

Chapter Fourteen

Being, Nothing, and Becoming

Part 3 of this study provides a commentary on and discussion of the text contained in part 2. The issues addressed by Hegel in the introductory essay presented in chapter 9—“With What Must the Science Begin?”—have already been extensively considered in part 1. The following chapters will thus concentrate on the main text of the *Logic* presented in chapters 10 to 13. My hope is that what I have to say here will help readers to understand both the specific details and the broader philosophical relevance of Hegel’s arguments.

From Being to Becoming

One might think that philosophy ought to begin with the concept of “beginning” itself. Yet for Hegel such a concept is, paradoxically, too complex to serve as the real beginning of thought. The concept of “beginning” (*Anfang*) is that of “a nothing from which something is to proceed” (*SL* 73/1: 73 [181]). It thus takes for granted from the start that what is being thought is the beginning *of* something yet to emerge. At the start of philosophy, however, we cannot assume that there will be anything beyond what we start with. We cannot assume, therefore, that what we start with is in fact the *beginning* of anything further. All we may understand there to be is sheer indeterminate being, which may or may not prove later to be, or to have been, the beginning of something more.

Hegel’s account of being begins not with a full sentence but with a sentence fragment: “*being, pure being, without any further determination*” (*SL* 82/1: 82 [193]). In this way, Hegel indicates through his language that what we are to focus on is not a determinate subject of discourse or “thing” nor a predicate of some assumed thing (such as the “Absolute”) but rather utterly indeterminate being. Such being is to be thought of not as existence or nature but as sheer being as such—what Hegel calls “indeterminate immediacy.” As we saw in chapter 4, these words are intended by Hegel to bring to mind not the explicit *negation* of determinacy or mediation but being that is *indeterminately immediate*. Such being is so indeterminate, indeed, that it has no “determination” or “content” of its own that would set it in explicit contrast to anything else. It is not “positivity” in opposition to “negativity” or “actuality” in opposition to “possibility” but pure and simple being.¹

1. See Hegel, *SL* 93/1: 96.

Such being is abstract, but it is not a mere illusion for Hegel as it is, for example, for Nietzsche. On the contrary, it is sheer *immediacy* itself. It is the least we can understand thought to be and the least we can understand there to be at all. Such being is that with which we are most familiar but which we rarely, if ever, reflect upon: the sheer *isness* of things, here considered by itself in abstraction from all relation to things or anything else as sheer, indeterminate being.

At this point, Hegel confronts us with the first of many surprising paradoxes: for he maintains that by virtue of its utter indeterminacy pure being is actually no different from *nothing* at all: “being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing* (*Nichts*), and neither more nor less than *nothing*” (*SL* 82/1: 83 [195]). Of all Hegel’s statements in the *Logic*, this is the one that has perhaps invited the most ridicule and elicited the greatest misunderstanding. In Hegel’s view, however, it is trivially true: pure being is utterly indeterminate and vacuous and as such is completely indistinguishable from sheer and utter nothingness. This is not to say that we are wrong to talk of pure being in the first place. There is being; it is all around us and is, minimally, pure and simple *being*, whatever else it may prove to be. Insofar as it is *pure* being, however, it is so utterly indeterminate that logically it vanishes into nothing. Presuppositionless philosophy is thus led by being itself to the thought of its very opposite.

This nothing that pure, indeterminate being itself proves to be is not just the nothingness to which we frequently refer in everyday discourse. We often say that there is “nothing” in the bag or “nothing” on television when what we mean is that the specific things we desire are not to be found and what there is is not what we are interested in. Such everyday nothingness is merely the absence of this or that specific thing (say, a ball), that is at the same time the presence of something else (say, the air). By contrast, the nothingness Hegel has in mind in the *Logic* is the absolute “lack” or “absence” of anything at all, or sheer and utter nothing. It is not even the pure void of space or the empty form of time, but is *nothing whatsoever*: “*nothing, pure nothing. . . .* complete emptiness, absence of all determination and content,” or what Hegel also refers to as the sheer “not” (*SL* 82–83/1: 83–4 [195]).

Hegel maintains, however, that such absolute, radical nothingness has its own immediacy. After all, it *is* sheer and utter nothingness and as such *is* intelligible to thought. Nothingness is, indeed, nothing but the sheer *immediacy* of nothingness itself; there is nothing else to it. As this immediacy, Hegel contends, it is indistinguishable from pure indeterminate *being*. This is not to say that we are mistaken to think of it as nothing in the first place. Pure nothing is *nothing whatsoever*, but it is so purely and immediately nothing that it vanishes logically *into* empty immediate being. Just as pure being vanishes logically into nothing, therefore, pure nothing equally vanishes logically back into being. This means, of course, that pure being and pure nothing not only vanish but also prove to be ineliminable since each one disappears into, and so immediately re-views, the other.

Unpalatable though it may be to some, the unavoidable conclusion to which presuppositionless logic leads us is that “*pure being* and *pure nothing* are . . . the same” because both are equally indeterminate and vacuous (SL 82/1: 83 [195]). Yet Hegel also insists that being and nothing are not simply the same but are immediately different from one another: being is *being*, and nothing is *nothing*. As such, Hegel tells us, they are “absolutely distinct” (*absolut unterschieden*) (SL 83/1: 83 [195]).² They do not just constitute one and the same indeterminacy, therefore, but form *two* radically different indeterminacies whose difference is, however, indeterminable. The fact that being and nothing are indistinguishable in their immediate difference is evident in their immediate *disappearance* into one another. On the other hand, the fact that they are immediately different in their indistinguishability is evident in the immediate disappearance of each into the *other*. In Michael Rosen’s words, they are “non-identical indiscernibles.”³

Being and nothing are utterly different from one another but collapse logically into one another because of the indeterminate immediacy of their difference. Since each one collapses into the *other*, however, each proves, as I noted above, to be ineliminable and irreducible. Yet each one proves to be irreducible precisely *as* vanishing into the other. The recognition of this fact brings about a subtle but important shift in the way being and nothing are to be thought. For we can now no longer say simply that being and nothing vanish into one another, but we have to understand each one to be nothing but its own vanishing or collapse. They do not just *disappear* into the other but *are* such disappearing.

Being and nothing thus both prove to be absolutely necessary and to be endlessly generated by one another. Yet neither has a separate stable identity apart from its vanishing since logically each vanishes straight away into the other. This vanishing that each one is is its own utter *indeterminacy*—indeterminacy now understood not just as sheer *being* or *nothing* but as radical instability and fluidity. The name Hegel gives to this “immediate vanishing of the one in the other” is *becoming* (*Werden*). Pure indeterminate being is not just being or nothing, therefore, but becoming; nothing, in turn, cannot just be sheer and utter nothing but must also be its own vanishing, or becoming.

Presuppositionless philosophy has to begin with sheer being, but it evidently cannot stop there because sheer being immediately proves to be not just being but becoming. This is not to say that it is now wrong to talk of “being.” Being *is*; it is—or, rather, proves to be—absolutely irreducible. What Hegel’s philosophy shows, however, is that logically, purely by virtue of being “being,” being turns out to be “becoming.” Becoming is thus what being is *in truth*: immediacy as the restless vanishing and reemergence of itself.

2. See Hegel, *EL* 141/188 (§88).

3. Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and Its Criticism*, p. 152.

Misunderstandings

The opening of the *Logic* is remarkably simple, but it has met with considerable misunderstanding and so evidently needs further clarification. The first thing to note is that Hegel's account of pure being is both conceptual and ontological. It shows that the bare thought of being mutates into the thought of becoming *and* that being itself turns out to be becoming. The fact that the *Logic* advances an ontological thesis does not mean, however, that it describes a temporal or historical process. As finite beings, we must unfold in time all that being entails and so must think first of being, then of nothing, and then of becoming. In so doing, however, we are not claiming that pure being itself vanishes and develops into becoming *over time*. We are claiming that pure being proves to be *logically* or *structurally* unstable—that it turns out logically to be nothing but vanishing and becoming.⁴

Hegel's *Logic* unfolds what it means and is to be, not just what *we* understand being to be. In the process, it demonstrates that pure being itself entails further, more complex structures or determinations, but it does not show that being leads over time to such determinations. Later in Hegel's system—for example, in the philosophy of history—we will learn that there are in fact developments in time (such as the emergence of consciousness) that are codetermined by the logical character of being. The task of the *Logic*, however, is not to describe such temporal developments but simply to lay out before us all that being logically must be.

In moving from being to nothing and back again in thought, we are certainly thinking in time, but what we are thinking is the *logical* collapse of being and nothing into one another and the corresponding *logical* transformation of each into becoming. In other words, we are setting out the logical “history” of being. Logically, being proves not just to be being after all but to be becoming; becoming, accordingly, is nothing but the structural instability that being immediately proves to be. Later in the *Logic* and in the *Philosophy of Nature*, being gradually shows itself to be much more determinate—to be the realm of finite things in space—and in the process, becoming mutates into the temporal coming-to-be and passing-away of such things. At the moment, however, we do not have temporal change and development in mind. All we have in view is sheer indeterminate becoming as such, or being as utter instability.

In the *Logic*, being and nothing are initially pure and indeterminate, but they soon prove to be much more determinate and complex than mere *being* and *nothing* (or becoming). Being will mutate logically into reality, being-something, actuality, and ultimately, space, whereas nothing, or the simple “not,” will mutate into negation, otherness, negativity, and ultimately, time. In each one, however,

4. See D. Duquette, “Kant, Hegel, and the Possibility of a Speculative Logic,” in *Essays on Hegel's Logic*, p. 8.

being and nothing as such will be preserved. “Nowhere in heaven or on earth,” Hegel writes, “is there anything which does not contain within itself both being and nothing” (*SL* 85/1: 86). Indeed, every further determination of being and nothing will simply be a more complex and intimate interrelation *between* being and nothing.

The key to understanding Hegel’s *Logic* is to distinguish carefully what is true of being *qua* pure *being* from what is true of, for example, being *qua* reality or being-something and to avoid reducing one category or determination of being to another. There will clearly be structural affinities between such determinations since less determinate ones are contained in more determinate ones, but there will also be significant differences that are not to be overlooked.⁵

To be finite, as we will see later, is to cease to be. Finitude thus incorporates into its structure the vanishing of immediate being into nothing. Yet to be finite involves more than simply *being* and its vanishing. Over and above sheer being, finitude entails being “something” in relation to “others” and being subject to “change.” Thus, although all finite things are destined to pass away by virtue of the fact that they *are* at all, there is a clear determinable difference between their structure as existing things and their nonexistence. Being a finite thing is definitely not the same as utter nothingness.

Sheer indeterminate being is, however, logically indistinguishable from nothingness. Or, rather, there is an immediate difference between pure being and pure nothing that is indeterminable and so immediately evanesces. We can say of pure being, therefore, that it is identical to nothingness because pure being considered by itself is quite indeterminate. But we cannot say of finite things that they are just nothing or that their existence and nonexistence are indistinguishable because finitude has a determinate logical structure that is clearly different from that of pure nothingness.

In Hegel’s view, it is the failure to respect this difference that often prompts people to pour scorn on the beginning of the *Logic*. For readers all too often assume that Hegel is equating the being and nonbeing of concrete, *determinate* things. According to Hegel, such readers draw the following facile conclusion: “being and non-being (*Nichtsein*) are the same, therefore it is the same whether this house is or not, whether these hundred dollars are part of my fortune or not.” As Hegel notes, however,

this inference from, or application of, the proposition [that being and nothing are the same] completely alters its meaning. The proposition contains the pure abstractions of being and nothing; but the application converts them into a determinate being and a determinate nothing. But, as we have said, the question here is not of determinate being. (*SL* 85–6/1: 87)

5. See Hegel, *SL* 840/2: 569.

Hegel's point is that utterly *indeterminate* being is logically indistinguishable from—though also irreducible to—sheer nothingness. He is not claiming that existing things cannot be distinguished from nonexistent things or that it makes no difference to me whether I exist or not. He is highlighting the slippery, evanescent character of indeterminate immediacy as such, not denying the reality of *determinate* objects. As we shall see, all determinate things share in the slipperiness of indeterminate being to some extent since they are modes of being; for this reason, they are subject to negation, destruction, and death. But what they are is not exhausted by such indeterminacy since they are also concrete determinate things with a definite logical and, indeed, empirical character. Those who mock Hegel for denying the clear difference between the existence and nonexistence of determinate things are thus themselves guilty of blurring distinctions because they fail to distinguish between the logical character of pure being as such and that of determinate being. Indeed, Hegel's critics fail to notice—or mischievously choose to ignore—that at the start of the *Logic* Hegel cannot possibly be erasing the distinction between the existence and nonexistence of determinate things because he has not yet demonstrated that pure being actually entails any determinacy at all.⁶

Hegel and Nothing

Another charge that might conceivably be leveled at Hegel—although he does not mention it himself—is that he is a nihilist for whom all there “is” is *nothing*. According to this view, when Hegel asserts that pure being is nothing, he is not telling us anything about being as such but is replacing the *fiction* of “being” with the true idea of sheer and utter nothingness. He is saying that there never is any being to begin with but that ultimately there only ever “is” nothingness. To my mind, this is not, and cannot be, Hegel's position. When he states that being is in fact nothing, he is not denying that there is any being in the first place. On the contrary, he is affirming that there *is* being, but he is pointing out that insofar as it is utterly indeterminate and immediate, being vanishes logically into nothing. Yes, we are brought to consider nothingness—sheer and utter nothingness without any trace of being at all. But we are brought to consider such nothingness by the indeterminacy of pure, immediate *being*. Hegel is thus not a nihilist who rejects the very idea of being but an ontologist—albeit one of a highly original kind. Moreover, Hegel's ontology does not merely run aground on the sandbank of nothingness because sheer and utter nothingness itself proves to be indeterminate being. Being is thus actually irreducible and so does not just vanish into nothing but proves logically to *be* its own vanishing or becoming.

6. On this misunderstanding of Hegel, see Harris, *An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel*, p. 97; Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, pp. 137–8; and J. M. E. McTaggart, *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), pp. 15–16.

Hegel's apparent "nihilism" actually turns out to be a stage in the logical transformation of being into becoming.

This is not to say that Hegel interprets nothingness from the start as a mode of being. The nothing Hegel has in mind is absolute nothingness—no space, no time, no "presence," no determinacy, no "things," no *being* whatsoever but the pure and utter *not*. By virtue of its very purity and *immediacy* as sheer nothingness, however, such nothingness is itself indistinguishable from indeterminate being. It, too, is, logically, the vanishing of itself into its absolute other. So even if Hegel were a total nihilist and completely rejected the very idea of being, he could not remain one, because nothingness would itself slip ineluctably into being and make him an ontologist.

An important consequence of this dialectical slippage of nothing into being, as Cynthia Willett and George Cave have both pointed out, is that speculative philosophy could just as easily have begun with nothing as with being.⁷ Hegel begins with being because what is left once all our presuppositions have been suspended is the sheer being of thought itself—thought *as* sheer being. It turns out, however, as Cave notes, that "Being has no ontological priority over Nothing," because "Being and Nothing vanish *immediately* into one another."⁸ We could, therefore, have begun with nothing, as Hegel himself states: "that . . . the beginning should be made with nothing (as in Chinese philosophy), need not cause us to lift a finger, for before we could do so this nothing would no less have converted itself into being" (*SL* 99–100/1: 105 [197]). I stress that this is *not* because Hegel has loaded the dice in favor of being from the start. The nothingness that Hegel considers in the *Logic* is sheer nothingness without a trace of being whatsoever. By virtue of its utter purity as *nothing*, however, such absolute nothingness proves to have an *immediacy* of its own and so to be indeterminate being. Nihilism thus converts itself into ontology, whether it wishes to or not, through its insistence on its own purity.

An Immediate, Indeterminate, but Ineliminable Difference

As I have noted, Hegel's opening analysis of being and nothing is quite simple: pure being is so indeterminate that it is nothing at all, and nothing is so purely and immediately negative that it is being. The principal difficulty confronting the reader of this simple dialectical account is that being and nothing have no stable, determinate identity but shimmer with irreducible duplicity. We are used to—or at least believe we are used to—a world of stable, identifiable objects. It is thus hard for us to get our minds around the dialectical shimmering and flickering of pure being and nothing. Yet if Hegel is right, being and nothing as such

7. C. Willett, "The Shadow of Hegel's *Science of Logic*," in *Essays on Hegel's Logic*, p. 88, and G. P. Cave, "The Dialectic of Becoming in Hegel's Logic," *The Owl of Minerva* 16, 2 (Spring 1985): 157.

8. Cave, "The Dialectic of Becoming in Hegel's Logic," p. 159.

are nothing but this shimmering. This is not to say that Hegel believes the whole world of nature and history keeps slipping in and out of being as if someone were switching existence on and off like a light. But Hegel does believe that pure being and pure nothing vanish logically into one another, and as we shall see, he believes that such restless vanishing constitutes a moment of, though does not exhaust, the world of finite, determinate things.

In order to comprehend this unstable indeterminacy of being and nothing, one must recognize that they are ineliminably *different* and that each one vanishes into its *other*. As several commentators have pointed out, *being* and *nothing* are not just two words for the same thing or thought but are two *different* determinations.⁹ The significant point, however, is that the difference between them is utterly immediate and is not further specifiable or determinable because they are both indeterminate. As Hegel remarks, “if being and nothing had any determinateness by which they were distinguished from each other then . . . they would be determinate being and determinate nothing, not the pure being and pure nothing that here they still are.” The difference between being and nothing thus cannot be stated or defined but can only be “meant” (*gemeint*) (SL 92/1: 95).¹⁰

Günther Maluschke concludes from this that there is no intrinsic *logical* difference between being and nothing at all but that their difference is “extra-logical,” or formed by subjective opinion (*Meinen*) alone.¹¹ To my mind, however, this is not Hegel’s position. It is true that he maintains that the difference between being and nothing “exists (*besteht*) not in themselves but in a third, in subjective *opinion*” (SL 92/1: 95). As I understand Hegel, however, what he is claiming is that there is no definite, stable difference between being and nothing in themselves and that only subjective opinion can keep them clearly apart. This is quite compatible with the claim that being and nothing are themselves logically—though unstably and indeterminably—different. Indeed, as we have seen, Hegel insists explicitly that they are “absolutely distinct,” and elsewhere he calls them “incompatibles” (*Unverträgliche*) (SL 83, 91/1: 83, 94 [195]).

Hegel’s position, as I understand it, is that there is an immediate *logical* difference between being and nothing—being is being and nothing is nothing—but that this difference just as immediately vanishes, only to reemerge as it vanishes. This disappearing difference cannot be defined, but it can be *meant* or, one might even say, *intuited*. Hegel thus cannot be accused of utterly eliminating even the difference between pure being and pure nothing, let alone that between concrete existence and nonexistence. What he invites us to think is an irreducible difference that vanishes the moment it is thought—the moment it *is*—

9. See, for example, Johnson, *The Critique of Thought*, p. 19, and Pöggeler, ed. *Hegel*, p. 80.

10. Miller’s translation has “fancied or imagined” for *gemeint*.

11. G. Maluschke, *Kritik und absolute Methode in Hegels Dialektik (Hegel-Studien Beiheft 13)* (1974) (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1984), p. 163.

because it is simply immediate and indeterminate. The lesson for the rest of the *Logic* will be that any difference that is not just to vanish will have to be more than just immediate.

The Transition from Being to Nothing

In the paragraph on becoming Hegel says of both being and nothing that “each immediately *vanishes in its opposite*” (*SL* 83/1: 83 [195]). Yet at the start of the same paragraph, he writes that “being—does not pass over but has passed over—into nothing, and nothing into being” (*daß das Sein in Nichts und das Nichts in Sein—nicht übergeht, sondern übergegangen ist*). Is there a contradiction between the use of the present and perfect tenses in these two sentences? Is Hegel both affirming and denying that there is an actual transition from being to nothing and back again? I believe not. What the remark at the beginning of the paragraph indicates is that the transition is in each case *immediate*. There is not first being and then later the vanishing of being into nothing, but pure being vanishes immediately—and so *has* vanished—the moment it is thought, indeed the moment it *is*. As Gadamer puts it, “being and nothing exist solely as passing over or as transition itself, as Becoming.”¹² If, Hegel writes, there are those “who are reluctant to recognize either one or the other as only a *transition* (*Übergehen*) of the one into the other,” then “let them state *what* it is they are speaking of, that is, put forward a *definition* of being and nothing and demonstrate its correctness” (*SL* 92/1: 96). Hegel is confident, however, that this challenge cannot be met.

By virtue of being pure transition into the other, being and nothing are both *becoming*. As Alan White notes, “what is thought in ‘Becoming’ is precisely the movement from Being to Nothingness and from Nothingness to Being.”¹³ Yet Michael Theunissen points out that Hegel appears to draw a distinction between the ideas of “transition” and “becoming.”¹⁴ Hegel states that “*transition* (*Übergehen*) is the same as becoming (*Werden*) except that in the former the two [being and nothing], from one of which transition is made to the other, are pictured (*vorgestellt*) more as resting outside one another, the transition taking place *between* them” (*SL* 93/1: 97).¹⁵ In these lines, however, Hegel is not denying that the transition of being and nothing into one another constitutes becoming. He is simply warning his readers that, unlike the word “becoming,” the word “transition” can seduce us into misconstruing the movement at issue as one between two quite *separate* and enduring categories. For Hegel, there can be no such transition “between” being and nothing precisely because neither is anything apart from the transition into the other. This transition, or movement, that being and nothing

12. Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, p. 89.

13. White, *Absolute Knowledge*, p. 37.

14. Theunissen, *Sein und Schein*, p. 119.

15. Translation revised.

each is is all that Hegel means by “becoming.” Becoming is thus not actually distinct from transition at all but is simply “this movement (*Bewegung*) of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other” (*SL* 83/1: 83 [195]).

I should add that the fact that being and nothing both vanish in this way does not mean that they are in any sense unthinkable. Hegel is not asserting that both vanish *before* they can even be thought. He is claiming that they can and must be thought since they are both ineliminable, but that logically what they are thought to be, and what they *are*, is nothing but their *vanishing*. The fact that they vanish the moment they are thought does not demonstrate that their immediacy somehow eludes our grasp. Rather, it reveals that logically the immediacy of the one *is* its own vanishing into the equally vanishing immediacy of the other. Logically, pure being *is* nothing but its vanishing and so *is* nothing but becoming, and the same is true of sheer and utter nothing.

Why Do Being and Nothing “Move”?

One common misunderstanding of the *Logic* is that it describes not the logical movement of being and nothing—or of the categories of being and nothing—themselves but the *experience* undergone by the philosopher as he or she endeavors to render each one intelligible. On this reading of the *Logic*, being does not itself vanish logically into nothing. What happens is simply that *we* inevitably move from thinking of being to thinking of nothing when we try to bring pure being into focus. The origin of this kind of misreading is to be found in the work of Schelling, Trendelenburg, and Kierkegaard.

Schelling insists that Hegel’s attribution of immanent movement to pure being “means no more . . . than that the *thought* which begins with pure being feels it is impossible for it to stop at this most abstract and empty thing of all.” For Schelling, as I suggested in chapter 3, “the compulsion to move on” in the *Logic* does not derive from pure being itself; it “has its basis only in the fact that thought is already used to a more concrete being . . . and thus cannot be satisfied with that meagre diet of pure being in which only content in the abstract but no determinate content is thought.” He concludes from this that “the concept [of being] for its own part would lie completely immobile if it were not the concept of a thinking subject,” that is, if it were not thought by such a subject.¹⁶

Kierkegaard also takes the view that concepts do not move by themselves and calls Hegel’s introduction of movement into logic “a sheer confusion of logical science.” With a noticeably raised eyebrow, Kierkegaard remarks that “it is surely strange to make movement fundamental in a sphere where movement is unthinkable; and to make movement explain logic, when as a matter of fact logic cannot explain movement.”¹⁷ Kierkegaard’s source for this apparent truism is not

16. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 138.

17. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 99–100.

Schelling but Trendelenburg. Trendelenburg insists that he takes Hegel very seriously. He maintains, however, that “he who is strict enough to hold the presuppositionless dialectic of pure thought to its word, and really attempts to proceed without any presupposition and purely, soon sees that it remains immovable and that its productions are still-born.” Concepts move in the *Logic* only because Hegel smuggles in a principle derived from nature—that of “local motion”—and uses it to animate the categories artificially. Without importing this principle, Trendelenburg argues, “thought would not move from its place.”¹⁸ Trendelenburg does not share Schelling’s specific explanation for the movement of categories in the *Logic*, but he agrees that those categories move, or appear to move, only because of the way they are thought by the philosopher, not because of any logical feature of their own.

In my view, nothing in the text of the *Logic* supports Trendelenburg’s claim. Nor is there any evidence to back up Schelling’s assertion that the speculative philosopher moves from pure being to other categories because of some nostalgia for the concreteness of life that is missing from the thought of pure being. There appears, however, to be some evidence to support the general view that speculative logic is moved from one category to another by the activity of the philosopher rather than the categories themselves. At one point in the *Logic*, Hegel writes that it is *reflection* (*Reflexion*) that “declares” being to be nothing and so “equates” the two categories (*SL* 99/1: 104 [195]). This seems at least to suggest that we move from the thought of pure being to that of nothing only because reflection *experiences* pure being as vacuous, not because pure being logically converts itself into nothing.

Wolfgang Wieland interprets the “move” from being to nothing along these lines. According to him, the category of pure being turns out to be something other than it purports to be “when one makes use of it or even thematizes it.” The opening move of the *Logic* thus presupposes “that one has undertaken the attempt to determine pure being. Only as a result of this attempt does the category of nothing offer itself to the systematic progression.”¹⁹ Without this effort on the part of the philosopher to employ or render determinate and intelligible the category of being, it would seem that that category would forever remain that of pure being.

As Henrich has pointed out, however, any reading that understands the move from being to nothing to be prompted by the activity of the philosopher must be mistaken because it turns speculative logic into a *phenomenological* logic—an account of what happens when pure being is thought *by us*, not an account of the logical character of pure being *itself*.²⁰ Hegel states clearly in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* that the categories “investigate themselves” and that dialectic dwells

18. Trendelenburg, *The Logical Question in Hegel’s System*, p. 189.

19. Wieland, “Bemerkungen zum Anfang von Hegels Logik,” p. 201, my translation.

20. Henrich, “Anfang und Methode der Logik,” p. 82.

“within” them (*EL* 82/114 [§41 Add. 1]). If this is the case, they must be understood to develop or “move” because of their own *logical* character, not because of the way we think of them or experience them. As Henrich puts it, “reflection on their being thought (*Gedachtsein*) cannot count as the moving principle of their progress.”²¹

This is not to deny that thought or reflection has to render explicit and “experience” for itself the dialectic implicit in each category, but this dialectic must be inherent in the categories *themselves*. Reflection does, indeed, “declare” being to be nothing, but it does so only because pure being *itself* vanishes logically into nothing.²² Hegel does not claim merely that our thought slips from one category to another as it tries to render them determinate (as Wieland claims); nor does he assert that our thought passes from one category to another as it struggles to get back to the concreteness of life (as Schelling claims); nor does he simply and arbitrarily import the idea of motion into his treatment of the categories (as Trendelenburg claims). On the contrary, he uncovers the dialectic at the logical heart of being itself.

The Dialectic of Being and Nothing Reexamined

We now have to consider in more detail why exactly pure being does immediately slip away into nothing (and so prove to be nothing but its own vanishing, or “becoming”). The simple answer is that being does so because it is utterly indeterminate. Hegel makes this clear in both the *Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*. In the former, he argues that, since being is “pure indeterminateness and emptiness” “there is *nothing* to be intuited in it” (*SL* 82/1: 82 [193]); in the latter, he confirms this conclusion by stating that “only in this indeterminacy, and because of it, is being *nothing*” (*EL* 139/186 [§87]). To my mind, however, the way in which this argument is often understood by commentators is much more problematic than is generally recognized. Consider the following restatements of Hegel’s argument.

According to Stace’s account:

Being . . . is the highest possible abstraction. . . . Because being is thus utterly empty, it is therefore equivalent to nothing. The thought of nothing is simply the thought of the absence of all determination. When we think of anything we can only think it by virtue of its having this or that determination, size, shape, colour, weight, etc. What has no determinations of any kind is an absolute emptiness, nothing. And because being is by its very definition the absence of all determination, it is nothing.²³

21. Henrich, “Anfang und Methode der Logik,” p. 82.

22. This refines the position set out in Houlgate, “Schelling’s Critique of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*,” p. 123.

23. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, p. 135.

McTaggart argues as follows:

Pure Being, says Hegel . . . has no determination of any sort. Any determination would give it some particular nature, as against some other particular nature—would make it X rather than not-X. It has therefore no determination whatever. But to be completely free of any determination is just what we mean by Nothing. . . . And thus we pass over to the second category.²⁴

Lastly, here is a more recent account of Hegel's argument by Friederike Schick:

The first determination of being is "indeterminacy and emptiness" . . . It does not have difference within itself or with respect to anything else. For thought, however (which is here not yet distinguished from intuition), it is thus—nothing. If thought otherwise means distinguishing, that is, determining, then nothing is to be thought where nothing is given to be determined and distinguished.²⁵

On the surface, these three restatements of Hegel's position seem reasonable and accurate enough: they all say that pure being lacks determination and for that reason is actually nothing at all. Yet, one should note that in each case the argument as it is presented has a very significant condition. For Stace, it is that "when *we* think of anything *we* can only think it by virtue of its having this or that determination." Given this condition, Stace argues, "what has no determinations of any kind is . . . nothing." Schick takes the same condition for granted: "if *thought* otherwise means distinguishing, that is, *determining*, then nothing is to be thought where nothing is given to be determined and distinguished." Accordingly, we are told, being is nothing "for thought" (*für das Denken*). Finally, McTaggart presupposes that "to be completely free of any determination is just what *we* mean by Nothing." On this condition, he contends, "we pass over" from being to nothing. In each case, then, being is nothing only because its utter lack of determination makes it nothing *for us*. It is evident, however, that this way of interpreting Hegel's argument renders the vanishing of being into nothing wholly contingent upon our need for determinacy and our assumption that one can talk of being (rather than nothing) only when such determinacy is encountered. *We* can only think in terms of determinacy, and if we encounter no such determinacy, *we* judge that there is nothing to be thought. For *us*, therefore, pure being cannot but be equivalent to nothing at all.

But this raises the following obvious question: *given this reading*, would be-

24. McTaggart, *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic*, p. 15.

25. F. Schick, *Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik—metaphysische Letztbegründung oder Theorie logischer Formen?* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1994), p. 118, my translation.

ing still vanish into nothing if it were thought by an intelligence that does *not* constantly seek determinacy and assume that an absence of determinacy is the total absence of being, or nothing at all? Surely the answer must be no. For if we were to give up the idea that there is no being without determinacy (as the modern demand for radical self-criticism requires us to do), then there would no longer be any compelling reason to equate pure, *indeterminate* being with the absence of being altogether, or nothing. Being would certainly lack all determination, but this would provide no ground for thinking of it as nothing because we could no longer take it for granted that the absence of determinacy is the absence of being as such. In other words, nothing of *being* would be lost by pointing out that pure being is nothing *determinate*; one would simply be considering being from a different perspective. Pure being would be indeterminate immediacy, and “nothing” would be one and the same being, only now conceived specifically as the absence of determinacy. There would be no vanishing of the one into the other; *we* would simply turn our attention from one to the other and back again.

The interpretations of the opening of the *Logic* provided by Stace, Schick, and McTaggart may seem at first sight to restate accurately Hegel’s argument, but they clearly cannot do so because they make the transition from being to nothing contingent upon *our* habits of thought and so fail to explain why pure being *itself* should vanish logically into nothing. Furthermore, there is a fatal incoherence to the argument as Stace and others present it. For on the one hand, we are required to begin speculative logic with the thought of pure being as such with no further determination. Yet on the other hand, the claim that the absence of determination is nothing whatsoever implies that there is being only where there is determinacy. We are thus able to argue that pure being is nothing only because we simultaneously set aside *and* hold on to the idea that all being entails *determinacy* and so is *determinate* being.

Note that it is not just a matter here of our operating with the idea of indeterminate being yet remaining familiar with the idea that being entails determinacy. As we saw in chapter 4, there is nothing objectionable about retaining such a double perspective, provided that the two perspectives do not both play a role in moving the logic forward.²⁶ The problem with the reading of the *Logic* that I am considering here is that the idea that being is indeterminate *and* the idea that being entails determinacy are both operative in the logical account itself: for pure, indeterminate being is said to be the absence of being—that is, nothing—only by virtue of the fact that it is the absence of determinacy.

To my knowledge, Henrich was the first to note that this manner of interpreting Hegel’s account of being is unsatisfactory. According to Henrich,

this transition [from being to nothing] would not be understood in Hegel’s sense at all, if one tried to interpret it in the following way: We

26. See above, pp. 84–6, 101–2.

first think of the indeterminate immediacy of being. Then we notice (*bemerken*) that we have thought a completely empty immediacy, and we now characterize (*bezeichnen*) this immediacy in virtue of its emptiness as nothing.²⁷

Henrich does not say which commentators he has in mind here, but in my view his point clearly applies to the three I have quoted above.

Now it might be argued that McTaggart, in contrast to Stace and Schick, does not define being *as* the absence of determinacy or *as* empty of content, but just focuses on pure being as such and notes—correctly—that pure being *in fact* lacks determinate content. Little would be gained from pointing this out, however, if the move from being to nothing is still made contingent upon our failure to encounter in pure being the determinate content with which *we* are familiar and which *we* require for there to be more than just nothing. Being and nothing would not disappear of their own accord into one another; rather, our thought would oscillate back and forth between the two as it attends now to the pure immediacy before it and now to that immediacy's emptiness.

Moreover, on this account, being would be excluded by nothingness—and so be understood to vanish—only on the basis of our *assumption* that the absence of determinacy is in fact the absence of being. At the outset of speculative logic, however, this very assumption is meant to be abandoned along with all other assumptions about being and thought. Indeed, only by abandoning it can we think of indeterminate *being* in the first place. As I suggested above, therefore, this problematic reading can explain the dialectical slippage of pure being into nothing only by simultaneously suspending *and* retaining the idea that determinacy is needed for being.

To recapitulate: Hegel's argument at the start of the *Logic* is not, and cannot be, that pure being is nothing because it is defined as lacking—or in fact lacks—the determinacy and concreteness with which *we* are familiar from ordinary experience and which *we* require for there to be an object of thought. Such an argument cannot be Hegel's because it makes the move from being to nothing depend wholly on *our* assumption that the absence of all determinateness or content leaves us with nothing. Hegel, by contrast, argues that pure being vanishes into nothing through its *own* indeterminacy, quite independently of any assumptions we might make. But how exactly are we to understand this vanishing? Why does it occur?

Being vanishes into nothing, according to Hegel, because it is so indeterminate in itself that logically *it is not even the pure being that it is* and so is in fact the absence of being. Pure being vanishes, in other words, not because it fails to meet our standard of intelligibility or because it is experienced by us as nothing but because its own utter indeterminacy prevents it logically from even being

27. Henrich, "Anfang und Methode der Logik," pp. 87–8.

pure and simple being. Hegel makes this particularly clear in these lines from the *Logic*: “because being is devoid of all determination whatsoever (*das Bestimmungslose*), it is not the (affirmative) determinateness which it is; it is not being but nothing” (*SL* 99/1: 104 [195–7]). This, then, is the *logical* reason why pure being vanishes—one that is independent of the way in which we may or may not experience such being. Hegel does not deny that at the beginning of the *Logic* we have to hold fast the thought of pure being in its sheer immediacy; pure being does not just jump up from nowhere and confront us.²⁸ He insists, however, that logically being dissolves *itself* into nothing through its own purity and indeterminacy and is not merely found by us to be nothing when we try to determine it or render it intelligible.

Note that the transition from being to nothing occurs *immediately*. It is not mediated by any comparison we might make between pure being and “what we mean by nothing”; nor does pure being harbor within itself a distinct, identifiable “ground,” “cause,” or “condition” of nothingness.²⁹ Being vanishes immediately into nothing because the very indeterminacy of being *itself* means that logically being is not even the being it is. As Hegel puts it, “because *being* is posited only as immediate, therefore *nothing* emerges (*bricht hervor*) in it only immediately” (*SL* 99/1: 104).³⁰

On this reading, it should be noted, nothingness is not merely the absence of being by virtue of being the “absence of all determination”—a position that conflates being and determinacy. Nothingness is, rather, the *immediate* absence of being as such; it is the sheer lack of being into which pure being itself immediately vanishes. It is, as Hegel says, quite simply “not being, but nothing” (*SL* 99/1: 104 [197]).³¹ McTaggart takes the alternative view of Hegelian nothingness that I reject. According to him, Hegel “means by Not-Being, as he meant by Nothing, not the mere denial of Being, but the assertion of the absence of all determination.”³² In support of McTaggart’s interpretation one could point out that Hegel does say of pure being that it is nothing because “just as little is anything (*etwas*) to be thought in it” as intuited (*SL* 82/1: 83 [193]). The problem, however, is that equating “nothing” with the absence of “anything” or “something” makes it difficult to think of pure being as vanishing purely by itself—without any reference to any other category—into nothingness.

28. As we saw in chapter 3, it is the understanding (*Verstand*) that holds fast to the thought of pure being at the start of the *Logic*; see above, p. 65.

29. See Hegel, *SL* 103/1: 109, and Henrich, “Anfang und Methode der Logik,” p. 88.

30. See also Burbidge, *On Hegel’s Logic*, p. 39.

31. This is made particularly clear in the first edition of the *Science of Logic*. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band: Die Objektive Logik (1812/1813)*, eds. F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 11 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1978), p. 53: “das Nichts ist hier die reine Abwesenheit des Seyns [Seins]” (“nothing is here the pure absence of being”).

32. McTaggart, *A Commentary on Hegel’s Logic*, p. 16.

On the one hand, if nothing is understood primarily as the absence of something and for that reason is taken to be the absence of being, then being is effectively equated with being-*something*. But if this is the case, then there can be no pure *being* that is not something in the first place, and so there can be no vanishing of such being into nothing. Rather, one simply has the absence of something that is nothing from the start. On the other hand, we may accept that the absence of something constitutes pure indeterminate *being* just as much as nothing. After all, being is thought as pure and indeterminate at the start of the *Logic* precisely by not being thought of as a “thing.” This means, however, that being does not disappear from view when we point out that it is not “something” or a determinate entity and so call it “nothing.” Such nothingness is simply being, or the “absence of something,” under a different description.

In neither case, then, is pure being actually thought to *vanish*. In the first case, it cannot be thought at all since being is identified with being-something. In the second case, being remains when nothing is thought since nothing is the very same “absence of something” as being. Yet Hegel states clearly and unequivocally that both being and nothing do vanish into their opposites: “their truth is . . . this movement of the immediate vanishing (*Verschwinden*) of the one in the other” (*SL* 83/1: 83 [195]). We can make sense of Hegel’s claim, in my view, only if nothingness is understood not just as the absence of “something” or “determinacy” but as the immediate absence of being as such that is entailed by the sheer indeterminacy of pure being itself. Indeed, on my reading, “nothing” is simply the name we give to the complete and utter *vanishedness* of being. Being is thought, but it is too indeterminate even to be being and so immediately vanishes; what is left is nothing.

This is not to deny that nothingness is indeed the absence of determinacy, or sheer “indeterminacy.” But it is to maintain that nothingness is the absence of determinacy (and of finitude, quantity, content, space, and so on) because it is the absence of being as such, *not the other way around*. Accordingly, when Hegel says that pure being is “pure indeterminateness and emptiness” and so is nothing, he means not only that pure being lacks determinacy (which is perfectly true), but also that it is so indeterminate in itself that logically it is not actually *being* at all. For this reason, Hegel concedes, “should it be held more correct to oppose to being, *non-being* (*Nichtsein*) instead of nothing, there would be no objection to this so far as the result is concerned, for in *non-being* the relation to *being* is contained” (*SL* 83/1: 84 [195]). The important point is that nothingness should not just be conceived as “the nothing of a particular something” (*das Nichts von irgend Etwas*) but as the absence of all being whatsoever.

Having said this, Henrich is right to note that at the start of the *Logic* nothingness may not actually be conceived as the *explicit* negation of being—as *Nicht-sein*—because this would turn nothingness into a mediated category constituted by its opposition to another and so would make of it more than *simple*

nothingness.³³ Nothingness *is*, indeed, the absence of being. Yet it may not be defined as such because to do so would be to include being in nothing as excluded by it. Nothingness is the sheer and utter absence of being, so all reference to being must be absent from it. Consequently, it must be understood purely and simply as *nothing*. “We are concerned first of all,” Hegel writes, “not with the form of opposition . . . but with the abstract, immediate negation: nothing, purely on its own account (*das Nichts rein für sich*), negation devoid of any relations—what could also be expressed if one so wished merely by ‘not’ (*Nicht*)” (*SL* 83/1: 84 [195]). It is by virtue of such immediacy, of course, that pure nothing immediately vanishes back into being.

The opening dialectic of being in the *Logic* is straightforward, but it harbors various traps for the unwary. Readers need to distinguish carefully between the way in which being and nothing are defined and what they are: they *are* utterly indeterminate, but they are not defined as—and must not be confused with the category of—“in-determinacy” itself. Readers must also distinguish between the way pure being is experienced by the philosopher and the intrinsic logic of pure being itself. If these distinctions are respected, then Hegel’s account of being will be seen to be quite intelligible: pure being immediately vanishes into nothing because it is so pure and indeterminate that logically it is not even the very being it is.

Hegel’s Immanent Critique of the Idea of Purity

Robert Pippin suggests that in beginning with pure being Hegel is only pretending to accept and entertain a concept he actually considers to be impossible. The whole point of German Idealism, Pippin contends, is “the denial of the possibility of immediacy, or an intuitive apprehension of pure being,” so Hegel obviously cannot begin with the successful thought of immediacy or pure being itself. The dialectical move from being to nothing thus does not show us how *being* is to be understood. On the contrary, “the thought of ‘nothing’ is . . . just the thought *that* the thought of being designates no possible object of thought.”³⁴

It should be clear that I do not share this interpretation of the opening of the *Logic*. In my view, Hegel does not implicitly reject the very idea of immediacy or pure being from the start but rather sets out to establish what pure being *is*. The ensuing account demonstrates that logically pure being is not just pure *being* after all but the vanishing of itself into nothing (and back again), or what Hegel calls *becoming*. In the course of this account, however, Hegel reveals what pure being *itself* proves to be and so unfolds its own true nature. In the

33. Henrich, “Anfang und Methode der Logik,” p. 88.

34. Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism*, pp. 183–4.

words of the *Encyclopedia Logic*, the progression from being to nothing to becoming and beyond is “the *going-into-itself* (*Insichgehen*) of being, its own deepening into itself” (*EL* 135/181 [§84]).

The *Logic* thus presents being itself in its immanent logical self-determination. Yet by proving that being is not just pure being but becoming, the *Logic* at the same time provides a thorough critique of the reduction of being to *pure being* by thought. Indeed, by unfolding the truth implicit in being and each subsequent category, Hegel shows how all the categories determine their own limits, reveal their own inadequacies, and so subject themselves to an autonomous, immanent critique. In speculative logic, therefore, “the activity of the forms of thinking, and the critique of them, [are] united within the process of cognition” (*EL* 82/114 [§41 Add. 1]).

The idea that Hegel’s *Logic* combines the presentation and the critique of the categories has been explored most extensively by Michael Theunissen in his seminal and magisterial work, *Sein und Schein*. Theunissen argues that, for Hegel, pure being and nothing lack truth not because they are still “undeveloped determinations” but because they are “unreal, and thus illusory” (*unwirklich, also Schein*).³⁵ On my reading, by contrast, Hegel’s immanent critique does not show pure being to be a mere illusion but reveals pure being rather to be a radical *underdetermination* of being’s true character. Similarly, speculative logic shows that the sheer “not” or nothing is an underdetermination of negation, negativity, and otherness. Hegel’s contention, therefore, is that there *is* being and immediacy but that such being is not *merely* being but also becoming, determinacy, finitude, and so on. Equally, there “is” the not or nothingness, but this not is not *merely* nothing but also determinacy, negation, difference, and so on. Moreover, sheer being and nothing both prove themselves to be more than they immediately are, *through* what they immediately are.

Hegel’s challenge to Parmenides is thus not that the latter clings to the illusion of pure being (as Nietzsche would argue) but that he actually fails to think pure being itself in its utter purity and indeterminacy. By distinguishing sharply between being and nothing and insisting that being is utterly free of negation, Parmenides neglects to attend closely enough to what *being* itself proves to be; for he fails to recognize that being in fact “is not what it should be, if it is not this pure negation, . . . nothing.”³⁶ Hegel claims with startling boldness that any philosopher who insists absolutely that being is simply being and that nothing is simply nothing remains under the spell of Parmenides and subscribes to what Hegel calls “a system of identity” (*SL* 84/1: 85). As I indicated in chapter 2, the dialectic of pure being thus provides a critique not only of Parmenides but of the

35. Theunissen, *Sein und Schein*, p. 100. All translations of passages from Theunissen’s book are my own.

36. Hegel, *VLM* 77, my translation.

whole tradition that he spawned, including most obviously Spinoza. That dialectic also calls into question the familiar conviction that “nothing comes from nothing” and lends support to the Judeo-Christian idea that being is created from nothing. Judaism and Christianity often picture this creation as a specific event in time rather than as an eternal ongoing occurrence. Nevertheless, for Hegel they articulate in an imaginative form the truth that being is always being generated and “created” through negation (*SL* 84/1: 85).

It is important to remember, however, that Hegel is led to his “Judeo-Christian” conception of being and nothing not by any prior assumption that there is a divine creator but by his logical demonstration that pure being and pure nothingness prove to be nothing but their immediate vanishing into one another. Indeed, an important key to Hegel’s dialectic as a whole is the insight that all *purity* is essentially the process of its own disappearance and loss. This is not to say that the idea of pure being is utterly illusory after all. Hegel’s point is more paradoxical and profound than that. His point is that *ultimately* being is *not* pure being or pure immediacy precisely because *insofar as it is* pure and simple being it undermines itself logically and turns out to be the instability of becoming. In Hegel’s view, there *is* immediate being; it is all around us. This being has a character that belongs to it by virtue of the fact that it is purely and simply *being* and nothing else. In being purely what it is, however, being proves paradoxically but logically *not just* to be pure being but to be its own vanishing or becoming. In this respect, Hegel’s speculative analysis comes close to deconstruction, for both call into question the idea of unblemished purity. Hegel does not, however, regard purity as rendered impossible by the differential conditions of its possibility but understands it to undermine itself. In Hegel’s speculative logic, there is nothing *other* than pure being at work. Yet such being constantly undermines, negates, and—as we shall see—“others” itself and so shows that ultimately it is not utterly *pure* being but the complex realm of finitude and nature. Hegel’s critique of unblemished purity is wholly immanent rather than quasi-transcendental and, in my view, is all the more trenchant for that.³⁷

The self-dissolution of pure being could be said to constitute the *tragic* nature of being. Being negates itself simply through being what it is just as heroes and heroines, such as Macbeth and Antigone, destroy themselves through their own actions.³⁸ Ontological tragedy for Hegel is not the brutal incursion of nothingness into being but the conversion or slippage of being and nothing into one another through their own nature and “action.” (As we saw in chapter 2, it is above all the recognition of this “tragic,” dialectical dimension to being that distinguishes Hegel from Plato.)³⁹ This slippage, or dialectical conversion, is not

37. See chapter 5, above.

38. See Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, pp. 198–213, and chapter 20, below, p. 374.

39. See above, pp. 42–3.

driven or determined by any necessity prior to being but is the very *happening* of being itself—the happening that Hegel names “becoming.” In the next chapter we will examine Hegel’s account of becoming more closely and explain why becoming is necessarily the becoming of determinate being.