

# The Meaning and Power of Negativity

Edited by  
INGOLF U. DALFERTH  
and TREVOR W. KIMBALL

*Religion in  
Philosophy and Theology*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Religion in Philosophy and Theology

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# The Meaning and Power of Negativity

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edited by  
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and  
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## Preface

The theme of the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont was *The Meaning and Power of Negativity*. It attracted considerable interest far beyond Claremont and brought together participants from different religions, traditions, and academic disciplines for three days of fruitful conversations. The present volume documents our discussions and reflections. It includes the reworked versions of the papers presented at the conference as well as additional material from the 2017 Forum Humanum competition. Together the diverse contributions to the volume constitute a compelling introduction to the remarkably fecund subject of negativity in contemporary philosophy of religion.

We are grateful to the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) who has again generously provided ten conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference. We gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College, and Claremont McKenna College and the assistance of the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich in handling the *Forum Humanum* competition. We are indebted to the contributors to this volume, to Mohr Siebeck who has accepted the manuscript for publication, and to Marlene A. Block (Claremont) who helped to get the manuscript ready for publication.

Trevor W. Kimball  
Ingolf U. Dalferth



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# Introduction: The Meaning and Power of Negativity

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

## 1. Negativity and Negation

The theme of this volume is not due to a strange interest in the manifold phenomena of destruction, deception, and devastation in our life and culture. They are omnipresent, and we are all aware of them. What is less obvious is the fact that negativity is not a negative or destructive phenomenon, but something without which we could not live a human life. In a semiotic respect, it helps us to identify a particular term by distinguishing it from others. In a cognitive respect, it allows us to define concepts by distinguishing them from each other. In an experiential respect, it highlights the positive by distinguishing it from nothingness, evil and otherness. It is that without which we could not make any distinctions, and we rely on it everywhere. Without paying attention to deficiency, misunderstandings, disagreement, evil, and resistance in everyday life, to operations of negation and distinction in the order of signs, to the recognition of differences in the social sphere and to power conflicts in politics or the tensions of transcendence in religion, we cannot cope with contingency and otherness, subjectivity and power, transcendence and immanence and other manifestations of the pluriform dynamics between signifier, signified and meaning in human life and culture. These are all phenomena of negativity, and they are all at issue in the investigations and discussions in this volume.

Negativity is not to be confused with negation. Negation is an operation that takes propositions from  $p$  to  $\text{non-}p$ , negativity is a quality or state of being negative. But before something can be negative, there must be something positive. Both negation and negativity point beyond the obvious and disclose the phenomenological depth of what we perceive and the hermeneutical background of what we highlight for investigation. Construction and destruction, deconstruction and reconstruction involve negativity; and whatever is, can be understood as the negation of a negation. If you look for it, you can find it everywhere:  $p$  is not  $q$ ;  $\text{non-}p$  is not  $p$ ;  $p$  is not  $\text{non-}p$  etc.

However, is the discourse of negativity symbolic, ontological, or epistemological? Opinions differ widely. Some argue that negativity functions in the symbolic order as the principle that helps to define the meaning of a sign as the

totality of its differences from other signs. Others argue that in the ontological order, negativity is what entities reject by striving for full realization. And still others use it epistemologically as the principle that helps us to critically distinguish between our concepts and what we try to understand through them.

Hegel's philosophy made negativity prominent in philosophy, and he learned this from theology. What has emerged from nothing and what is becoming is not yet what it can be. Creation is what it is by not being the creator, and vice versa. So wherever there is God, there is negativity, and wherever there is creation, there is the negation of negativity.

This is of course a controversial view. For Spinoza, negativity is only "imaginary" and results from our failure to grasp the actual causal chain. For Adorno, it is the motor of a "negative dialectic" that goes beyond all that is given by refusing to fix it in a state of reconciliation. For Badiou, negativity results from the occurrence of events that break into the orders of life and provoke their transformation into a new order. And for Lacan it marks the symbolic void that must be named but cannot be sublated into a symbolic discourse.

Others go even further and understand negativity as a basic trait of reality. Where Western thinkers emphasize being, presence and becoming, Asian traditions focus on nothingness, non-existence, absence, and emptiness. How does this relate to Western attempts to reflect on being and non-being, evil and suffering, perfection, and destruction? And how does the emphasis on the negative differ from existential nihilism and ontological despair? Clearly negativity plays a central role in both philosophy and theology in more than one way. Philosophy of religion has for some time ignored or underestimated its profound importance. It is time to focus on it again.

## 2. Negation as Operation

Such an investigation must begin with distinctions.<sup>1</sup> Negativity is something different from negation. But what is it? This may be the wrong question to ask. Not every sign we use signifies a particular thing (a 'what') that can be determined semantically through contrasting meanings. Signs can mean something specific if they are used conventionally within a certain code ('Tisch', 'table', 'la mesa'). They can indicate something if they are used as pointers to some-

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<sup>1</sup> The following considerations include and continue reflections from the following publications: I. U. DALFERTH, "Ist radikale Negativität möglich?," in *Die Arbeit des Negativen. Negativität als philosophisch-psychoanalytisches Problem*, ed. E. ANGEHRN and J. KÜCHENHOFF (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2014), 37–60; *Transcendence and the Secular World: Life in orientation to the ultimate presence*, trans. J. BENNET (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), chap. F; *Fiktion und Negativität. Zur Rolle des in Negativen im Fiktiven* (forthcoming).

thing ('signposts'). They can determine something by distinguishing it from other things in a certain way ('... is red'). They can function as a medium that communicates more than the signs used convey, because the point of their use lies not in what they (directly) show or say, but in what is (indirectly) shown in and with their use (illocutionary force of utterances; symbols). Or they can refer to an operation that is or is to be performed with or on other signs.

To this last category of signs belong logical operators like *implication* (if ... then), *conjunction* (and), *disjunction* (or) or *negation* (not). These logical signs do not denote anything.<sup>2</sup> They do not stand for anything else that could be thematized or investigated independently of them. They are operators, not designations, signs that indicate that a certain operation should be performed on other signs – for example an operation of negation.

Negation is not a basic operation but presupposes several things: there must be something on which it is performed (something *negatable*), something or someone who performs it (a *negator*), and something through which it is performed (a *negating means*). The conditions for the possibility of such sign operations are thus always not only logical but also pragmatic and existential. Only if there are two propositions p and q, an operator 'and' and somebody who performs the operation, the two propositions can be linked as 'p and q'. And only if there is a proposition p, someone who negates it, and something through which it is negated ('non-'), there can be a negation 'non-p'. By itself, the negation operator has no sense. One cannot only negate. One always negates *something* – in a certain respect (definite negation) or completely (total negation). If there is nothing negatable, then there is no negation. Neither can there be any negation if there is no one or nothing to carry it out. If there is no negator, then there is no negation. And finally, we can only negate something if there is something by or through which it is carried out. If there is no means or medium of negation, then there is no negation. Thus, negation is always a negation of ... (something *negatable*), a negation by ... (*negator*) and a negation through ... (*means of negation*), and all three moments indicate something without which negation is not possible.

The result of a negation can be affirmed as true or denied as false. Just as propositions are not to be confused with affirmations, so negations are not to be confused with denials. Propositions can be entertained hypothetically and without being affirmed, and negations can be performed without affirming or denying the result. 'It is raining' may be true, and 'It is not raining' may be false. I can affirm or deny either of them, and the result can be true or false. I can affirm what somebody denies and deny what somebody affirms. Denials

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<sup>2</sup> Compare to L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Werkausgabe*, Bd. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 7–85; 29, 4.0312: "Mein Grundgedanke ist, daß die 'logischen Konstanten' nicht vertreten."

are not always denials of negations, but they are operations just as negations. But whereas negations result in negative propositions (non-p), denials of negative propositions ('non-p' is false) result in true or false statements ("It is not true that 'non-p' is false" or "It is true that 'non-p' is false").

### 3. Negativity and Difference

Negativity, on the other hand, is not an operation, but a property or a trait – that which renders the negative negative. The negative, however, stands in contrast to the positive and thus is determined by its contrast to the positive just as the positive is by its contrast to the negative. Thus, not only the negative is characterized by the property of negativity, but also the positive: without negativity there is neither negative nor positive. Negativity is that which makes not only the negative to be negative, but also the positive to be positive. This does not mean that negativity is a property of both the negative and the positive (it determines neither the negative nor of the positive), rather, by expressing its reciprocal otherness, it marks the *distinction* between the two (thus determining their difference) which the process of negating articulates: Negativity characterizes neither the positive nor the negative, but the relationship of contrast between them.

However, if it characterises this relationship of contrast, then it characterises every such relationship. Nothing can be different from something else without negativity, which expresses itself variously in specific distinctions, differentiations, negations or denials. This applies not only to what is real or actual (nothing is actual without preventing something else from being actual), but also to what is possible (nothing is possible without being distinguished from other possibilities), not only to signs (every sign is what it is by its differences from all others in the particular system to which it belongs), but also to what is signified (everything is determined by being distinguished from what is other: *Omnis determinatio est negatio*.)<sup>3</sup> As a necessary property of distinctions or contrasts, negativity is that which enables the distinction of different things, i. e. negates their non-distinguishability or indiscernibility (identity) and affirms their reciprocal otherness (non-identity). Without negativity there is no difference. Negativity is the necessary condition for the possibility of all difference.

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<sup>3</sup> B. DE SPINOZA, Letter to Jarigh Jelles on June 2, 1674. See also, W. RÖD, "Omnis determinatio est negatio," in *Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen*, ed. W. HOGREBE, XIX. Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie, 23–27 September 2002 in Bonn, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 478–489.

However, differences are of various kinds. There are differences between things (A/B) and differences in relating to things (I/It), to others (I/Other) and to oneself (I/Myself). There are external differences between objects, between selves and objects, and between selves and selves. There are categorical differences between relations to other things (object relations), to others (relations between selves) and to oneself (self-relations). There are logical differences between  $p$  and non- $p$  (difference), and pragmatic differences between  $p$  and non- $p$  on the one hand (the negatable) and the negator on the other (otherness). While logical difference can be understood without reference to time, pragmatic otherness is necessarily linked to time. And while something can be distinguished from something else without reference to time (A is different from B with respect to C), different acts of referring to myself cannot be distinguished without time (I am different now from what I was last year).

All difference in life results from processes of differentiation. But while it is possible to distinguish between *this* and *that* by reference to traits or properties which characterise their relationship of contrast, it is not possible to distinguish between *this* and *this* in this way, but only through recourse to the sequence of references to *this* in time. Sequences in time presuppose different events and those in turn negativity as a condition for the possibility of the *earlier than* and *later than* relations between events in temporal sequences. In self-relations, therefore, taking account of time is indispensable, whereas in object relations it often is not. This shows in philosophical accounts of difference and otherness. While critical philosophical approaches typically attempt to understand difference and distinction from the point of view of otherness and self-relation, naturalistic approaches seek to reduce otherness to differences in the relationship between one object and another that can be explained in terms of different traits or properties.

However, in either case the operation of distinction (the act of distinguishing) is an operation of negation that takes time to go from  $p$  to non- $p$ . It presupposes something actual that carries out the negation operation (negator), and something actual on which it acts (negatable). It determines something actual against the background of its possibilities with regard to the fact that it is not yet or otherwise. And it presupposes negativity as difference, finiteness, and otherness.

Negativity as a principle of reciprocal distinction is enacted in time as negation and as the negation of negation. In this process, which Hegel thought through pre-eminently, there is no pure being and no pure nothing, but only a becoming which transforms different things into other different things through negation. Absolute nothing is a void (*ex nihilo nihil fit*): it is a purely abstract contrasting concept that cannot be distinguished from its antithesis of pure being, but rather coincides with it: “this pure being is the *pure abstraction*, and hence it is the *absolutely negative*, which when taken immmediately, is equally



*nothing*.”<sup>4</sup> Only non-being, considered retrospectively from the perspective of being, directed as it is towards being, carries within itself the dynamic to become: It is the *possibile* of a *not-yet-being*, which presses on towards realisation. But this applies to each stage of finite becoming. The realisation process is accomplished through the negation of each position which, in the light of the not-yet, further develops that which has come about thus far, driving it forward into the deepening, unfolding and actualisation of its truth.

Negation is thus never only formally an operation to determine truth, but a means to build and develop a reality determined by reason and truth. It can and must be iterated over and over again and thus constitutes, as a process of determining signs, a truth process of reality. This means that, for the negativity process, the operation of negating needs *time* to be able to move from p to non-p. It presupposes something *actual* on which it operates by continuing to determine it against the background of its possibilities in terms of its not-yet-being or otherness. It presupposes a (sign) *medium* with the help of which it can be carried out. And because of the time and media used, the iteration of the negation can never return to the formal starting point of the negation process (p): to negate non-p (non-non-p) results, not in the starting position p, but in a new state q, which can, in its turn, be further determined by negation. Despite the elementary and inexorable nature of the process of negativity, there is little that is elementary about the negation operation as the enactment form of this process. It invariably presupposes a complex signifying practice in time, which is taken into account in every act of negation. Without time, mediation (actuality), possibility (persistence) and signifying practice there is no negating, no negation, and no denial.

#### 4. Versions of Negativity

If negativity is understood semiotically as a structural feature of distinctions, then it presupposes something actual in order to be possible. This applies to different versions of negativity in different ways.

In the practical sense, negativity is a short formula for experiences such as pain, loss, fear, suffering, failure, or the depressing experience that much of what we try to do ends up being the opposite of what we intended, hoped for, or expected. But only those who live can experience such things, and no life is

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<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik* (1830), *Werke*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), § 87, 186; *The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. GERAETS, W. A. SUCHTING, and H. S. HARRIS (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), § 87, 139.

determined only by such negative experiences. One can only experience pain, fear or breakdown against the background possibility of a life that comprises more than just that. Both as the reality (of actual life) and as the possibility (of a successful life), more must be present than merely the negativity of failure.

In an ontological sense, negativity is involved in the transition from non-being to being, or from being to non-being. However, the negativity of non-being cannot be the whence or the whither of being. The negativity of non-being cannot be conceived of radically, either as the origin or as the future of being. Any change in the realm of being can only be described as a modal change from being possible to being actual or from being actual to being possible, and there is nothing that can become actual that is not possible, either before it becomes actual or through becoming actual. The possible is always considered from the perspective of the actual, whether it be retrospectively as a not-yet-being or prospectively as a no-longer-being. Each can be understood either as a change to being (a coming-into-being), or from being (a ceasing-to-be), or in being (a becoming-other). Thus *coming-into-being* is a change from non-being to being-there and *ceasing-to-be* is a change from being-there to non-being, while *becoming-other* represents a change from being-thus to being-other, which can be more precisely defined in various specific ways (as a quantitative, qualitative, locational or temporal change etc.).

In the epistemological sense, negativity cannot be the first. One cannot start with negativity. Only from the positive can negativity be thematized or experienced as negative. For negativity to be possible, something positive must be actual. The negative, against which the positive is set in contrast, can be described from the perspective of, and within the horizon of, the positive, but not within its own horizon (to the extent that it has one at all). As Hegel emphasised, it cannot be viewed as nothing but at most as non-being. Epistemically it is a boundary concept beyond precise description. Such “boundary concepts,” as Kant emphasised, do not have a descriptive or determinative function. Rather, they serve to limit claims to validity and to mark out the sphere available for the meaningful use of descriptive concepts of meaning. They do not describe something negative, but state where and how the positive has its boundaries and under what conditions it can be recognised as positive. However, necessary conditions are only available *with* what is conditioned, not without it and in their own right. They flag up a relative difference from that which they conditionally enable, but they are not in themselves assumed and accessible. Thus they never appear alone and unattached, but only ever with and in relation to something else.

In a semiotic sense, negativity constitutes the meaning of a sign as the totality of its differences from all other signs. Unless this totality is limited, its meaning would be indeterminable or only a relative, hypothetical construal. In order that the negativity of differentiation can operate in a determinative

way, it must be circumscribed by a boundary. Limitless differentiation is the dissolution of all meaning. Without the demarcating distinction from all that is senseless, meaningless, and nonsensical, there is nothing that is meaningful.

In a hermeneutic sense, negativity characterizes phenomena such as incomprehension, misunderstanding, or non-understanding as deficiency or lack of meaning or as meaninglessness. However, here again the negative other to understanding is not to be construed in a descriptive or determinative way, but as a demarcating boundary. From the perspective of understanding, the negativity of the incomprehensible can be understood only as a boundary line, not as fundamentally determinative in itself. Without meaning it is impossible even to speak of nonsense and meaninglessness.

## 5. Contradiction and Conflict

The possibilities of understanding outlined can be divided into two lines of thought that recur in the history of thinking about negativity and can be summarized as a *semantic contradiction* and as *empirical conflict*. Kant was one of the first to make a systematic and clear distinction between contradiction and conflict or opposition in this sense. In his treatise, *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (1763), he differentiates *logical opposition* or contradiction from *real opposition* without contradiction,<sup>5</sup> and he further subdivides the latter into *oppositio actualis* and *oppositio potentialis*.

So far I have merely considered the grounds of real opposition, in so far as they *actually* posit in one and the same thing determinations, of which one is the opposite of the other. A case in point would be the motive forces of one and the same body which tend in exactly opposite direction; and here the grounds cancel their reciprocal. For this reason, I shall, for the time being, call this opposition *actual opposition* (*oppositio actualis*). On the other hand, to take predicates of the following kind: although they belong to different things and although the one predicate does not immediately cancel the consequence of the other predicate, nonetheless, they may each legitimately be called the negative of the other; and they may be legitimately so called in virtue of the fact that each is so constituted that it is either capable of cancelling the consequence of the other, or it is capable of cancelling something which is determined like that consequence and which is equal to it. This opposition may be called *possible opposition* (*oppositio potentialis*). Both oppositions are real; that is to say, they are both different from logical opposition; both of them are constantly being employed in mathematics, and they both deserve to be employed in philosophy as well.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I. KANT, *Versuch den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen*, A3–A6, AA II, 171–173; “Attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy,” in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770*, trans. D. WALFORD and R. MEERBOTE (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211–213.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, AA II, 192–193; 230–231.

In a purely mathematical sense, the concept of negative magnitude is a mere relative or contrasting concept: “A magnitude is, relative to another magnitude, negative, in so far as it can only be combined with it by means of opposition; in other words, it can only be combined with it so that the one magnitude cancels as much in the other as is equal to itself.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of “real opposition” this is different, since,

real repugnancy only occurs where there are two things, as *positive grounds*, and where one of them cancels the consequence of the other. Suppose that motive force is a positive ground: a real conflict can only occur in so far as there is a second motive force connected with it, and in so far as each reciprocally cancels the effect of the other. [...] The passage of a ship westwards is just as much a positive motion as its passage eastwards; but if we are dealing with one and the same ship, the distances thus covered cancel each other out, either completely or in part.<sup>8</sup>

It follows that, rather than adopting the traditional position, one must describe negative phenomena – or, more precisely: phenomena that are called negative – differently, that is as something which lacks something because something else has deprived it of that something (*privatio*), or as something which is not (yet) what it could be (*defectus*).

A negation, in so far as it is the consequence of a real opposition, will be designated a *deprivation (privatio)*. But any negation, in so far as it does not arise from this type of repugnancy, will be called a *lack (defectus, absentia)*. The latter does not require a positive ground, but merely the lack of such a ground. But the former involves a true ground of the positing and another ground which is opposed to it and which is of the same magnitude. In a body, rest is either merely a lack, that is to say, a negation of motion, in so far as no motive force is present, or alternatively, such rest is a deprivation, in so far as there is, indeed, a motive force present, though its consequence, namely the motion, is cancelled by an opposed force.<sup>9</sup>

Kant thus distinguishes not only between *logical contradiction* and *real opposition* or *conflict*, but also between two forms of real negativity, which he defines more closely as *deprivation (privatio)* or as *lack (defectus, absentia)*. Neither should be confused with formal negation, but are reality phenomena – either something is not what it could and should be (*absentia*), or something cannot be what it is because it is being prevented by a counterforce (*privatio*). For Kant, therefore, *privatio* (conflict as deprivation) and *absentia* (conflict as prevention) are *negativity phenomena* and not *forms of negation*; they are not the results of formal sign operations directed towards the avoidance of contradiction, but rather *negative reality phenomena* or *phenomena of conflict*, which make it clear that something is not what it could and should be, because it has not yet developed its potential or is being prevented from doing so by the opposition of something else.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 174; 214.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 175; 215–216.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 177; 217.

## 6. Determinations of Signs and Determinations of the Signified

This has consequences for our understanding of the negation operation. It operates on and with signs (*non-p*), but it can also indicate negativity or conceal it. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the *determinacy* constituted by separating it from what is other (*p* rather than *q*, *r*, *s*) and the *negation* of what is thus determined (*non-p*): That *p* is not *q*, *r*, *s* or *non-p*, but *p*, is one thing, to negate this *p* is another. Only something that is *something* can be negated. It is only something if it is *determined*. And it is determined only insofar as it is distinguished from something else (as something determined) or from everything else (as fully determined).

But there is a further distinction that has to be taken into account. Insofar as the sign 'p' (a proposition) serves to signify *p* (a state of affairs), a determinacy is likewise introduced at the level of the signified, one which is developed by means of its differences from what is other (the determinacy of the signified). Both these determinacies can, but do not have to, coincide: the system of propositions that determines the sign 'p' and the system of states of affairs that determines *p* are different. Therefore we must distinguish between two inter-related processes of determination: the determination of the sign (propositions) and the determination of the signified (states of affairs). Negation operations can only take place at the level of the sign, so that negation of the signified can only be carried out as a negation operation on the corresponding sign.

Thus, whereas the determination of signs depends on their difference from other signs, the determination of the signified depends on its difference not only from the sign that signifies it, but also from other events or states of affairs that are or can be signified by other signs. The determination of signs (a semiotic process) and the concreteness of reality that is or may be signified (an ontological process) must not be confused. Negation determines signs and is thus an operation in the realm of possibility and meaning. The result may be denied or affirmed to be true in the actual world. But denial or affirmation are events in time that differ from other events or actual states of affairs (facts). They occur in the actual world and may result in conflict or opposition that go beyond mere difference and contradiction in the world of meaning because they concern actualities and not merely possibilities. Negation determines possibilities, negativity also occurs in reality. And since reality comprises both dimensions of possibility and actuality, negativity is both more comprehensive and more powerful than negation.

This has consequences for understanding both negation and negativity. Thus, with respect to negation, Frege contended that the rule of determination implied that for every thought there must be a contradictory thought,

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