

---

## **Sublation (in German 'Aufhebung')**

Kai Froeb, quoting Brinkmann, Dahlstrom, di Giovanni, Geraets, Suchting, Harris, Erdmann and Hegel

**Content**

The meaning of “sublation” as translation of “Aufhebung” . . . . . 3

Quotes (a Reader on “sublation” in the context of Hegel’s Language) . . . . . 4

    Hegel.net’s note to the following quotes . . . . . 4

    Translator’s note from Brinkmann/Dahlstrom 2015 translation of the Enc. Logic . . . . . 5

    Lexical note by Prof. George di Giovanni 2010 to his translation of the Science of Logic . 5

    Note from the comments to the 1991 translation of the Encyclopaedia Logic by Geraets/Suchting/Harris . . . . . 5

    J. E. Erdmann in 1841 on “sublation” . . . . . 7

    The explanation of “sublation” in Hegel’s own words in his Logic . . . . . 7

See also . . . . . 8

## The meaning of “sublation” as translation of “Aufhebung”

One central term of Hegel, the German word “Aufhebung”, is usually translated as “sublation” into English.

In fact, the word “sublation” appeared in the 19th century English literature, only after Hegel and the Hegel School began using “Aufhebung” and translators needed an equivalent. “Aufhebung,” depending on context, was being used to mean simple negation, affirmation, or a simultaneous affirmation/negation. English translators looked to Latin (many English scientific words have Latin roots) and found the word “sublatus” (to take or carry away or lift up); the Latin “sublatus” then became “sublation” in English.

Why did the translators associate “lifting” or “taking away” with the abstract ideas of negation and affirmation?

The entire flow of meaning from the original German word “Aufhebung” arises from its basic associative picture, which in German involves simply lifting something from a lower place to a higher place, such as from the floor or ground into your hand.

However, thinking about this process can bring to mind certain associations and inferences when the word is used:

A. Something lifted from its ground has been thereby taken away. A legal ban may be “lifted” and thus may in effect be done away with (negated).

B. On the other hand, something lifted up may in fact be preserved (saved) for later use. Physically or even spiritually someone may “lift up” a person who has fallen and save him from impending destruction. Here we have affirmation.

C. The picture of something being raised to a higher level can be abstracted and then applied to intellectual constructs. Someone might say, “Let’s take this thesis to a higher level.” This actually happens. For instance, it is now commonly said among physicists that classical (Newtonian) physics has been “sublated” by or within relativistic (Einsteinian) physics. In other words, it has simultaneously been negated (superseded or supplanted) and affirmed (confirmed to be valid, but only within a wider, relativistic context that was not suspected by Newton).

Thus, an older thesis may be done away with (negated) but preserved in part, namely that part that has been shown to be reasonable. A new or wider understanding has emerged from a critique of the old. The “sublation” of a concept or thesis in its broadest conception has reformed its implicit assumptions (and even its antitheses) by both preserving and negating them in a higher thought that includes the truth of subsidiary or partial aspects.

The aspects A and B are [explicitly mentioned by Hegel himself](#), while his pupil and Hegelian Professor of Philosophy J.E. Erdmann was the first one to explicitly mention all three aspects [in his comment of 1841](#).

Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (10th ed.) states that “sublation” means to “negate ... but preserve as a partial element in a synthesis.” This is as close to the philosophical meaning as should be expected from

a common dictionary. Dictionaries, after all, merely report what most writers appear to mean when they use a word.

In order to express the three aspects (A,B,C) mentioned above all together, Hegelians prefer to speak of "Aufhebung" instead of "expansion," "inclusion," "synthesis," "sublimation," "transfiguration", "transfiguration", which all more focus on some aspects or else involve unhelpful additional (and unnecessary) connotations.

BTW, Hegel himself never used the term "synthesis" for the concept of "Aufhebung" discussed here.

(hegel.net 2002, with some minor adjustments in the following years)

## **Quotes (a Reader on "sublation" in the context of Hegel's Language)**

### **Hegel.net's note to the following quotes**

As supplement to the original 2002 hegel.net article, we have compiled for you some major relevant English quotes on the usage of "Aufhebung" in the context of Hegel's Language and how to translate it into English. These are also the major sources used in the hegel.net article above (beyond my general knowledge of the German language and Hegelian Philosophy).

The quotes below are provided in reverse chronological order (newest first, oldest last): first we cite the translator's note from the newest translation of the Enc. Logic by Brinkmann/Dahlstrom of 2015, followed by the latest translation of Hegel's "Science of Logic" by di Giovanni in 2010, then we cite the remarks of the translators of Theodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris philological ambitious new translation of the "Encyclopaedia Logic" of 1991.

We then go on to the original texts in English translation, starting with a quote from the "Logic and Metaphysic" of the Hegelian J.E. Erdmann 1841 and finally going on to the texts of Hegel himself. His notes on sublation in his Encyclopaedia Logic are short and clear, they are here cited according to the Geraets/Suchting/Harris translation. For Hegel's longer discussion of "sublation" in his 1831 "Science of Logic", we use Stirling's 1898 translation in "The Secret of Hegel". While the Geraets/Suchting/Harris translation tries to find consistent translations of Hegel's terminology that best match the use of terms in the English philosophical language in a philological way, Stirling tried to reproduce the use of the German language by Hegel. Both ways have their own merits and disadvantages.

Please note that while we make use of the fair use policy regarding quoting from Brinkmann/Dahlstrom, di Giovanni and Geraets/Suchting/Harris for scientific purpose, their texts are recent and do not fall under the Creative Common Licence used by the other texts of this page as well as for this compilation itself.

(hegel.net 2020)

### **Translator's note from Brinkmann/Dahlstrom 2015 translation of the Enc. Logic**

Finding a suitable English equivalent for *aufheben* is perhaps the most formidable challenge for translators of Hegel's texts. We translate the term with 'sublate', 'sublating' or 'sublation'. The alternative 'supersede' would have had the advantage of conveying much of the technical term's central significance as a process of cancellation, preservation, and elevation at once. However, as Hegel's *aufheben* and *Aufhebung* are themselves non-ordinary terms of art like 'sublate', and since the translation of the *Science of Logic* appearing in this series of Hegel translations chose 'sublate' and 'sublation', we thought it best to opt for 'sublate' and 'sublation' as well.

(Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1, Science of Logic*, Edited and translated by Klaus Brinkmann, Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge University Press 2015, page xvii)

### **Lexical note by Prof. George di Giovanni 2010 to his translation of the Science of Logic**

*Aufheben*, *Aufhebung*. The commonly accepted translations of these terms are "to sublate" and "sublation." These are terms of art which were originally coined by Stirling precisely for the purpose of translating the corresponding German words but have now made their way into the OED. Much as I have tried to replace them with words that are just as common in English as the German equivalents are in German, and having even experimented for a while with Suchting's suggestion of "to suspend" and "suspension," I finally had to give up and return to the traditional translations of "to sublate" and "sublation." The fact is that the only common English word which would somewhat adequately render the double meaning of the German *aufheben* is the lowly "to take up" (which, incidentally, is the translation of the Latin *tollere* from which "to sublate" was coined). "To take something up" means "to take it away" while at the same time to "appropriate it." But "to take" is in English an all too widely used word, and with too many shades of different meanings, to allow the technical narrowing that Hegel has in mind.

(notes from Prof. George di Giovanni added to "Hegel Science of Logic", Cambridge University Press 2010, translated by him)

### **Note from the comments to the 1991 translation of the Encyclopaedia Logic by Geraets/Suchting/Harris**

**Notes by Geraets/Harris** With *aufheben*, there is no problem about the meaning, because Hegel explains the term (in its systematically ambiguous use) as clearly as it can be explained. But there has always been controversy about how it should be rendered. One tradition allows the translator to decide whether the "cancelling" or the "preserving" moment is dominant, and to use a battery of words to render different supposed shades of meaning. But the perfect determinacy of Hegel's logical concept forbids us to take this route (which, being the road of subjective arbitrariness, is a thoroughly bad one in any event). So, for this fundamental name of the logical movement of the Concept, we have had to decide between

“sublation”, an artificial logical word that has virtually *no* meaning, except what Hegel’s explanation and its own context give it, and “suspension”, which is the ordinary word that comes closest to being systematically ambiguous in the right way. *Aufheben* is a very ordinary word in German; the English “put by” has most of the same ambiguity, though without the element of “raising up”. But “put by” would be as alien in logical discourse as “sublate” is in vernacular speech (and about as empty of all obvious meaning). In the end, our majority has decided that even “suspend” is out of place in pure logic. So only “sublate” will be found in our translation.

(“The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze”, translation by Theodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, from the Preface “Introduction: Translation Hegel’s Logic” by W. A. Suchting, page xxvi)

### Notes by Suchting   ”aufheben, (das) Aufheben, Aufhebung

Aufheben (the discussion may be confined to the verb) is an ordinary German word, which (as Hegel explains in § 96 A) has the double meaning of “do away with” and “preserve”. He uses the word in both nontechnical and technical senses. As to the former, the first of the two meanings just listed (e.g., § 119 R) is the usual one. As to the latter, he makes use of both meanings to mark his conception of the way in which one logical category successively does away with and also includes an immediately preceding one.

The present translation does not clearly recognise the distinction between Hegel’s nontechnical and technical uses, rendering *aufheben* as if he always uses it in the second way. If the distinction were to be respected, there would be no difficulty at all about the first, for there are many English words (“cancel”, “abolish”, and so on) that would do the job quite satisfactorily. It is the second, technical use that gives trouble. Since the publication of J. H. Stirling’s *The Secret of Hegel* (1865), the standard English rendering has been “sublate”. Now, according to the OED, the term appears first in English about the mid-sixteenth century, with the meaning “remove”, including removing by destroying. It appears again in nineteenth-century logic books (as early as 1838), where it means “deny”, “contradict”. Stirling simply imposed on it the extra semantic dimension of “include”, “preserve”, for the sole purpose of having an English word with a meaning to match the dual meaning of *aufheben*. So it is clear that this involves the rendering of an ordinary German word by a quite extraordinary English one that by the nineteenth century lived on only in manuals of logic and that as a translation of *aufheben* was completely factitious.

Is there an English word which is both ordinary and also possessed of the dual meaning of the German one? I suggest that “suspend” fills the bill: it is perfectly ordinary and has the dual sense of something’s being put out of action whilst continuing to exist. In addition, it has strong etymological similarities to *aufheben*: *sus-* is a form of *sub-*, which can signify “from below” and consequently “on”, and *pend* is the stem of the verb *pendere*, “hang”, whilst *aufheben* is formed from *auf*, meaning “on”, and *heben*, “lift”. These etymologies reflect logical features of the operation of *aufheben*. A category that is *aufgehoben* “hangs” from the next higher one in the sense of being dependent upon it, having been “lifted” into that position by the dialectical process. The only objection I have heard against this suggestion is that “suspend” has an overtone of temporariness, which *aufheben*, at least in Hegel’s technical use of it, does not. But, on

the one hand, there is nothing incoherent in the idea of something's being suspended indefinitely, and, on the other hand, a category that is *aufgehoben* in Hegel's logic is once more in play when it is abstracted from the larger context in which it has been shown to be a mere "moment", as it regularly is by the "understanding". Even if the objection were judged to be sound, still, taking everything into account, a very good case can be made that "suspend" comes incomparably closer to *aufheben* than "sublate" does, and therefore should be employed in the absence of a better rendering.

("The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze", translation by Theodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, from the Preface "Some minor comments on terminology", page xxxv-xxxvi)

### **J. E. Erdmann in 1841 on "sublation"**

J. E. Erdmann was the first one to explicitly mention the three aspects of "sublation":

"Sublate taken in the threefold sense of tollere, conservare, elevare: hence sublate and degrade at one and the same time."

("Outlines of Logic and Metaphysics" by J.E. Erdmann, trans. B. C. Burt, New York, 1896 [PDF, 12 MB<sup>1</sup>]. The quote can be found in footnote 1 to §34. In the German first edition of 1841 [PDF, 22 MB<sup>2</sup>], it was §33).

### **The explanation of "sublation" in Hegel's own words in his Logic**

Hegel's own explanation of sublation only explicitly mentions two aspects of "sublation":

**Hegel's explanation in the Annotation to §87 of his "Encyclopaedia Logic" of 1830** At this point we should remember the double meaning of the German expression "aufheben". On the one hand, we understand it to mean "clear away" or "cancel", and in that sense we say that a law or regulation is cancelled (*aufgehoben*). But the word also means "to preserve", and we say in this sense that something is well taken care of (*wohl aufgehoben*). This ambiguity in linguistic usage, through which the same word has a negative and a positive meaning, cannot be regarded as an accident nor yet as a reason to reproach language as if it were a source of confusion. We ought rather to recognise here the speculative spirit of our language, which transcends the "either-or" of mere understanding.

("The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze", translation by Theodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, Annotation to §87, page 154)

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://hegel.net/erdmann/Erdmann1896-Outlines\\_of\\_Logic.pdf](https://hegel.net/erdmann/Erdmann1896-Outlines_of_Logic.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://hegel.net/erdmann/Erdmann1841-Logik\\_und\\_Metaphysik-Teil1\\_1ste\\_Auflage.pdf](https://hegel.net/erdmann/Erdmann1841-Logik_und_Metaphysik-Teil1_1ste_Auflage.pdf)

**Hegel's explanation in his "Science of Logic" of 1831** [page 243] The expression Sublation,

Aufheben und das Aufgehobene (das Ideelle), sublation and what is sublated (and so only idéellement, not réelement is), this is one of the most important notions of philosophy, a ground-form which repeats itself always and everywhere, the sense of which is to be exactly apprehended and particularly distinguished from the Nothing (negation). What sublates itself, does not, on that account, become nothing. Nothing is the immediate [directly present to us]; what is sublated, on the other hand, is a mediate, it is a non-beënt — but as result — which set out from a being : it has, therefore, the definite particularity from which it derives still IN itself [impliciter; what anything has in itself, it implies or involves].

Aufheben, To sublata, has two senses, now signifying as much as to preserve, maintain, and again as much as to cause to cease, to make an end of. Even preserving includes the negative in it — this negative, that something, in order to be conserved is removed or withdrawn from its immediacy, from an existency open to external influences. What is sublated or resolved is thus, at the same time, preserved ; it has only lost its immediacy, but it is not on that account annihilated. The two characters of sublation just stated, may be described lexikalisch as two significations of the word.

It is striking to find language using the same word for two contradictory predicables. To speculative thought, [page 244] it is gratifying to find words which have a speculative meaning in themselves. The German language has a considerable number of these.

The double meaning of the Latin tollere (which the Ciceronian wit — tollendum esse Octavium — has made notorious) is more circumscribed, its affirmative character amounting only to a lifting-up. A thing is sublated, resolved, only so far as it has gone into unity with its opposite ; in this more particular sense, as what is reflected, it may be fitly named moment.

Weight, and distance from a point, are called, with reference to the Lever, its mechanical moments, because of the identity of their effect, not- withstanding their diversity otherwise ] the one being, as it were, the real of a weight, and the other the ideal or ideel of a line, a mere character of space (See Encycl. Hegel, 3d edn., § 261, Remark).

The remark must often occur to be made, that philosophy uses Latin expressions for reflected characters, either because the mother-tongue has not such as are required, or if having them, as here, because they remind more of what is immediate, while the foreign tongue suggests rather what is reflected.

(Hegel 1831: Science of Logic, Voll. Translated by James Hutchison Stirling, in "The Secret of Hegel", quoted here by the 2nd, revised, edition (1898), page 243-244 [searchable PDF, 85 MB<sup>3</sup>]. The quote is taken from Hegel's remarks on the "sublation of becoming").

## See also

- <https://itself.blog/2007/12/02/a-question-on-the-translation-of-the-hegelian-aufhebung/> has a very interesting thread on how to translate "aufheben" into English and its history.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://hegel.net/stirling/Stirling1898-The-Secret-Of-Hegels-2nd-edition.pdf>