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Everything Rational Is a Syllogism: Inferentialism

4.1 Introduction

The syllogism is of fundamental importance for Hegel insofar as it is intimately connected to our rationality. As the third and last chapter on the section on subjectivity it works as the portal to the constitution of objectivity. It is the moment at which objectivity is born, so to speak. Dealing with the section on the syllogism shall reveal what type of object constitutes “what is.” The inferential process at work in the syllogism will reveal it to be the only adequate site for the objectivity of the object to become. The constitution of this object is social; it occurs in Spirit, in the “we” of the community. Thus, it occurs in the syllogism insofar as only by means of it are we capable of holding each other accountable for and entitled or not to the commitments undertaken. We are beings that give and expect reasons for our actions and beliefs. This is what makes us rational.

Hegel’s goal in these sections is two-fold. On the one hand, he wants to reveal the inferential nature of objectivity, that is, that a judgment is not capable of possessing objectivity unless it is part of an inferential act in which it appears as a conclusion. Objectivity is not a matter of being. It is rather a matter of becoming. It has to reveal its own process of becoming objective. And this can only happen by giving reasons. Objectivity can only lie in the logical space of reasons. On the other hand, he wants to establish differences in the type of object referred to in judgments and syllogisms. Following the philosophical search for the unconditioned he wants to reveal that infinite objects are more transparent regarding the structure of their objectivity than other more immediate or sensuous types of object. The development encountered from syllogism to syllogism is fueled by the need to find adequate expression for the infinite nature of what Hegel understands by object. For an object to be infinite is for it...
to always be other than itself while always being itself. It is always more than what it is and can never be exhausted in its determinations. The last syllogism dealt with by Hegel, the disjunctive syllogism, is the most appropriate site for infinite objects to make their appearance insofar as in it objects posit their own becoming. In this syllogism we find that an infinite object is constituted by what it is not. This occurs insofar as we are dealing with processes. The disjunctive syllogism is the site for a process to reveal its having become what it is. It allows infinite objects to reveal their historical character. In other words, it lays bare what conceptuality amounts to.

The fact that these objects are historical means that they are never fully realized. Rather, they are in a constant process of reconstitution. In this manner the object is always itself while always being other than itself. Its identity as object is an ever-changing result that constantly reconfigures its process of having become itself. Infinite objects, therefore, are constituted in their opposition to themselves, through what they are not.

The fact that objectivity is located within the Doctrine of the Notion grants Hegel his idealist badge. The fact that it is reached only by means of the syllogism, an inferential activity, is what the present chapter will attempt to make sense of. The smallest unit of meaning for Hegel is found neither in a concept nor in a judgment. For a concept to have meaning, something needs to be said of it; it needs to be part of a judgment. However, for a judgment to have meaning, it needs to be part of an inferential act. Borrowing hermeneutic terminology, for something to be thematized it must be part of a horizon of meaning. To thematize something is equivalent to saying something about it. The horizon from which it is thematized is equivalent to the premises from which what is thematized is inferred.

### 4.2 Detour via Brandom

The first pages of Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* are dedicated to shedding light on what distinguishes humans from non-humans, based not on what we are but on what we take ourselves to be. This train of thought leads him to focus on what we are distinctly able to do. His answer is that we are the only beings that subject ourselves to the authority of reasons. This can be offered as a definition of rationality. Brandom says:

Being rational is...being subject to the authority of reasons. Saying “we” in this sense is placing ourselves and each other in the space of reasons, by giving and asking for reasons for our attitudes and