

# MODAL FOUNDATIONALISM IN BRANDOM'S INTERPRETATION OF HEGEL

## Fundacionalismo moral en la interpretación de Brandom de Hegel

**RESUMEN:** La lectura que Brandom hace de la metafísica de Hegel ofrece una interpretación apasionantemente rica en el contexto de la metafísica modal contemporánea. Brandom lee la negación determinada de Hegel en el modo en que operan los conceptos de incompatibilidad material y relaciones de consecuencia material. Brandom reconoce la incompatibilidad como un concepto modal y lo sitúa como primitivo en el fundamento de la metafísica de Hegel. Este artículo examina la afirmación fundacionalista modal de Brandom en comparación con la forma en que Hegel concibe la modalidad en su Lógica. Tras este examen, el artículo sugiere que la interpretación de Brandom sigue siendo problemáticamente indiferente al aspecto anti-fundacionalista de la Lógica de Hegel y a la comprensión de Hegel de la modalidad en el contexto de la metafísica modal contemporánea.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** MODALIDAD; INCOMPATIBILIDAD; NEGACIÓN DETERMINADA; DIFERENCIA; FUNDACIONALISMO

**ABSTRACT:** Brandom's reading of Hegel's metaphysics offers an excitingly rich interpretation within the context of contemporary modal metaphysics. Brandom reads Hegel's determinate negation in the way that the concepts of material incompatibility and material consequence relations operate. Brandom recognizes incompatibility as a modal concept and places it as a primitive in the foundation of Hegel's metaphysics. This paper examines of Brandom's modal foundationalist claim in comparison to how Hegel conceives of modality in his Logic. Upon this examination, the paper suggests that Brandom's interpretation remains problematically indifferent to the anti-foundationalist aspect of Hegel's Logic and Hegel's understanding of modality.

**KEYWORDS:** MODALITY; INCOMPATIBILITY; DETERMINATE NEGATION; DIFFERENCE; FOUNDATIONALISM

## I. INTRODUCTION

Brandom's set of publications<sup>1</sup> remarkably bridges—often thought of as irreconcilable traditions of—German Idealism and Analytic Philosophy. Brandom defines his objective as the following: “We have yet to achieve a reconciliation and synthesis of the Kripke-Kaplan-Stalnaker-Lewis (David) approach to modality with the Kant-Hegel-Sellars one — but perhaps someday we shall”.<sup>2</sup> This ambitious outlook transform itself into a comprehensive project where it took shape in flesh and bones as conceptual/modal realism in *From Empiricism to Expressivism* and finally in *A Spirit of Trust*. The synthesis Brandom achieves in his works entails the key notions of material incompatibility, difference, and modality with which Brandom suggests a new understanding of Hegel's metaphysics. Brandom suggests a picture of Hegel's metaphysics, which welcomes a notion of modality at its core as a conceptual primitive. Brandom reads Hegel's *determinate negation* through material incompatibility (MI) and consequence (MC) relations and this, for him, amounts to a modal notion, which operates as a metaphysical *primitive* in Hegel's metaphysics. Brandom's reading omits an important tenet in Hegel that the *Logic* is the refutation of any metaphysical primitives at the beginning. Such modalist view, claiming that modality is a conceptual primitive in Hegel's metaphysics, is at odds with Hegel's metaphysics given that the categories of the *Logic* do not operate *only* under the rubric of the modal determinations and that reducing the categories of the *Logic* to a single primitive notion does not picture an appropriate way in which the *Logic* makes its categories explicit.

In this paper, I will examine Brandom's MI and MC relations in his version of modal realism by seeking for the Hegelian roots in his interpretation of Hegel's metaphysics. For this, I will look at the notion of difference in Brandom's MI and MC relations and relate to that of Hegel. Brandomian modal realism suggests MI and MC as modal notions and places them at the core of Hegel's metaphysics as a foundational modal primitive. This examination will suggest two meanings of MI and MC regarding whether MI and MC relations are themselves modally *determining* things or only *expressing* modal determinations in things. Although Brandom claims them to be the former, I suggest that his interpretation has to mean the latter in order to avoid a version of He-

[1] BRANDOM, R., “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy”, *Hegel Bulletin*. vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–15. doi:10.1017/hgl.2014.1; BRANDOM, R., *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars*, Harvard University Press 2015; BRANDOM, R. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019.

[2] BRANDOM, R., “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy”, *Hegel Bulletin*. vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, p. 6.

gel's metaphysics with commitments to a type of foundationalist metaphysics. I conclude that Brandom's exciting reconciliation project does not capture the true spirit of Hegel's metaphysics, namely, that of anti-foundationalist and presuppositionless science of thinking/being.

## II. FROM CONCEPTUAL REALISM TO MODAL REALISM

Brandom conceives of Hegel's world as purely conceptual. Accordingly, the conceptual world of Hegel involves commitments to realism. This realism recognizes the world as conceptual without the involvement of subjects. Brandom argues:

“[...] At the centre of Hegel's innovations is a non-psychological conception of the conceptual, according to which to be a modal realist about the objective world (the world as it is independent of its relation to any activities or processes of thinking) is thereby to be a conceptual realist about it.”<sup>3</sup>

The definition of the conceptual takes us to Brandom's account of Hegel's determinate negation: “[...] Hegel understands what is conceptual as whatever stands in relations of what he calls ‘determinate negation’ and ‘mediation’ — by which he means material incompatibility and material consequence”.<sup>4</sup>

Material incompatibility reveals which properties of a thing are compatible to be held in the thing depending on the properties the thing already holds. Material consequence, on the other hand, amounts to the inference from material incompatibility of the thing's properties to the possibility or necessity of the properties the thing might/must have, based on the properties it already contains. For instance, gold is incompatible with silver. The material incompatibility relation reveals that a gold object is incompatible with the silver one in virtue of the incompatibility between the properties of gold and silver. The material consequence here enables us to infer what must follow from the properties of the gold object. As for the consequence of being gold, a gold object might be conceived in different shapes and sizes due to its compatibility with shape and size properties but incompatible with melting at 961°C whereas silver is compatible with melting at 961°C.

## III. DIFFERENCE WITHOUT REFLECTION

*Difference* in Brandom is conceived of as a crucial notion for Hegel's determinate negation or that which is the same his own MI relations. Accordingly,

[3] BRANDOM, R., “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy”, *Hegel Bulletin*. vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, p. 5.

[4] BRANDOM, R., “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy”, *Hegel Bulletin*. vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, p. 5.

two types of *difference* are at the core of his MI and MC relations.<sup>5</sup> One type implies *exclusivity* or *contradiction*, and the other implies *compatibility* or *contrariety*. *Exclusive* difference expresses that one object excludes the possibility of having another property in virtue of the current properties it holds. For instance, square and circle and gold and silver in relation to each other, are *exclusively* different. A square object excludes the possibility of itself being circle, and likewise, a gold object excludes the possibility of it being silver. The concurrent presence of two or more exclusively different properties results in a *contradiction*. *Mere* difference, on the other hand, expresses the properties in a *contrariety*. That is, they remain in a thing as distinct but without one excluding the other because the property silver does not contradict the qualities of the property square, but nonetheless the difference between silver and square remains as a contrariety.

In addition to the two separate operations of difference, *mere* difference finds its constitutive elements in *exclusive* difference. According to Brandom, “one can define mere difference solely in terms of exclusive difference, but not *vice versa*”<sup>6</sup>. The exclusive difference, as present in relation to other properties, constitutes their identity with which distinct properties are thought of being *merely* different from each other. As an example, we can consider the property whiteness as exclusively different from blackness and merely different from hardness. A thing could contain the properties of whiteness and hardness but cannot contain both white and black due to them being exclusively different from each other. The collection of exclusively different properties from whiteness determines which different properties are seen as a merely different properties for a white object. Although, exclusive difference grants us merely different properties, we cannot have the same inference from mere difference to the exclusively different properties. A set of merely different properties from whiteness (hardness, warmth and so on) cannot reveal from what the white object is exclusively different. In other words, exclusive difference is potent to express a set of possible properties through its constitution of mere difference among properties. This leads to the notion of modality that renders properties necessary, possible, and impossible for a thing to hold. In Brandom’s modal realism, incompatibility relations, grounded in the notion of exclusive and mere difference, are indeed modal determinations in things.

Notably, Hegel offers a logical account of difference in *Wesenslogik*, though unfortunately Brandom omits it in his discussion on types of difference. The

[5] BRANDOM, R., *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars*, Harvard University Press 2015, pp. 199-200.

[6] BRANDOM, R., *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars*, Harvard University Press 2015, p. 200.

determinations of identity and difference explain that difference in its absolute form, i.e., difference, differing itself from itself, involves the identity that differs itself. Difference by being absolutely different to itself amounts to a reflective bounce from itself back to itself. This self-relation of difference constitutes an identity within itself while it remains different from the identity of itself (SL 361/WL-II 46-7). Difference, in virtue of operating according to its concept, reveals an opposite of itself as its identity. Since Brandom's concept of difference does not shed light on these thoughts in Hegel's concept of difference, Brandom's account of difference does not involve the idea of identity within difference. Thus, Brandom's modal realism suggests that a property, by only being different from other properties, cannot constitute an identity of itself within itself in a reflective manner. In this account, its identity lies within its relation to the other exclusively different properties. This constitutes the identity determination of properties without reflectivity. This is a point of departure from Hegel, which is the result of not identifying the shift between determinate negation as a form of determination for being and negativity or reflectivity as a form of determination for essence.

#### IV. EXCLUSION IN INCOMPATIBILITY

Brandom argues that "there is a determinate way the world objectively is, and its being that way rules out (excludes the possibility) of its being some other ways"<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, a set of properties that a determinate being holds eliminates the possibility for the same being to involve other properties by means of *excluding* the possibility of being in an other way through incompatibility relations. For instance, a white thing eliminates the possibility of its being black due to the incompatibility of whiteness with blackness in a single thing as its properties. The actual beings are what they are through the elimination of possibilities with which they could be otherwise. *Exclusion* is a key notion in the operation of incompatibility relation among possibilities for Brandom but not so for Hegel.

The closest thought to Brandom's idea exclusion of possibilities in Hegel is seen in Hegel's account of real possibility in his *Wesenslogik* where the set of real possibilities, letting the actual emerge out of themselves, are seemingly being excluded in the actual. This is a seeming exclusion because the relation of the actual to its possibilities does not end after the emergence of the actual. The real actuality retrospectively finds its determinations in these very possibilities it emerges from. If we look at Hegel's treatment of mere (formal) possibility, we find that there is nothing in possibilities that can exclude another possibility

[7] BRANDOM, R., *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars*, Harvard University Press 2015, p. 204

to be the possibility of an actual. The *mere* possibility of A implies the *mere* possibility of non-A. Mere possibility is impotent in determining actual and its real possibilities. Real possibility is, for Hegel, is an actuality on its own and only if its relation to other actualities is set explicitly, it operates as a possibility of the other actuality. The seeming exclusion (the disappearance of possibilities) takes place insofar as something other than the set of possibilities determines what comes out as the actual and it might be seen as though it is incompatibility relations among possibilities that let the actual be this and not that. For instance, let's think about rainbow as a real actuality, which comes out of the collection of individual actualities—reflection, refraction, and dispersion of the sunlight through water particles as its real possibilities. The collection of real possibilities of the rainbow does not eliminate the possibility of rainbow to be otherwise. Under the same conditions, but with an exception that water particles are icy crystals, the rainbow would be sundog. The determinate way expresses what the actual is given the current real possibilities out of which the actual emerges. Real actuality keeps itself in relation to its possibilities, but this relation is not a relation of dependence. Rather, the relation is set in the very thought that real actuality itself without its relation to possibilities is already real possibility for another actuality. Briefly, the treatment of real possibility and actuality in Hegel seems to be the closest point to the idea of the exclusion in Brandom's modal realism, but it does not involve the moment of exclusion of certain possibilities for real actuality.

#### V. INCOMPATIBILITY: A MODAL EXPRESSION OR A MODAL DETERMINATION

Brandom claims that MI and MC relations are themselves modal:

“[T]he relations of material incompatibility and consequence in virtue of which objective facts and properties are determinate are *alethic modal* relations: a matter of what is conditionally impossible and necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

Anything in incompatibility relations is to be recognized as modally determined. By this, modal determinations of a thing are conceptually required to have a certain set of properties. However, this requirement limits and ties modality to a categorically different concept of property. This account of modality cannot give us what the *determining* operations of modal concepts, *possibility* or *necessity*, do. Rather, modality here can only express the given property relations in a thing, and from this, modality becomes expressive of the arrangement of properties. Modalities remain as mere names for already

[8] BRANDOM, R. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019, p. 59

determinate states, not actively determining categories as Hegel conceives of. Incompatibility relations does not explain how and what modal notions do in determining things' modal status, but rather the incompatibility only *expresses* the property relations, which, for Brandom, amounts to modal relations. This is an important point to consider since here Brandom is being more Kantian than Hegelian. For Kant (CPR A 219/B 266), modality does not determine anything in objects but *expresses* the relation of objects to the cognition. For Hegel (EL §143), however, modality amounts to determinations that determine being further to be actuality, and forms of actuality are thought of as modalities.

If Brandom is right that incompatibility relations are themselves modal notions, then firstly it is a departure point from Hegel in terms of how modality is supposed to be conceived. Secondly, regarding Hegel's distinct stand from Kant in how to conceive of modality, we can say against Brandom's account that what incompatibility relations determine in things remains a mystery since in things, all determinations are carried out by the properties. For this reason, it is more viable to conceive of MI and MC as only *expressing* modal determinations, i.e., the incompatibility of a property does not determine the thing. Rather, its incompatibility relation with the other properties *expresses* the thing in a way that it shows modal determinations such as the possibility/impossibility of a thing to be such-and-such. Briefly, MI and MC relations have an expressive function for modal determinations. In other words, they make explicit modal determinations through property relations, but they are not *modally* determining things.

The distinction between being a modal notion and expressing modality leads us to an answer to the question of why Brandom's interpretation of Hegel's metaphysics faces the problem of foundationalism. Recognizing MI and MC as modal and placing them at the core of Hegel's metaphysics leads to a form of foundationalism that grounds the categories of Hegel's *Logic* in modality, which is not what Hegel would commit to. Here the issue is not whether modal notions of MI and MC and Hegel's notion of determinate negation is sufficient to be a primitive and foundational in Hegel's metaphysics, but rather the issue is precisely any foundation *per se*. As for why modality is not apt for this task lies in how Hegel conceives of modality i.e., it refers to a specific type of determinations for being like other determinations defining being. There is nothing foundational in modality for being to make itself explicit any way more substantial than other determinations of being. To my understanding, modalities are determinations of actuality, actuality as a type of being like *Dasein*, existence, object and so on. That is, there is not anything that modal determinations make explicit apart from actuality because modal determinations are solely derived from and lies within the very concept of actuality.



## VI. MODAL FOUNDATIONALISM IN BRANDOM'S HEGEL

Brandom makes a radical claim about Hegel's metaphysics by canonizing his understanding of *modal* determinate negation:

"Hegel's principal metaphysical primitive, determinate negation, is intrinsically and essentially a *modal* notion. [...] Modality is built into the metaphysical bedrock of his system."<sup>9</sup>

We can consider two tenets of the *Logic* for why determinate negation cannot be a primitive for Hegel's metaphysics. Firstly, Hegel's introductory essay 'With What Must Science Begin' in the *Logic* does not leave any doubt about the attitude we should take against any primitive notions governing the thought in its activity of making explicit the logical categories of thinking. The essay does not only explicate why any primitive notions in the first philosophy causes a delay in the beginning by moving the investigation to the primitive notion lying behind the first notion, but also does it lay a necessary groundwork for the beginning should be presuppositionless i.e., without implicit primitive waiting to be revealed in the course of the *Logic*. Secondly, Hegel in the *Logic* does not follow a certain set of explanatory notions for making explicit being or thinking. Rather, determinations changes depending on the form and the content of thinking and being. This is clearly reflected in the transition from *Seinslogik* to *Wesenslogik*. Modal determinations for Hegel are not a matter of material incompatibility since negation in *Seinslogik* develops into negativity in *Wesenslogik* that contains the negation within itself just as actuality containing possibility as a negative within itself. Pippin (2020: 17) identifies an elegant nuance in Hegel's negation between *Anderssein* and *Gegensatz* that captures the shift in the type of determination process from *Seinslogik* to *Wesenslogik*.<sup>10</sup> While *Anderssein* is the type of negation in the categories of being that takes place in dualities, such as, something and other, one and the many and so on, *Gegensatz* is another type of negation in essence that amounts to the inclusivity of dualities in one another, such as ground and grounded, actuality and possibility and so on. The domain of modality is within *Wesenslogik* in which the *Logic* moves forward with *reflective* determinations. However, we should note that *reflective* determinations do involve negation in the logic of modal concepts, but the logic of modality is not only made explicit by negation alone.

[9] BRANDOM, R. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019, p. 141.

[10] PIPPIN, R., "Brandom on Hegel and Negation", in *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*. ed. Bouché, G., Routledge: New York 2020, p. 17.



The worrying aspect in Brandom's understanding of Hegel's metaphysics is that it leans towards a foundationalist reading of Hegel, which Hegel refutes upfront. Brandom places a metaphysical primitive in Hegel's metaphysics, even though Hegel's *Logic* does not suggest one—let alone it being a modal primitive. The roots of the foundationalism stems from Brandom's "one-size-fits-all account of determinate negation".<sup>11</sup> This *one-size-fits-all* notion of determinate negation does not do justice to the unique logical characteristics of each category in the *Logic*. Being is present all the way in the *Logic* but takes up various forms like *mechanically* determined object, *modally* determined actuality and so on. Each form of being shows a unique way to be without being reducible to a single primitive or one another. Modal determinations cannot sufficiently make explicit the non-modal ways of being in the *Logic* since modal determinations are *insignificant*, for instance, in qualitative being and *insufficient* in mechanical being. The logic of the world involves various determinations of being that make explicit various aspects of the world. Brandom's interpretation, glorifying an aspect of the world such, like modality, inevitably undermines the other aspects that do not express themselves in a modally determinate way.

The Brandomian modal realist could suggest that everything there is involves to some extent modal determinations by virtue of the substantial role of MI and MC relations. Although some categories of the *Logic* that are not modally determined, such as quality and quantity, we should note that being is to some extent *modally* determined, when conceived in a more logically concrete way as mechanical, chemical, or organic being, since these types of being include, *without being reducible to*, modal determinations. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that these higher and more concrete categories of the *Logic*, explaining more complex forms of being than the modal form, are not governed by modal determinations. The *Logic* can make explicit what it means for objects to have *mechanical*, *chemical* and *teleological* determinations without modality, even though these objects show necessity and contingency in their nature. However, in Brandom's modal realism, the mere determination of objects would involve modal relations of MI and MC at their core since their determinations are by means of determinate negation.

[11] By *one-size-fits-all*, Pippin elegantly captures what Brandom aims to achieve with his conception of determinate negation in Hegel, namely, a single primitive concept that can explain all the world. PIPPIN, R., "Brandom on Hegel and Negation", in *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*. ed. BOUCHÉ, G., Routledge: New York 2020, p. 15.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Brandom's interpretation of Hegel's metaphysics may not convince the ones closely following the minute details of Hegel's *Logic* and also the ones who appreciate the common idea that Hegel is an avid critic of philosophy with primitive notions and principles. Suggesting a primitive notion at its core does lose the true spirit of the *Logic*. Brandom's reconciliation project may well be thought of as successful but with some serious compromises in Hegel's *Logic*. Brandom's project is, no doubt, excitingly rich, but it is yet to be authoritative in reflecting the tenets of Hegel's metaphysics in his picture of reconciliation—at least until Brandom meets Hegel's metaphysics in Hegel's metaphysical *magnum opus*, the *Logic*. Perhaps someday he shall.

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