined in itself. It is not necessary to consider its relations to other determinations in order to understand it.

b) Secondly, the dialectical or negatively rational side. In this second conceptual step «one sees that a property is determinate only insofar as it strongly differs from other properties, excluding them in the sense that it is impossible for one object (at one time) to have two properties that are incompatible in this sense»⁷. In this way, the relational structure of a determination is made explicit. The determination itself is considered in terms of «relations to, mediation by, difference and disparity from other properties»⁸. The negative character of this moment consists in the fact that it shows the inconsistence of the first immediate articulation of the determination in question. Nevertheless, this second step is not a sufficient condition in order to individuate the concrete nature of the determination. The determination itself risks being dissolved in an infinite system of relations with what is other than itself.

c) Thirdly, the conceptual content of the determination gets consistently individuated only in the third side of dialectic, namely the speculative or positively rational one. This last step starts with the pure immediacy of the first moment overcome in the pure mediation of the second one. These two opposite characterizations are brought together and the conceptual content of the determination is grasped as an immediacy which is fully mediated. The identity of the determination with itself consists of its relation with what is other than itself: «In the final stage, then, one returns to the determinate content of the property, but now understands its identity as essentially consisting in its relation of exclusion or of difference from

⁶ Ivi, p. 204.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
those it contrasts with» \(^9\). Something determinate is not simply this determinate thing, and it is not identifiable even as the negative exclusion of the determinate things which are other than and incompatible with itself. It rather is this determinate thing insofar as it is the negative exclusion of the determinate things which is other than and incompatible with itself.

In order to explain Brandom’s claim regarding the radicalization of the law of non-contradiction in Hegel’s dialectic, I will try to clarify the nature of the negative-exclusive relations through which determinations get concretely structured. The negative character of these relations is nothing other than what Hegel defines as determinate negation. Therefore, the way Brandom explains determinate negation will be essential in understanding his account of contradiction in the dialectical process.

I start with a fundamental distinction made by Brandom between two kinds of difference.
(a) compatible difference;
(b) incompatible difference.

The first kind of difference is the difference between two properties that are different and compatible, like square and red. Brandom calls this kind of relation «mere difference» \(^10\). The second kind of difference is the difference between properties that are different and incompatible, like square and triangular. This difference is called «material incompatibility» \(^11\) and it is the one involved in Brandom’s account of determinate negation \(^12\). He

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\(^9\) Ivi, p. 205.
\(^10\) Ivi, p. 179.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) «To say that a concept stands in material incompatibility relations with other concepts is to say that some inferential moves from or to that concept are possible and others are not. A concept is, thus, the result of this process of determination, a process that by defining relations of incompatibility with other concepts generates an inferential context and, hence, a logical space. By inferential context, I understand the group of concepts against which a particular concept stand in concrete, material, inferential relations, and through the mediation of which a concept becomes a concrete universal. By logical space, I understand the system of interrelated concepts that is thus generated» (D. PERINETTI, History, Concepts and Normativity in Hegel, in Hegel’s Theory of the
describes this difference in this way: «properties can also be different in the stronger sense of material incompatibility – of the impossibility of one and the same thing simultaneously exhibiting both»\textsuperscript{13}. The negation meant as material incompatibility does not deal with the formal relation between terms and propositions, but rather with the relation pertaining to the content of the terms and the propositions in question\textsuperscript{14}. This very relation is constitutive precisely with respect to the way this content is articulated and thus the negation it embodies can be said to be a «determinate negation».

In this sense, according to Brandom’s reading of determinate negation, material incompatibility is at the basis of every kind of determinateness. Everything is determinate because it is characterized by some properties that exclude other incompatible properties. This means that everything is what it is because it is constituted in one way and not in another incompatible way\textsuperscript{15}.


\textsuperscript{13} R. BRANDON, \textit{Tales of the Mighty Dead}, p. 179.

\textsuperscript{14} In his analysis of negation (which is not specifically related to Hegel's conception of determinate negation), Francesco Berto ascribes the relation of material incompatibility not only to properties, but also to concepts, states of affairs, propositions, worlds: «I shall talk of material exclusion or, equivalently, of material incompatibility. It may be explained in terms of concepts, properties, states of affairs, propositions, or worlds, depending on one’s metaphysical preferences—and we want to be as neutral as possible not only on logical, but also on metaphysical issues. For instance, we may view it as the relation that holds between a couple of properties P1 and P2 if and only if, by having P1, an object has dismissed any chance of simultaneously having P2. Or we may also claim that material incompatibility holds between two concepts C1 and C2, if and only if the very instantiating C1 by a puts a bar on the possibility that a also instantiates C2. Or we may say that it holds between two states of affairs s1 and s2, if and only if the holding of s1 (in world w, at time t) precludes the possibility that s2 also holds (in world w, at time t). Put it any way you like, material exclusion has to do with content, not mere performance: it is rooted in our experience of the world, rather than in pragmatics» (F. BERTO, \textit{Άδύνατον and Material Exclusion}, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», LXXXVI (2), 2008, p. 179-180).

\textsuperscript{15} «The essence of determinateness is modally robust exclusion» (R. BRANDON, \textit{Tales of the Mighty Dead}, p. 179).
This exclusive difference is what is expressed by the principle *omnis determinatio est negatio* and it is the essence of Hegelian conception of negation as determinate negation: «For Hegel, it is this exclusiveness that is the essence of negation»\(^{16}\).

Determinate negation, namely the negative-exclusive relations through which everything gets determined, is inherently connected with the role played by contradiction in Hegel’s dialectic. Moreover, the exclusiveness at the basis of the determining power of negation is nothing other than the way the law of non-contradiction gets embodied in the way things actually are: «for an essential, defining property of negation is the exclusiveness codified in the law of non-contradiction: p rules out not-p; they are incompatible»\(^{17}\). This is the same as to say that something cannot be both p and not-p at the same time and in the same respect.

Therefore, according to Brandom, Hegel rejects the law of non-contradiction only insofar as it is only the minimal and more abstract expression of incompatibility, and then it provides only the minimal and more abstract expression of what determinateness actually is. This obviously depends on the fact that the law of non-contradiction is a formal principle, and insofar as it is formal, it cannot grasp the material character of exclusiveness at the basis of determinateness. Nevertheless, this does not imply a denial of the law of non-contradiction. The law of non-contradiction proves to be at the very basis of material exclusiveness and determinateness. We could say that even if the law of non-contradiction is not a sufficient condition of concrete determinateness, it is a necessary condition of determinateness itself.

In Brandom’s view, Hegelian dialectic is perfectly consistent. In this way Brandom’s reading aims at an actualization of the Hegelian system: by getting rid of inconsistence he makes Hegelian system more «palatable» for the contemporary philosophical sensibility.

\(^{16}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{17}\) *Ibid.*
3. The merits and the limits of Brandom’s account

I want to raise just one simple question: does Brandom’s interpretation provide a good account of determinate negation in Hegel’s dialectic and of the role contradiction plays within it?

First of all, negation is normally defined as a truth-functional operator which applies to a sentence to produce a sentence which is true if the original sentence is false, false if it is true. Obviously, Brandom is right in avoiding employing the concept of truth and falsity in order to explain what determinate negation consists in. Determinate negation is not a formal operator. Rather, it corresponds to some kind of negative relation affecting the content of thought determinations. The adjective «material» that Brandom ascribes to the relation of incompatibility is precisely meant to capture the non-formalistic character of Hegel’s notion of negation.

Secondly, the negative relation at the basis of determinate negation cannot be one of mere diversity. Determinate negation has a constitutive value as regards to the way thought determinations are structured and this value is rooted in the incompatibility between opposed determinations: something is what it is because it excludes from itself everything incompatible with itself. Mere diversity does not embody this exclusive character and therefore it cannot have the determining value that Hegel ascribes to determinate negation. Given a determination $d$ affecting an object $O$, the mere diversity of $d$ with another determination $f$ that does not affect $O$ and that does not have any kind of relation with $d$ cannot say anything about $d$ itself and the way it determines $O$. They are completely independent and their relation is simply external. In order to have a determining value, the negation needs to be a difference between mutually exclusive properties. This kind of difference is inherent in the properties themselves and it is thus constitutive with respect to the way they are\(^\text{18}\).

\(^{18}\) A conception of negation that is not based on the concept of truth and falsity, but refers to some kind of incompatibility relation between opposed determinations, cannot be reduced to a metaphorical notion of negation.
Nevertheless, something more is needed in order to explain how determinate negation works in dialectic. We can find the missing element in Hegel’s words. In the *Science of Logic* Hegel claims:

*Determinateness is negation (Die Bestimmtheit ist Negation)* – is the absolute principle of Spinoza’s philosophy; this true and simple insight establishes the absolute unity of substance. But Spinoza stops short at negation as determinateness or quality (*bey der Negation als Bestimmtheit oder Qualität*); he does not advance to a cognition of negation as absolute, that is, self-negating, negation (*absoluter, d. h. sich negirender Negation*)19.

In these lines Hegel is trying to explain the nature of determinate negation, and, more specifically, the way negation is determinateness, namely the dynamic through which everything constitutes itself. Hegel refers to Spinoza’s principle, as Brandom rather, the reference to the notion of material incompatibility allows us to explain what negation is at a pre-discursive level, that is to say not as regards to the way negation works in our thought and discourse about how things are, but as regards to how things are in themselves. Such an approach to the notion of negation does not deal only with Hegel’s conception of determinate negation, but also with a more general treatment of what negation is. This kind of analysis is not a way to avoid talking about truth values and the way negation works in our language, but rather it aims at pointing out a primary structure of negation on which also the linguistic dimension of negation is based. Such a treatment of negation is not specifically Hegelian. We can find a similar approach to the structure of negation also in the contemporary debate on negation. For instance, according to Sainsbury, «the apprehension of incompatibility [is] an ability more primitive than the use of negation. The negation operator is being explained as initially a means of registering (publicly or privately) a perceived incompatibility […] For present purposes, what matters is that incompatibility be a very basic feature of a speaker’s (or proto-speaker’s) experience of the world, so that negation can plausibly be explained in terms of incompatibility» (R.M. SAINSBURY, *Can Rational Dialetheism be Refuted by Considerations about Negation and Denial?*, «Protosociology», 10, 1997, p. 224).

does; but Hegel does something more than Brandom: Hegel says that negation as it is meant in Spinoza’s principle is a necessary but not sufficient condition for something to determine itself. According to Hegel, the essential character for a negation to be really determinate negation is self-reference\textsuperscript{20}. A negation is really determinate negation insofar as it is absolute negation, negation of negation, namely «self-negating negation»\textsuperscript{21}.

Therefore, determinate negation is a negative relation through which a determination excludes not its other, but itself. Thanks to this self-exclusion, determinations turn into what is other than themselves (selbstbezüglicher Andersheit). This self-exclusive relation is what Hegel calls ‘absolute negativity’ (absolute


\textsuperscript{21} Koch underlines the self-referential dynamic characterizing Hegel’s conception of negation: «Die zweite Besonderheit der Hegelsche Negation hat damit zu tun, dass sie in Selbstanwendung auftreten kann» (A.F. KOCH, \textit{Dasein und Fürsichsein (Hegels Logik der Qualität)}, in \textit{G.W.F. Hegel. Wissenschaft der Logik}, ed. by A.F. Koch - F. Schick, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2002, p. 29). Henrich relates this self-referential character of negation with its being a double negation: a negation which denies itself turns out to be a double negation. Nevertheless, this double negation does not work like the double negation of standard logic – the first negation pertains to a proposition and the second one pertains to the first and annuls its negative character. i.e. the two negations are different and work at two different levels. In Hegel’s notion of negation, the negating negation and the negated negation is one and the same, because the negation in question is a negation which denies itself: «Für Hegel autonomisierte Negation gilt aber, dass sie gerade deshalb verdoppelt werden muss, weil sie auf diese Weise selbstreferentiiell gemacht werden kann. Daraus folgt aber, da di beiden Negationen nicht dadurch voneinander verscheiden sind. Die Negation, welche die Negation negiert, negiert sich. Dem ist aber sogleich hinzuzufügen, dass die Negation sich nur dann negieren wird, von sich, sofern sie sich negiert, unterschieden kann. In der autonomen Negation ist die Negation selbst-negierend und durch sich negiert» (D. HENRICH, \textit{Hegels Grundoperation. Eine Einleitung in die Wissenschaft der Logik}, in \textit{Der Idealismus und seine Gegenwart}, ed. by U. Guzzoni – B. Rang – L. Siep, Meiner, Hamburg 1976, p. 216).
Negativität), which is the key principle at the basis of the dialectical movement of logical determinations.

Therefore, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of negations, that Hegel himself clearly separates in the passage I quoted. Both involve incompatibility, or, better said, exclusiveness. Nevertheless, they have a different structure and completely different implications with respect to the role played by contradiction in the dialectical process:

1) on the one hand, there is Spinoza’s determinate negation. This negation seems to correspond to Brandom’s account of determinate negation as material incompatibility;

2) on the other hand, there is negation as absolute negation, or self-relating negation.

Brandom, as well as Spinoza, «stops short at negation as determinateness or quality». Nevertheless, this determinateness or quality is not the concrete and true determinateness Brandom pretends to grasp through his conception of material incompatibility, but simply an abstract determinateness. More specifically, the determinateness based on Spinoza’s and Brandom’s conception of determinate negation basically corresponds to the

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22 «Der Gedanke von selbstbezüglicher Andersheit kann das Prinzip definieren, das Hegel ‘absolute Negativität’ nennt» (D. Henrich, Die Logik der Reflexion, p. 263). In order to make explicit the self-referential character of negation, Henrich refers to the platonic notion of Heterótes and to a negation conceived not as a simple not-being, but as a determinate not-being. This kind of negation deals with the idea of a determinate other. Nevertheless, Hegel develops this platonic input in a new way. In effect, the negativity Plato refers to corresponds to a relation of exclusion between two different terms. The peculiar character of Hegel’s notion of negativity consists in turning the exclusion between two different relata into the self-exclusion of one and the same term: «Die Situation verwandelt sich erst dann grundlegend, wenn das Prädikat ‘anders’ so angewendet wird, dass dabei nicht zugleich auf einen weiteren Fall Bezug genommen werden soll, von dem ein vorliegender unterschieden ist. […] Wird auf ‘Andersheit’ das Prädikat ‘anders’ angewendet, aber so, dass auf nichts weiter als eben auf Andersheit Bezug genommen werden kann, so wird die zweistellige Relation insofern als einstellige Relation und zugleich Selbstbeziehung gebracht» (ivi, pp. 262-263).

23 WdL II, p. 376; p. 536.
abstract conception of determinateness at the beginning of the Doctrine of Being, and precisely in determinate being (Dasein)\(^{24}\).

It is no accident that in the Anmerkung of the section Quality Hegel refers precisely to Spinoza’s principle «omnis determinatio est negatio». More importantly, the characterization of determinateness in the section ‘quality’ corresponds exactly to the way Brandom explains determinateness as constituted by material incompatibility. Determinate being is «being with a non-being (Seyn mit einem nichtseyn) […] they do not extend beyond each other; so far as determinate being is in the form of being, so far it is non-being, so far is it determinate (geben sie nicht übereinander hinaus; so weit das Daseyn seyend ist, so weit ist es Nichtseyn, ist es bestimmt)»\(^{25}\). Everything is a determinate being, that is, everything has a quality insofar as it is not its non-being, namely what is incompatible with it. Nevertheless, the determinateness in question is just the more abstract articulation of determinateness

\(^{24}\) Henrich underlines the fact that the self-referential negation is the most important logical tool in Hegel’s logic: «Diese strikten Selbstbezug von Negation im Sinne eines Anderes seiner selbst hat Hegel zum wichtigsten Operationsmittel seiner Logik gemacht» (D. HENRICH, Formen der Negation in Hegels Logik, in Seminar: Dialektik in der Philosophie Hegels, ed. by R.-P. Horstmann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, p. 220). Nevertheless, he also says that it is not the only one. There are parts of the dialectical process that do not involve this self-referential negative dynamic: «In Hegels Logik findet sich aber auch noch eine andere Form der Negation. […] In diesen Begriffen ist ein relationaler Sachverhalt gedacht, in dem zunächst einmal eine Beziehung von Einem zu einem Andere vorausgesetzt ist, die nicht vom Typ der >Andersheit in sich<, sondern die einfache Beziehung verschiedener Relata ist» (ivi, p. 223).

\(^{25}\) G.W.F. HEGEL, Wissenschaft der Logik, erster Band, Die objektive Logik, erstes Buch, Die Lehre vom Seyn (1832), in GW, Bd. XXI, hrsg. von F. Hogemann, W. Jaeschke, Meiner, Hamburg 1985 (from now on WdL I), pp. 97-98; engl. transl. by A.V. Miller, Science of Logic, Allen – Unwin, London 1969, pp. 23-385, pp. 110-1. Moreover, it is no accident that interpreters who assume Brandom’s conception of determinate negation and try to test it on the Science of Logic usually refer to Hegel’s thematization of Dasein: «Dasein is a bestimmtes Sein, a determinate being, something of which you can say: “Det (x)” only insofar as x does not have some properties. Something is something determinate because it is a centre of exclusion of properties» (F. BERTO, Che cos’è la dialettica hegeliana?, (my transl.) Il Poligrafo, Padova 2005, p. 285).
itself. It is «the one-sidedness of quality as a determinateness which is only immediate or only in the form of being (die Einseitigkeit der Qualität als nur unmittelbarer oder seyender Bestimmheit)»26. The concrete nature of determinate being as such is developed only at the end of the chapter on determinate being, namely in infinity, where infinity proves to be structured according to a determinate negation that, far from being other-exclusive, is completely self-exclusive.

An other-exclusive negation, namely a determinate negation meant as material incompatibility, would imply an abstract and one-sided conception of infinity, what Hegel defines as ‘spurious infinity’. The spurious infinity is an infinity that is simply identical with itself insofar as is it different from the finite, which is incompatible with it. Hegel himself shows how this conception of infinity is in itself contradictory, because infinity is limited by the finite it excludes, and thus it is something finite:

The infinite as thus posited over against the finite, in a relation wherein they are qualitatively distinct others, is to be called the spurious infinite, the infinite of the understanding, for which it has the value of the highest, the absolute Truth. The understanding […] is entangled in unreconciled, unresolved, absolute contradiction. […] This contradiction occurs as a direct result of the circumstance that the finite remains as a determinate being opposed to the infinite, so that there are two determinatenesses; there are two worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their relationship the infinite is only the limit of the finite and is thus only a determinate infinite, an infinite which is itself finite27.

Understanding, in keeping the finite and the infinite as two separate determinations, turns out to explain the infinite as something determinate and finite, that is to say as something

26 WdL I, p. 98; p. 111. Moreover, it has to be noted that already in determinate being the self-relating structure of negation is implicitly present. Houlgate correctly remarks that «something […] is real being, but real being that is self-relating. It is also negation, but again negation that is self-relating. Self-relating negation, however, is necessarily “self-negating” negation because it is negation that is not mere negation after all» (S. HOULGATE, The Opening of Hegel’s Logic, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2006, p. 317).

27 WdL I, p. 127; pp. 139-140.
different from what infinite is. Being determinate, being finite, contradicts the very nature of infinity itself. This contradiction is the symptom of the abstractness and one-sidedness of the understanding’s point of view, which is not able to grasp the concrete and true nature of infinity. This negative-critical meaning of contradiction partly corresponds to the role Brandom ascribes to this logical structure. Yet, the contradiction involved by the dialectic of infinity also has a positive side. This contradiction is also the symptom of the necessity for the concrete self-determination of infinity to include in itself its own opposite, i.e. the finite.

The true nature of infinity, that includes the finite in itself, is articulated as a negativity that, far from being other-exclusive and letting the finite out of itself, is self-exclusive. Infinity «is essentially negation of the negation, the self-related negation (sie ist ferner wesentlich Negation der Negation, die sich auf sich beziehende Negation ist)»\(^28\). The negation in question is a self-negation because infinity does not deny the finite as something beyond itself. Infinity is the self-negating process inherent in the finite itself.

The finite is itself insofar as it ends and is no more itself. Its ending is its own self-negation, and this self-negation is the constituting dynamic of infinity: «as regards the finite, it is readily conceded that it is the null; but its very nullity is the infinity from which it is thus inseparable»\(^29\). Infinity is the self-superseding of the finite, because it is the finite’s passing over into what is other than itself and the realization of its finitude in this very process of passing over that is its own self-negation. In this sense, infinity is both itself and its other – the finite – because it is the self-


\(^{29}\) \textit{WdL I}, p. 131; p. 143.
negating dynamic through which the finite itself concretely realizes its finitude:

Finitude is only as a transcending of itself (Hinausgehen über sich); it therefore contains infinity, the other of itself. Similarly, infinity is only as a transcending of the finite (Hinausgehen über das Endliche); it therefore essentially contains its other and is, consequently, in its own self the other of itself. The finite is not sublated (aufgehen) by the infinite as by a power existing outside of it; on the contrary, its infinity consists in sublating (aufzubeben) its own self.  

Therefore, infinity is inherently self-contradictory, and this self-contradiction is grounded in the self-referential character of the negation through which it gets determined. The finite is itself insofar as it denies itself and passes over into its other; it is itself insofar as it is no more itself. Infinity is itself in this very process of self-negation, because it is this process through which the finite ceases to be what it is and passes over into its other, realizing itself as true infinity: «that in which the finite sublates itself is the infinite as the negating of finitude».

Yet, the finitude that infinity negates does not lie outside of itself, but is its constitutive moment. Hence, its negating of finitude is a negation

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30 Ivi, p. 133; pp. 145-6. This is why «each contains its own other in its own determination, just as much as each, taken on its own account, considered in its own self, has its other present within it as its own moment» (WdL I, p. 132; p. 144).

31 Ivi, p. 133; p. 146. The contradiction in question is a kind of ontological contradiction. The notion of ontological contradiction is not just an Hegelian extravagance and it is not even completely extraneous to the contemporary debate on the notion of contradiction. In fact, there are different ways of conceiving of this notion. There is a semantic, syntactic, pragmatic definition of the notion of contradiction and, most importantly for our concern, there is also an ontological definition of contradiction in the context of philosophy of language. More specifically, an ontological contradiction consists in some kind of incompatibility involved in the way something is, or, better said, «a contradictory situation is one where both B and ~B (it is not the case that B) hold for some B» (R. ROUTLEY, V. ROUTLEY, Negation and Contradiction, «Revista Colombiana de Matemáticas», 19, 1985, p. 204).
of itself, or a self-negation. This is why infinity both is and is not the finite, and so is inherently contradictory.\(^{32}\)

Self-reference is an essential character of determinate negation, not only with respect to the structure of the finite and infinity, but with respect to the concrete articulation of all the determinations:

Now the negativity (\textit{Negativität}) just considered constitutes the turning point of the movement of the Notion (\textit{den Wendungspunkt der Bewegung des Begriffes}). It is the simple point of the negative relation to self (\textit{Sie ist der einfache Punkt der negative Beziehung auf sich}), the innermost source of all activity, of all animate and spiritual self-movement, the dialectical soul that everything true possesses and through which alone it is true; for on this subjectivity alone rests the sublating of the opposition between Notion and reality, and the unity that is truth.\(^{33}\)

Every determination gets structured in this negative self-reference and this self-negation is what pushes it to overcome its immediacy and to develop its concrete determinateness. This negativity is the absolute negativity, the dialectical soul that leads every determination to overcome the distance between its reality and its concept, that is the distance between what it immediately is and its concrete truth. This negative self-reference is what brings every determination to realize its concrete nature.\(^{34}\)

\(^{32}\) «A finite something is self-negating being; and immediately infinite being is the immediately self-relating being that finite, self-negating being constitutes but that is immediately different from such self-negation. In true infinity, self-relating being becomes explicitly identical with self-negating, finite being. In true infinity, therefore, the positivity and negativity at the heart of being are perfectly fused» (S. HOULGATE, \textit{The Opening of Hegel’s Logic}, p. 428).


\(^{34}\) «Hegel considers every possible content of speculative science – whether a
Brandom misses the self-referential character of determinate negation. This gap prevents him from understanding the true role of contradiction in Hegel’s dialectic. Brandom’s determinate negation is other-exclusive; Hegel’s determinate negation is self-exclusive. The other-exclusiveness of Brandom’s conception of the determining power of negation is precisely what grounds the radicalization of the law of non-contradiction he sees in Hegelian dialectic. Something is what it is because it is characterized by some properties and not by other properties incompatible with them.

If the presupposition of the other-exclusiveness of determinate negation in Hegel’s dialectic is misleading – as I have shown – then the conception of contradiction it involves is misleading too. Far from being a radicalization of the law of non-contradiction, Hegelian dialectic radically casts doubt on the universal and necessary validity of this principle, by showing the contradictory concrete articulation of the determinations, i.e. a contradictory articulation raised by the self-referential character of the negation constitutive of the determinations themselves.

The contradiction of the finite and infinity, as well as the contradictory structure of other logical determinations, can be said to be the truth of these determinations. It is their truth because it is a self-contradictory logical dynamic immanent in the development of the determinations, that is a logical dynamic concept, a living being, or a mode of thought – as driven by the urge to resolve the tension between that which it is in itself and its actual determinations» (K. DE BOER, The Sway of the Negative, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke - New York 2010, p. 44).

Actually, there is a way in which some interpreters endorsing Brandom’s account try to explain the self-referential character of determinate negation. Basically, they claim that it consists in nothing but the fact that the exclusive relation between opposite determinations is a relation that is part of the necessary conditions for defining the determinations themselves. In this sense, it is a relation of exclusion that is internal in the determinations. For example, Cortella claims: «qualities imply the exclusion of other qualities, and then imply the introduction of the negation toward itself. [...] The negation affecting the quality is not only a negation toward what is other than the quality – external negation – but it is also an internal negation, i.e. a negation toward the possibility to be other qualities» (L. CORTELLA, Autocritica del moderno, my transl., Il Poligrafo, Padova 2002, p. 234).
following which the determinations come to concretely realize what they really are. Therefore, this structure is the necessary concrete and intrinsic development of their own articulation and this comes to light only by focusing on the self-relating character of the negativity at their basis. Only performing this self-negating and self-contradictory dynamic are these determinations what they really are.

Nonetheless, even if Brandom’s conception of material incompatibility and the coherentist interpretation of dialectic it involves cannot be considered a good account of Hegel’s thought, we could ask if it at least supports an actualizing aim with respect to Hegelian philosophy.

The answer is no, and indeed for one simple reason. An actualizing project of Hegel’s philosophy cannot disregard Hegel’s most fundamental convictions, one of which is underlined by Horstmann’s claim I quoted at the beginning of this paper, namely that «Hegel thinks of his new logic as being in part incompatible with traditional logic»\(^{36}\). One of the most important incompatibilities between standard logic and Hegel’s speculative logic concerns the approach to contradiction, namely the fact that *contradictio est regula veri*, i.e. contradiction is the law of truth.

If we select some parts of Hegel’s philosophy and get rid of the thesis of the truth of contradiction, like Brandom does, we are not looking at Hegel anymore, because we are just simply looking somewhere else. On such a kind of approach Horstmann writes: «if we start to separate elements of this philosophy from their systematic context in order to profit from them philosophically in isolation we don’t execute Hegel’s will any longer but we subscribe to a different project»\(^{37}\).

4. **Hegel’s dialectic and Priest’s dialetheism**

I think there are contemporary perspectives from which it is possible to come back to Hegel’s legacy, and in particular to

\(^{36}\) R.-P. Horstmann, *What is Hegel’s Legacy, and What Should We Do With It?*, p. 280.

\(^{37}\) Ivi, p. 285.
Hegel’s thesis of the truth of contradiction. Paraconsistent logical systems, and especially dialetheism, are examples of this possibility.

The research on paraconsistent logical systems started in the Fifties. It was born as an effort to clarify the status of dialectical logic and to face the problem of logical systems containing true contradictions. Paraconsistent systems reject the *ex falso quodlibet*. Dialetheism is the view that there are true contradictions. Graham Priest is the most important advocate of the dialetheist thesis, and even if his work cannot be considered an interpretation of Hegel’s notion of contradiction, it refers to Hegel’s thought as one of the most important antecedents of dialetheism in the history of philosophy. In the manifesto of dialetheism, that is *In Contradiction*, namely the book Priest published in 1987, he is quite explicit about this: «It is the main claim of this book that Hegel was right: our concepts, or some of them anyway, are inconsistent»⁴⁹. In this sense, Priest’s claim can highlight the revolutionary character of Hegelian conception of contradiction with respect to standard logic paradigm.

I believe the comparison with dialetheism to be crucial in order to highlight two decisive aspects of the notion of contradiction in Hegel’s thought – two aspects that an interpretation like Brandom’s totally misses, namely (1) the ontological value of contradiction and (2) the self-referential character of the negativity at its basis.

(1) Priest refers to examples of ontological contradiction that are explicitly Hegelian. To show this, we need only to recall the structure of limit or the structure of movement. Here I will refer only to the former.

In Hegel’s analysis of the determination of the limit in the Doctrine of Being, the limit is defined both as the locus within which a thing, A, begins to be what it is, that is to say its generative principle (in this sense *limit is A*) and as the locus within which a thing, A, ends, namely the locus

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³⁸ Dialetheism is «the view that the LNC fails, that some contradictions are true» (G. PRIEST, *What is so Bad about Contradiction?*, «The Journal of Philosophy», XCV (8), 1998, p. 416).
where its non-being begins (in this sense *limit is* $\neg A$). The structure of the limit of $A$ is self-contradictory insofar as the limit of $A$ is both $A$ and $\neg A$. The limit is determined in two incompatible ways$^{40}$.

Actually, in *What is so bad about Contradiction?* Priest analyzes an example of ontological contradiction that specifically mirrors Hegel’s thematization of the determination of the limit:

I walk out of the room; for an instant, I am symmetrically poised, one foot in, one foot out, my centre of gravity lying on the vertical plane containing the centre of gravity of the door. Am I in or not in the room? By symmetry, I am neither in rather than not in, nor not in rather than in. The pure light of reason therefore countenances only two answers to the question: I am both in and not in, or neither in nor not in. [...] If I am neither in nor not in, then I am not (in) and not (not in). By the law of double negation, I am both in and not in$^{41}$.

Priest characterizes the ontological structure of the limit of the room by saying where I am when I am exactly in this limit. The results is the same of Hegel’s Logic: when I am in this limit I am both in the room and not in the room$^{42}$.

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$^{40}$ Considering this two ways separately does not allow us to define the essence of the limit. Saying that $A$, in being limited, is just $A$, or that it is just $\neg A$, is only a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for defining the limit. On the one hand, there are infinite points in $A$ that are $A$ without being the limit of $A$. On the other hand, there are infinite points in what is other than $A$ that are $\neg A$ without being the limit of $A$. The necessary and sufficient condition for defining the limit is to keep together $A$ and $\neg A$, and allow that ‘the limit is $A$ and the limit is $\neg A$’. Hegel claims: «Limit is the mediation through which something and other each as well *is*, as *is not*» (*WdL I*, p. 114; p. 127). As Illetterati remarks, the limit «is the point where both what is determinate and what is negated in the determination both receive their being and cease to be what they are» (L. ILLETTERATI, *Figure del limite. Esperienze e forme della finitezza*, my transl., Verifiche, Trento 1996, p. 40).

$^{41}$ G. PRIEST, *What is so Bad about Contradiction?*, p. 415.

$^{42}$ Another paradigmatic example Priest refers to is the instant of change, which is again and not accidentally explicitly Hegelian. Cf. G. PRIEST, *In Contradiction*, pp. 159-181.
Priest argues for the thesis of the truth of contradiction on the epistemological level through the analysis of a logical-semantic phenomenon that involves a self-referential negative dynamic, namely the self-reference paradoxes. Priest tries «to defend the view that the semantic paradoxes are bona fide sound arguments». Therefore, the contradictions entailed by them are true contradictions.

Self-reference paradoxes and the way they imply contradictions have something in common with the way logical determinations in Hegel’s logic turns out to be contradictorily structured. Here I will refer only to the liar paradox and I will try to show how the self-reference structure working at the basis of the paradox can shed light on how contradictions arise in Hegel’s logic.

The liar paradox is a proposition negatively referred to itself, saying of itself that it is false. The result is a proposition that is true insofar as it is false, and that is false insofar as it is true:

\[ V(p) \leftrightarrow \neg F(p) \]

If the falsity of \( p \) is equal to the negation of \( p \), then this formula can be translated in the simpler form:

\[ p \leftrightarrow \neg p \]

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43 «The paradoxes are all arguments starting with apparently analytic principles concerning truth, membership, etc., and proceeding via apparently valid reasoning to a conclusion of the form ‘a and not-a’» (ivi, p. 11).

44 Ivi, p. 10.

45 Even Koch refers to the linguistic phenomenon of the liar paradox (and more generally, to the self-reference paradoxes) in order to show that self-reference negation is not only an Hegelian extravagance, because it is a logical dynamic that has a crucial role also in the contemporary philosophy of language: «die Lügnerantinomie bzw. Jeder Satz, der seiner Negation logisch äquivalent ist, gibt uns einen unabhängigen Grung, Hegels Grundoperation, die Autonomisierung der Negation, al seine Operation anzuerkennen, die wir vortheoretisch immer schon vollzogen haben» (A.F. KOCH, Die Selbstbeziehung der Negation in Hegels Logik, «Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung», LIII (1), 1999, pp. 8-9).
that means: it is the case of $p$ iff it is not the case of $\neg p$. The conclusion of the liar paradox is a self-contradiction, based on some sort of self-negation.

A structural analogy with Hegel’s dialectic can be outlined on the basis of this self-negating dynamic. If we go back to the example of the finite this is quite clear. On the one hand, the finite is itself insofar as it ends and it is no more itself. On the other hand, the finite, by stopping being itself, realizes its very nature, that is to say in its coming to an end and not being itself anymore it is properly itself because it realizes its own finitude: «The finite in its ceasing-to-be, in this negation of itself has attained its being-in-itself, in united with itself»⁴⁶.

This self-negation is not the simple overcoming of the finite. Quite to the contrary, its coming to an end and its not being itself anymore is the very moment in which it is really what it is. In negating itself and passing over into its other the finite realizes its own finitude; and the concrete realization of the finite necessarily implies its own self-negation. In the very moment in which the finite $F$ denies itself and turns into $\neg F$, it concretely realizes itself as $F$, and the concrete realization of $F$ takes place only insofar as it turns out to be $\neg F$. Hence, the logical dynamic of the finite mirrors the form of the liar paradox: if the finite ($F$) is itself, then it is not itself ($\neg F$); if the finite is not itself ($\neg F$) than it is itself ($F$):

$$F \leftrightarrow \neg F$$

Both $F$ and $\neg F$ hold for $F$. The nature of the finite is inherently self-contradictory and the self-contradiction of the finite is based on the self-referential negative dynamic I have tried to outline⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ *WdL I*, p. 123; p. 136.
⁴⁷ Koch does not develop the same structural comparative analysis I have tried to outline by referring to the liar paradox and to the structure of the finite, but
Hegel and Priest share also the same idea about the solution of the paradoxical dynamic of the self-reference negation and of the contradiction it implies. In fact, whereas according to Priest the only solution to the paradoxes is to accept them as sound arguments, according to Hegel the contradiction which arises from a self-referential negativity, such as the one characterizing the structure of the finite, needs to be recognized as its own intrinsic and constitutive nature:

Speculative thinking consists solely in the fact that thought holds fast contradiction, and in it, its own self, but does not allow itself to be dominated by it as in ordinary thinking, where its determinations are resolved by contradiction only into other determinations or into nothing.\(^48\)

We don’t necessarily have to reject contradictions, because this would mean to be dominated by them. Rather, we need to learn to acknowledge their truth and learn to understand them. This Hegelian approach is exactly the same as Priest, when he tries to show that we need to learn to live in a world that contains true contradictions.\(^49\)

he implicitly recognizes its validity, when he writes: «Davon handelt die Logik der Endlichkeit. Als Endliches nämlich erweist sich das Etwas als das, was es ist: seiner eigenen Negation äquivalent, und als selbstzerstörerisch in einem unendlichen Progress des Verneinens» (A.F. KOCH, Die Selbstbeziehung der Negation in Hegels Logik, p. 17). In another article he is even more explicit about that: «den Ursachverhalt Etwas mit seiner immanenten Grenze oder Endliches, der sich sodann als mit seiner Negation äquivalent erweist: \(e \leftrightarrow \neg e\). Oder das Endliche in seinem Widerspruch geht über in sein Gegenteil, das wiederum das Endliche ist usf., in einem infiniten Progress der Selbsterstörung, einem paradoxen unvergänglichen Vergehen. Die beiden getrennte Momente des Umschlagens ins Affirmative und des ständigen Aussersichkommens sind hier eben vereinigt, und gerade indem das Endliche in selbstbezüglicher Negativität wiederum in Endliches umschlägt, kommt es fortlaufend ausser sich» (A.F. KOCH, Dasein und Fürsichsein, p. 40).

\(^48\) WdL II, p. 287; pp. 440-441.

\(^49\) It is not by accident that Koch outlines a solution of the liar paradox that exactly mirrors Priest’s one – accepting the paradox as true – and that he describes as the solution that Hegel would have given: «Haben wir ja die Möglichkeit […] den Lügner als sinnvollen Satz zu akzeptieren: Auch wenn die
My aim is not to formalize the structure of the finite in Hegel’s logic, but to show how its self-contradictory structure is grounded on self-negating dynamic as well as the self-contradiction entailed by the liar paradox. Priest himself writes:

For no one before this century tried harder than Hegel to think through the consequences of thought thinking about itself, or the categories applying to itself. And this is just the kind of self-referential situation that gives rise to the logical paradoxes.

Therefore, Hegel, as well as Priest, claims that there are true contradictions. Moreover, both Hegel and Priest reject trivialism, that is, the thesis that every contradiction is true (this implies that every sentence and the negation of every sentence are at the same time true and false, which means the complete loss of information).

In the Doctrine of Essence Hegel claims that «everything is inherently contradictory». This sentence could be misunderstood as intending to affirm the trivialistic thesis. Actually, the contradictoriness of everything does not imply that every contradiction is true, but that everything there is, namely everything that is determinate, is characterized by a contradictory nature. This does not mean that ‘anything goes’ and that it is possible to affirm the truth of absurd sentences such as «Socrates is a trireme». What Hegel’s thesis states is the contradictory nature of determinateness.

In the same way, dialetheism is not the thesis that all contradictions are true, but that only some contradictions are true. More precisely, some aspects of reality and language involve contradictory structures. These contradictory structures represent constitutive features of these local aspects of reality.

Negation uns in Antinomien verstrickt, so lassen wir sie uns (und unserem Denken) nicht nehmen; wir müssen den Widerspruch beherrschen lernen, ihn zählen, ihn nützliche theoretische Arbeit leisten lassen. Dazu würde uns Hegel raten» (A.F. Koch, Die Selbstbeziehung der Negation in Hegels Logik, p. 8).

51 WdL II, p. 286; p. 439.
Both in Hegel and Priest, the aspects of linguistic or ontological reality involving true contradiction concern some kind of dynamism. This is explicitly acknowledged by Priest. In the article *Dialectic and Dialetheic*, that is focused on the intrinsic parallelisms between dialetheism and Hegel’s and Marx’ dialectic, he claims:

> The law of non-contradiction holds in formal logic; but formal logic is correctly applicable only to a limited area (notably the static and changeless); in dialectical logic, which applies in a much more general domain, the law of non-contradiction fails\(^{52}\).

Therefore, Hegel and Priest share a fundamental perspective concerning the role true contradictions play in their conception of logic, because both conceive of contradiction as what allows logic to make room for aspects of thought and reality that standard logic cannot grasp, first of all dynamism.

Nevertheless, I think a strictly dialetheistic account of the Hegelian concept of contradiction is wrong for some essential reasons. First of all, there are some obvious distinctions between Hegel’s and Priest’s approach to contradiction. The formalizing intent of Priest’s approach is completely absent in Hegel’s logic. Secondly, whereas in Hegel’s logic true contradictions are claimed to be necessary and justified by the development of the dialectical process, in dialetheism it is not so. In dialetheism, contradictions are isolated cases of a system that is mostly consistent, and Priest’s aim is to build a logical system able to prevent any kind of explosive consequence for the system itself. On the contrary, contradiction in Hegel’s logic is the logical-ontological structure of all the determinations of the system. Contradiction can be said to play a systematic role in Hegel’s logic. Facing Priest’s famous question ‘what is so bad about contradiction?’, Hegel’s would not have replied as Priest does: ‘maybe nothing much’, but ‘absolutely nothing’, because contradiction is the principle of determination of the logical categories.

In order to test the equation of dialectic and dialetheism, I need to do the same I did with Brandom and to say something

\(^{52}\) G. PRIEST, *Dialectic and Dialetheic*, p. 391.
more about Priest’s conception of the negation at the basis of true contradiction, which he calls *dialetheias*. A dialetheia is «any true statement of the form: \( \alpha \) and it is not the case that \( \neg \alpha \)\) \(^{53}\). Priest works with a negation whose semantic is the same as that of a standard one. Therefore if \( \alpha \) is true then \( \neg \alpha \) is false. This is why *dialetheias*, namely the claims of the truth of ‘\( \alpha \land \neg \alpha \)’, implies the conjuncts being both true and false, which is the third truth value he uses in order to explain the possibility for a contradiction to be true.

According to Hegel, contradiction as the principle of determination is not both true and false. It is simply and radically true, because it is the speculative structure of logical-ontological determinations. This basically depends on Hegel’s notion of determinate negation and on his conception of logic.

Determinate negation is different from standard negation, even if it is still a negation insofar as it still has an exclusive character. The negation of a determination is not equivalent to its falsity. This is why Hegel does not need any third truth-value in order to explain how a contradiction can be true. In its intrinsic dialectic that is its own self-negation and its own self-contradiction, the determination is simply and concretely its own truth, it is what it necessarily needs to be according to its intrinsic essence. Hegel’s conception of logic and the contradictions it involves does not primarily deal with statements and their relations to reality, but with reality itself in its intrinsic dynamism. Hegel’s thesis *contradictio regula veri* means that contradiction is the law of truth, where truth needs to be meant as the intrinsic and essential structure of reality itself.

Nevertheless, despite these incompatibilities between Hegel and Priest, the reference to dialetheism proves that coherence is not a necessary condition in order to come back to Hegel from a contemporary perspective. Only if we accept the challenge to think the truth of contradiction, as Priest does, will we walk the same path Hegel did, but if we avoid contradiction, as Brandom does, will we totally miss this path and the new destinations it can lead to.

\(^{53}\) G. PRIEST, *In Contradiction*, p. 4.