

Chapter Two

Presuppositionless Thinking

Beginning with Pure Being

By no means does every modern commentator on Hegel accept that he really meant his philosophy to be presuppositionless. Yet it is quite clear from several passages in his texts and from the testimony of his earliest critics that he did. In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, for example, he writes that

All . . . presuppositions or assumptions (*Voraussetzungen oder Vorurteile*) must equally be given up when we enter into the Science, whether they are taken from representation or from thinking; for it is this Science, in which all determinations of this sort must first be investigated, and in which their meaning and validity like that of their antitheses must be [re]cognised. . . . Science should be preceded by *universal doubt*, i.e., by total *presuppositionlessness* (*die gänzliche Voraussetzungslosigkeit*). (*EL* 124/167–8 [§78])¹

In the *Science of Logic* itself the same point is made:

the beginning must be an *absolute*, or what is synonymous here, an *abstract* beginning; and so it *may not presuppose anything*, must not be mediated by anything nor have a ground; rather it is to be itself the ground of the entire science. (*SL* 70/1: 68–9 [175])

The great importance of this idea to Hegel was also clearly recognized by his most significant nineteenth-century critics. Schelling, for example, remarks in the 1830s that “Hegelian philosophy boasts of being a philosophy which presupposes nothing, absolutely nothing”; Trendelenburg makes reference in 1843 to Hegel’s “proud doctrine of the presuppositionless pure thinking”; and Kierkegaard introduces his discussion of Hegel in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) by noting that “the System begins with the immediate, and hence without any presuppositions.” None of these figures believed that Hegel’s philosophy is actually presuppositionless (or that presuppositionlessness is even

1. See also Hegel, *LHP* 137–8/92.

desirable), but they all took seriously his *claim* that he avoids taking anything for granted. Indeed, that is precisely why they are so eager to refute it.²

But what exactly does it mean to philosophize “without presuppositions”? As we saw in the last chapter, it means that we do not take for granted any particular conception of thought and its categories at the outset of philosophy or assume (with Kant) that concepts are “predicates of possible judgments” (*CPR* 205/109 [B 94]). It also means, however, that we do not assume that thought should be governed by the rules of Aristotelian logic or that the law of noncontradiction holds, or that thought is regulated by any principles or laws whatsoever. In short, it means that we give up everything we have learned about thought from Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, or Kant (or twentieth-century symbolic logic)—that we “abstract from everything” (*EL* 124/168 [§78]). This is not to say that we ourselves assume that the principles of Aristotelian (or post-Fregean) formal logic are simply wrong (Hegel maintains that the rules of syllogizing will eventually be shown in the *Logic* to be valid—albeit for a limited range of thought that excludes philosophy). It is to say that we may not assume at the outset that such principles are clearly correct and determine in advance what is to count as rational. We should thus not look to formal logic to provide a standard by which to establish whether Hegel’s arguments in the *Logic* are rational (or, more likely, by which to judge that they are sophistical). As G. R. G. Mure remarks, “to exempt a principle from criticism and presuppose it as a criterion by which to condemn a logical method is grossly and barbarously to beg the question”; and if there is one thing that a truly *critical* philosopher may not do, in Hegel’s view, it is “beg the question.”³

To philosophize without presuppositions is thus not to reject in advance all that traditionally counts as “thought,” “concept,” or “rationality.” It is merely to suspend our familiar assumptions about thought and to look to discover in the course of the science of logic *whether or not* they will prove to be correct. A science of logic has to set our familiar assumptions to one side at the beginning because *it* is to be the very discipline that determines what it is to think and

2. See F. W. J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. A. Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 148; F. A. Trendelenburg, *The Logical Question in Hegel’s System*, in G. W. F. Hegel: *Critical Assessments*, ed. R. Stern, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 1993), 1: 205; and S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 101.

3. See G. R. G. Mure, *A Study of Hegel’s Logic* (1950) (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 33. See also J. Burbidge, *On Hegel’s Logic: Fragments of a Commentary* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 4: “To evaluate Hegel’s logic against the conventional standards of formal logic begs the question. For Hegel is asking about the grounds of all logical validity.”

which categories and laws (if any) are inherent in thought as such. Critics of Hegel from Schopenhauer to Popper may rail against him for deliberately violating the law of noncontradiction (and muddling young heads in the process), but Hegel does not have it in mind deliberately to reject any of the traditional laws of thought. In fact, he is himself extremely critical of what he perceives to be the “crude rejection of all method” in the work of Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel (*SL* 53/1: 49). His point is simply that “logic . . . cannot *presuppose* any of these forms of reflection and laws of thinking, for these constitute part of its own content and have first to be established within the science” (*SL* 43/1: 35, my emphasis). Consequently, he has to be open at the start of the *Logic* to the possibility that the traditional laws of thought may, *or may not*, govern thought, properly understood. If Hegel’s *Logic* does turn out to violate the law of non-contradiction, therefore—and I am not here assuming that it does—it will be because thought *proves* not to be completely governed by that law, not because Hegel has simply decided to abandon it.

At this point, we need to consider one obvious question. If we are to examine thought without presupposing that it has any particular structure, operates with any particular concepts, or is governed by any particular rules, what are we to understand thought to be? What is to be the object of our examination? What is thought *minimally*? Hegel’s answer is indicated by his statement in §78 of the *Encyclopedia Logic* that the “freedom that abstracts from everything . . . grasps its own pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking” (*EL* 124/168). In Hegel’s view, free, self-critical thought that suspends all its presuppositions about itself is left with nothing to think but itself, its own simple *being*. To put it another way (suggested by a perceptive comment by Ute Guzzoni), thought that sets aside all its assumptions about *what* it is, is left with nothing to think but the simple thought *that* it is.⁴ Hegel’s presuppositionless science of logic begins, therefore, with the thought of thought itself as simply *being*—not being anything in particular but simply *be-ing* as such. Consequently, the first category considered by Hegel in the *Logic* is that of sheer indeterminate being *tout court*. At the outset, Hegel says, all that is present

is simply the resolve . . . that we propose to consider thought as such (*das Denken als solches*). Thus the beginning . . . *may not presuppose anything* . . . Consequently, it must be purely and simply *an immediacy*, or rather merely *immediacy* itself. . . . The beginning therefore is *pure being* (*das reine Sein*). (*SL* 70/1: 68–9 [175])

The path of “universal doubt” that leads into Hegel’s science of logic is clearly very similar to that taken by Descartes. Hegel’s conclusion, however, is

4. U. Guzzoni, *Werden zu sich. Eine Untersuchung zu Hegels “Wissenschaft der Logik”* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1963), p. 35.

not “I think, therefore I am” but rather “thinking, therefore *is*.”⁵ From this pure being of thought, Hegel believes, the necessary categories of thought have to be derived.

Does Hegel Have a Method?

We will look at the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic* in more detail later in this study. What I now wish to draw attention to is another important—and potentially rather disturbing—consequence of Hegel’s commitment to radical presuppositionlessness. Not only must we begin by conceiving thought itself as wholly indeterminate being, but we must also conduct our own examination of thought without assuming that it should take any particular course or follow any particular rule of procedure. As Richard Winfield puts it, our examination of thought “cannot be guided or legitimated by any propositional calculus, rules of syllogism, logic of discovery, semantic analysis, or doctrine of intentionality,” for none of these can be assumed at the outset to have any validity.⁶ This is not to say that Hegel should adopt no *method* whatsoever in his *Logic*. But his method can consist in nothing more than considering indeterminate being itself and setting out what, if anything, the thought of such being involves. That is to say, after he has “abstracted” from everything, his method must be simply “to take up *what is there before us*” and calmly “observe” it (*zusehen*).⁷ Hegel may not assume, however, that we are to proceed beyond that initial consideration of indeterminate being according to any prescribed rules, nor indeed that we are to proceed beyond that thought at all, for to do so would be to take too much for granted.

This means—though it may surprise some to hear it—that Hegel may not presuppose that we are to proceed *dialectically* in the *Logic* by showing, say, how one category passes over into, or contains, its opposite and then is taken up with that opposite into a third category that synthesizes the first two. The indeterminate concept of being may well prove on further examination to be dialectical and to disappear into the concept of nothing, but we may not assume at the outset that this will be the case or that our method should be to look for such dialectical slippage in other categories. All we may do is consider the concept of indeterminate being and note what, if anything, that concept *itself* turns out to be or do.

5. See *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), 1: 196 (*Principles of Philosophy*, 1: 10)

6. R. Winfield, *Reason and Justice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 142.

7. Hegel, *SL* 69/1: 68 (175), and G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik. Heidelberg 1817*, ed. K. Gloy, *Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, vol. 11 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1992), p. 21. Further references to the *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik* will be given in the following form: *VLM* 21. Phenomenology, for Hegel, also requires us “simply to look on (*zusehen*)” while consciousness develops itself immanently; see *PhS* 85/77.

William Maker is thus right, in my view, to maintain that Hegel does not have a dialectical or speculative method, “insofar as one uses the term ‘method’ in its traditional philosophical sense” to mean a rule of procedure that can be specified *prior* to its application to a given content:

Insofar as method is that which can—even if only in principle—be justified, formulated or learned in abstraction from the subject matter to which it is to be applied, Hegel does not have a method. . . . Insofar as one can speak of there being, in the sense just outlined, a phenomenological method, a scientific method, a transcendental method, an analytical method, a speculative method, and so on, Hegel does not have a method.⁸

Many commentators on Hegel—both friendly and not so friendly—find it very hard indeed to believe such a claim. Surely, they say, the discovery of dialectical method is one of Hegel’s great achievements, the lasting legacy he passed on (albeit in a modified form) to Marx, Engels, Adorno, and many others. Is it possible that the very idea of a definite Hegelian dialectical method is misconceived? Michael Forster, to name but one, seems quite convinced that Hegel devises a general philosophical method whose structure can be described in abstraction from, and prior to, any particular Hegelian analysis and which can then be “applied” to all manner of natural and spiritual phenomena. “Beginning from a category A,” Forster tells us,

Hegel seeks to show that upon conceptual analysis, category A proves to contain a *contrary* category, B, and conversely that category B proves to contain category A, thus showing both categories to be self-contradictory. He then seeks to show that this negative result has a positive outcome, a new category, C . . . This new category unites—as Hegel puts it—the preceding categories A and B.⁹

Forster claims that the analysis of the category of being at the beginning of the *Logic* provides a “textbook example” of this “general model” but that we can also draw on that model to highlight the inadequacies of many of Hegel’s other analyses.¹⁰ For “over large stretches of his texts,” Forster maintains, Hegel “deviates from the intended general structure of the method in more or less extreme ways.” This is already noticeable in the transition from the category of becoming to that of determinate being,

where, instead of showing Becoming and a contrary category to be mutually implying and then showing them to be unified in Determinate Be-

8. W. Maker, *Philosophy Without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 99–100.

9. M. Forster, “Hegel’s Dialectical Method,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. F. C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 132.

10. Forster, “Hegel’s Dialectical Method,” p. 133.

ing, Hegel tries to find a contradiction between two component concepts contained in the category Becoming and then argues that these two component concepts are unified in Determinate Being.¹¹

Later in the *Logic*, we are told, in the discussion of the forms of judgment and syllogism, “there is hardly even a trace of the official method.” Forster thus belongs to that well-established tradition of commentators who seek to criticize and correct Hegel’s specific analyses of concepts by measuring them against what they take to be his general philosophical method.¹² In my view, however, if Hegel’s philosophy is to be genuinely presuppositionless, as he proclaims it to be, then it cannot presuppose at the outset any general conception of dialectical (or any other kind of) method that is to be “applied” in particular cases. It is thus wholly illegitimate to criticize specific Hegelian analyses by reference to such a general method. As we shall see, Forster is quite right to note that Hegel’s analysis of becoming does not proceed in exact accordance with the model that Forster himself sets up. But he is quite wrong to believe that matters: for in a genuinely presuppositionless philosophy we have no right to assume in advance any general model as a standard by which to evaluate Hegel’s particular arguments. We are not to assume, therefore, that the *Logic* is structured according to the famous pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, nor indeed that Hegel arranges concepts in any other, more subtle, triadic sequence. We have simply to consider indeterminate being and observe how, if at all, it develops.

Now, as I have indicated, to insist that Hegel presupposes no dialectical method in his *Logic* is not to deny that indeterminate being may itself *prove* to be dialectical and to give rise to further categories that themselves turn dialectically into yet others. Dialectic may well *turn out*, therefore, to be the proper method for philosophical thought. Indeed, as we shall see, Hegel believes this to be the case—but this is only because thought is required to become dialectical by the concepts it is led to consider, not because dialectic is assumed in advance to be a “higher” way of thinking. Dialectic is thus “not brought to bear on the thought-determinations from outside; on the contrary, it must be considered as dwelling within them” (*EL* 82/114 [§41 Add. 1]). As we shall see, Hegel’s *Logic* does proceed in accordance with dialectical method after all, but such method is not a “method” in its traditional philosophical sense” (to quote Maker), because it is not a manner of thinking that is *applied* by Hegel to a given subject matter, such as thought, and that could be applied by someone else (for example, Engels) to nature or human history. It is, rather, the manner in

11. Forster, “Hegel’s Dialectical Method,” p. 155.

12. In a similar spirit Gerhard Martin Wölflé proposes to revise Hegel’s doctrine of essence in light of what he believes Hegel *should* be doing; see G. M. Wölflé, *Die Wesenslogik in Hegels “Wissenschaft der Logik”* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994). For my review of Wölflé’s book, see *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 32 (Autumn/Winter 1995): 40–7.

which concepts themselves develop and demand to be thought—“the method proper to every subject matter” (*SL* 826/2: 552). Dialectical method thus is not *Hegel’s* method but the method or manner of development that proves to be inherent in presuppositionless thought itself: “the nature of the content itself which spontaneously develops itself in a scientific method of knowing” (*SL* 27/1: 16).¹³

Since dialectical “method” is nothing but the manner in which the category of being develops into further categories, we can only understand what that method is supposed to be as we come to understand that course of development. There can be no *prior* understanding of that method, such as Michael Forster pretends to offer. In other words, the method of dialectic cannot be anticipated or predicted; it can only be discovered as we follow the movement from the category of being to that of becoming, determinate being, and so on. “What logic is cannot be stated beforehand, rather does this knowledge of what it is first emerge as the final outcome and consummation of the whole exposition” (*SL* 43/1: 35).¹⁴ This means that prior to any particular transition in the *Logic*, we have no model available by which to judge how that transition *should* proceed. All we know is how previous transitions have proceeded; but we do not know that future transitions should take a similar course. Nor, of course, are we allowed to judge any particular transition in the *Logic* by reference to traditional criteria of rationality. We cannot fault a transition for violating the law of non-contradiction or for failing to meet the traditional standards required for valid deduction or induction because we are not permitted to take any such criteria for granted in a fully self-critical philosophy.

But if we cannot evaluate Hegel’s arguments by reference to traditional standards of rationality or by reference to any preconceived notion of dialectic, how is it possible to criticize what he says at all? Can presuppositionless thought be criticized, or is it simply beyond all reproach by definition? What is so disturbing about Hegel’s insistence on presuppositionlessness is that it appears to render his philosophy invulnerable to any rational critique.

Hegel’s Rejection of External Criticism

As we shall see in a moment, Hegel by no means puts his philosophy beyond all criticism. He clearly recognizes that his derivation of the categories of thought in the *Logic* might need improvement, and indeed he laments the fact that he does not have the leisure to revise the text himself “seven and seventy times”

13. See also Hegel, *SL* 53, 830/1: 49, 2: 556, and A. White, *Absolute Knowledge: Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), p. 51.

14. See also D. Henrich, “Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung,” in *Die Wissenschaft der Logik und die Logik der Reflexion*, ed. D. Henrich, *Hegel-Studien* Beiheft 18 (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1978), pp. 223–5.

(*SL* 42/1: 33; see also *SL* 31, 54/1: 19, 50). He does, however, unequivocally reject all criticisms levelled at his philosophy from a standpoint other than that of presuppositionless thought itself. That is to say, he rejects what has come to be called all “external criticism” of his philosophy. Hegel does not, therefore, recognize as legitimate any criticism that charges him with riding roughshod over basic conceptual distinctions (for example, between what is finite and what is infinite), with confusing the “is” of predication with the “is” of identity, or with simply contradicting himself, if the critics concerned base those charges on the authority of formal logic or tradition and fail to show that the development of presuppositionless thought itself leads to the prohibiting of contradiction or conceptual “confusion.”

Hegel’s rejection of external criticism of his system is sometimes taken to rest on his own unjustified *assumptions* about philosophical thought. Hegel (so the story goes) simply takes it for granted that thought is dialectical or “absolute,” erects an entire philosophical system on that assumption, and rejects in advance any criticisms that are not made from within the “superior” standpoint of that dialectical system. Michael Rosen, for example, claims that Hegel only overcomes the challenge of skepticism by integrating it (in the *Phenomenology*) “into the course of an exposition which *presupposes* determinate negation [the thesis that negation always has a positive result] for its very possibility.”¹⁵ Similarly, Jürgen Habermas maintains that Hegel’s rejection of Kant’s critical limitation of human knowledge “already *presupposes* precisely what this for its part calls into question: the possibility of absolute knowing.”¹⁶ This interpretation also dominates much contemporary French reading of Hegel. In *Writing and Difference*, for example, Jacques Derrida insists that “the Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from *within* discourse, from *within* the system or the work of signification” and that it thus “belongs to restricted economy.”¹⁷

In my view, however, the interpretation of Hegel put forward by writers such as Rosen, Habermas, and Derrida, though popular, is in fact quite wrong. Hegel does not reject external criticism of his philosophy from *within* a dialectical system whose validity he presupposes, nor does he reject such criticism simply because its proponents fail to acknowledge some “higher” principle of dialectic that he himself takes for granted. He cannot be doing this because he does

15. M. Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 42, my emphasis; on determinate negation, see p. 31. For my review of Rosen’s book, see S. Houlgate, “Some Notes on Michael Rosen’s *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism*,” *Hegel-Studien* 20 (1985): 213–19.

16. J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), p. 21, my emphasis, my translation.

17. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 275, my emphasis. On the relation between Hegel and Derrida more generally, see S. Houlgate, “Hegel, Derrida, and Restricted Economy: The Case of Mechanical Memory,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34, 1 (January 1996): 79–93.

not begin by *presupposing* the viewpoint of dialectic, determinate negation or the “system” at all; he begins, rather, by *suspending* all presuppositions and assumptions about thought. For Hegel, if philosophical thought is to be fully self-critical and free, it can accept nothing on authority or as simply given and so can take nothing for granted about thought itself except its sheer indeterminate being; it must, in other words, be radically presuppositionless. But if thoroughly self-critical thinking suspends all presuppositions in this way, then any criticism levelled at Hegel from a position other than that of radically presuppositionless thought will necessarily stem from a thinking that is *less* self-critical and so more dogmatic than presuppositionless thought itself. This is the case because any such thinking by definition will uncritically presuppose some principle or other. It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that Hegel rejects all external criticism of his philosophy.

It can be very frustrating for someone approaching Hegel for the first time to be told constantly that this or that criticism made from an Aristotelian, Kantian, or Derridean point of view, or from the viewpoint of formal or symbolic logic, is illegitimate. (I am acutely aware of the evident frustration of some of my own students every time I teach the *Logic*.) But it is important to recognize that Hegel rules such criticism out of order *not* in the name of certain principles of nontraditional thinking that he has simply assumed—uncritically—to be authoritative but in the name of the most radical and thorough self-criticism he can conceive. In other words, Hegel rejects external criticism of his philosophy because he believes that one cannot legitimately criticize fully self-critical thinking from a position that is itself necessarily *less* than fully self-critical.

This explanation of, and justification for, Hegel’s rejection of all external criticism of his philosophy is not the one that is usually found in the secondary literature. More common is the claim made by Michael Rosen that Hegel dismisses or “overcomes” alternative points of view on the basis of his own conviction or assumption that thought is in truth dialectical or speculative. Yet it is clear on any attentive reading of the *Logic* that Hegel does not charge his critics with being insufficiently dialectical or with failing to raise themselves to the position of the “absolute.” He charges them only with being insufficiently *critical* of the presuppositions on the basis of which they formulate their own criticisms of him—that is to say, with taking too much for granted themselves. For example, in the preface to the second edition of the *Logic*, he charges certain unnamed critics with presupposing that the basic categories of thought are set in a fixed, determinate relation to one another and that categories (such as “reality” and “negation” or “finitude” and “infinity”), which are usually held to be opposed to one another, are indeed definitively opposed. In ordinary discourse such assumptions would be unobjectionable. Hegel considers them to be inappropriate for critics of the *Logic*, however, because the whole point of the *Logic* is to seek to discover—without taking anything for granted—*whether* the presumed opposition between categories such as “finitude” and “infinity” is defini-

tive or not. To criticize a philosophy whose task is precisely to find out how the categories are to be conceived on the basis of the uncritical assumption that they are to be conceived in a certain way is, from Hegel's point of view, to miss the point of the exercise he is undertaking and to bring dogmatic prejudgment—indeed prejudice—to bear on an enterprise that demands complete openness of mind. Remember that Hegel is not claiming that his critics are obviously wrong in their understanding of the categories and laws of thought. He is simply pointing out that such critics are less self-critical in their approach to the categories than he is (and than they should and could be) because they do not first set their assumptions about thought to one side and then seek to derive an understanding of the categories from the simple being of thought. He is also claiming that it is illegitimate for such insufficiently self-critical philosophers to criticize his efforts to *discover* the true character of the categories on the basis of what they in advance *assume* the categories to be.

Hegel admits that his critics are often unaware that they are taking a great deal for granted in their criticisms of him, but he still takes them to task for presupposing what he is seeking without prejudgment to discover:

I have been only too often and too vehemently attacked by opponents who were incapable of making the simple reflection that their opinions and objections contain categories which are presuppositions and which themselves need to be criticized first before they are employed. Ignorance in this matter reaches incredible lengths. . . . Such presuppositions as that infinity is different from finitude, that content is other than form, that the inner is other than the outer, also that mediation is not immediacy (as if anyone did not know these things), are brought forward by way of information and narrated and asserted rather than proved. But there is something stupid (*eine Albernheit*)—I can find no other word for it—about this didactic behaviour; technically it is unjustifiable simply to presuppose and straightway assume (*voranzusetzen und geradezu anzunehmen*) such propositions; and, still more, it reveals ignorance of the fact that it is the requirement and the business of logical thinking to enquire into just this, whether such a finite without infinity is something true, or whether such an abstract infinity, also a content without form and a form without content, an inner by itself which has no outer expression, an externality without an inwardness, whether any of these is *something true* or *something actual*. (SL 40–2/1: 31–3)

In his detailed and meticulous study of the criticisms levelled at the *Logic* by Hegel's contemporaries Schelling, Weisse, I. H. Fichte, Fries, Herbart, Schubarth, and Carganico, Bernd Burkhardt has shown that Hegel is quite right to accuse his critics of failing to call their own presuppositions into question. Those critics all dismissed as impossible Hegel's project of a "consideration of the thought-determinations in and for themselves," but in so doing, Burkhardt

points out, they “showed no readiness to submit the presuppositions . . . in their objections to a critical examination and so, at least formally, to take Hegel’s claim to presuppositionlessness and immanent self-criticism seriously.”¹⁸ To my mind, Hegel’s charge can be levelled as well at those who have continued to criticize him after his death. To the extent that they proceed from some tacit or explicitly acknowledged assumptions about thought and so do not suspend all such assumptions, they necessarily fall short of what, according to Hegel, is demanded of a modern, self-critical philosophy. Whether they part company with Hegel because they assume (with Marx) that thought is conditioned by social and economic practices or (with Nietzsche) that thought is an expression of the will to power or (with many contemporary analytic philosophers) that thought is governed by the rules of formal or symbolic logic makes little difference. In every case they base their criticisms of Hegel (and their own further philosophizing) on *presuppositions* that they do not call into question or suspend and in this respect remain less self-critical than Hegel in his *Logic*. Strange though it will seem to many to say so, most, if not all, post-Hegelian philosophy is thus in fact logically *pre-Hegelian* in that it has still to carry out the radical self-criticism that is demanded of any modern philosophy and that Hegel endeavors to carry out in his *Logic*.

On my reading, Hegel’s *Logic* is not some relic from a bygone age of naive metaphysical speculation or grandiose system-building but *the* quintessentially modern philosophy and the model for all post-Hegelian thinkers. It is the open-minded, thoroughly self-critical enquiry into the nature of thought that seeks to discover, without prejudging the issue, what it is to think. The radicality of the challenge posed by Hegel’s *Logic* to modern philosophers has, however, all too often been obscured by interpreters, such as Rosen and Habermas, who insist—against the clear evidence of Hegel’s own text—that Hegel’s *Logic* is in fact a closed system founded on questionable and now outdated assumptions of its own.

My aim in this study is to draw attention once more to the radicality of Hegel’s project. Furthermore, it is to explain how, according to Hegel, a fully self-critical, presuppositionless philosophy proceeds and what it reveals about the basic categories of thought. If readers of this study are to understand the significance, indeed the revolutionary import, of Hegel’s philosophy, they must take seriously his demand that thought suspend its assumptions about itself. They do not have to disengage their critical faculty altogether; they do not simply have to give themselves over to the authority of Hegel or of anyone else. But they do need to be as self-critical as possible in their reading of Hegel. This means that they must continually ask themselves whether their objections to a given Hegelian claim are based on an informed understanding of what Hegel, on

18. B. Burkhardt, *Hegels “Wissenschaft der Logik” im Spannungsfeld der Kritik* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1993), p. 527, my translation.

his own terms, is or is not entitled to say or whether they simply rest on assumptions made from an external (e.g., an Aristotelian, Kantian, or Wittgensteinian) point of view. Those who are tempted to dismiss the very idea of a presuppositionless philosophy as preposterous must also ask themselves whether their anti-Hegelian conviction that assumptions and presuppositions are unavoidable is itself anything more than an uncritical presupposition.

We should also be on our guard against the assumptions that are hidden in what appear to be the simplest and most innocent of questions—questions that any rational person might raise, such as “*what* is ‘being,’ according to Hegel?” This question is natural, but it is by no means as innocent and neutral as it appears. In Hegel’s view, “the question: *what*?” actually contains a very significant assumption because it “demands that *determinations* be assigned” (*SL* 121/1: 130 [217]). It demands that something at hand be determined in one way or another (as this or that) and so presupposes that what is asked about can in fact be so determined. Being, however, is initially understood by Hegel not to be something *determinate*—not to be a “what” or an “it”—but to be sheer *indeterminacy* or utterly “indeterminate immediacy” (*SL* 82/1: 82 [193]). The simple question “*what* is ‘being,’ according to Hegel?” thus always risks distorting the very thing it asks after, for it presupposes in its very form that being is not sheer indeterminacy but rather *something determinate*. Now, to point to this presupposition in the question “*what*?” is not to say that the question should never be posed; that question is, as I have suggested, perfectly natural. But it is to urge self-critical caution on those who pose this question and to enjoin them to bracket out in their minds the assumption the question contains. In other words, it is to enjoin them to ask the question “*what*?” without automatically assuming that what is asked after is necessarily a “what” itself.

If readers of Hegel’s *Logic* are to be thoroughly self-critical, they have no alternative but to set aside *all* their presuppositions about thought, its categories, and rules. This means that no external critique of Hegel’s *Logic* based on such presuppositions can have legitimacy. But it does not mean that Hegel’s work is beyond all criticism whatsoever, for that work remains vulnerable to criticism that is based on the requirements of presuppositionless thought itself, that is, *immanent* criticism. The method followed by presuppositionless thought is simply to render explicit or “unfold” what—if anything—is implicit in or entailed by the thought of sheer indeterminate being with which it begins. As Hegel insists in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, “the whole course of philosophising, being methodical, i.e., *necessary*, is nothing else but the mere *positing* of what is already contained in a concept” (*EL* 141/188 [§88]). No special intuition or privileged insight is needed to carry out this task. What is required is simply the ability to comprehend the definition of a concept and draw out what is implied in its definition. That is to say, what is required is *understanding*, of which Hegel thinks we are all capable. Philosophy, for Hegel, is thus an exoteric, public activity in which any rational person can participate; it is not the “esoteric possession of a

few individuals” (*PhS* 7, 43/20, 65) and certainly not the private property of G. W. F. Hegel. Consequently, any rational person can examine Hegel’s account of what is implicit in the initial category of being (and the subsequent categories) and consider whether or not that account is correct. To the extent that Hegel does not in fact render explicit what is implicit in a specific category, he is open to criticism and correction by the reader. It is essential to remember, however, that the criterion to be employed in formulating such a criticism must be provided by the relevant category as it has been determined by presuppositionless thought and by that category alone. Such a criterion must thus be wholly *immanent* to presuppositionless thought.

The task of the fully self-critical reader of the *Logic* is thus not to adduce alternative arguments against which to test Hegel’s own but to follow the course of and “advance together with” (*mitfortschreiten*) what is immanent in each category, making sure that Hegel adheres rigorously to what is required by presuppositionless thought (*EL* 17/31). If Hegel does not do this and either fails to draw out the evident implications of a category or moves from one category to another on the basis of extraneous considerations (such as metaphorical association or the simple desire to press on), then he is subject to criticism. But if Hegel does in fact keep rigorously to these requirements, then he can claim to have demonstrated successfully without taking anything for granted at the outset what it is to think and to have completed the task (bequeathed to him by Kant and Fichte) of deriving the basic categories and laws of thought from the very nature of thought. As Richard Winfield writes:

So long as examination shows that not one of the development’s determinations owes its character or order of presentation to introductions of extraneously given material or the stipulating of an extraneous determiner, the development can be said to exhibit the radically independent immanence that alone can signal its freedom from arbitrary direction and dogmatic foundations.¹⁹

Hegel remarks at the beginning of the Subjective Logic, concerning his own critique of Spinoza, that “genuine refutation must penetrate the opponent’s stronghold and meet him on his own ground” (*SL* 581/2: 250). It is clear also that legitimate criticism of Hegel can be made only by one who is prepared to meet Hegel (or rather presuppositionless thought) on his (its) own ground. Such criticism can thus only be advanced by someone who accepts the demand for presuppositionlessness, recognizes what it requires of the thinker, and carries this out better than Hegel himself. Although Hegel has sometimes been accused of “Teutonic arrogance,” he never claims that his presentation of the progressive development of presuppositionless thinking in the *Logic* is beyond improvement by himself or by others. “I could not pretend,” he writes, “that the method which

19. Winfield, *Reason and Justice*, p. 130. See also White, *Absolute Knowledge*, p. 36.

I follow in this system of logic—or rather which this system in its own self follows—is not capable of greater completeness, of much elaboration in detail” (*SL* 54/1: 50). But, he goes on, “at the same time I know that it is the only true method”—because he sees no alternative for philosophy in the modern world than to undertake a fully self-critical study of thought that suspends all previous assumptions about thought and draws out patiently and carefully the categories that are immanent and implicit in the sheer indeterminate *being* of thought itself. For Hegel, therefore, this “altogether new concept of scientific procedure” is the one on which philosophy “in future must always be based” (*SL* 27, 48/1: 16, 42).

Dialectic and Immanent Development

The details of Hegel’s new scientific procedure will be examined later in this study, as we discover how the indeterminate thought of being develops, but for the benefit of new readers of the *Logic*, I shall outline its principal features in advance. It should be obvious that my remarks are intended not to set out the way in which Hegel’s *Logic should* proceed but merely to provide a general description for the newcomer of how the *Logic* does actually proceed.

The first thing to note is that this procedure shows the categories of thought to be dialectical. That is to say, it demonstrates that, when properly understood, each category (starting with the initial indeterminate thought of being) turns before our very eyes into its own negation. As Hegel puts it, each category or “universal . . . , considered in and for itself, shows itself to be the other of itself” (*SL* 833–4/2: 561). The thought of sheer *being* immediately vanishes into the thought of *nothing*, the thought of *something* passes over into the thought of what is *other*, and the category of *finitude* turns into the category of *infinity*. No category simply is what it is, therefore, but each negates itself through what it is into its negation. Such dialectical slippage is not imported into the categories by the philosopher, according to Hegel, but is revealed to be the truth of each category by close and careful study of its structure. It is thus the dialectic that is inherent in thought itself—“the inwardness of the content, the dialectic which it possesses within itself” (*SL* 54/1: 50; see also *EL* 128/172 [§81]).

There is little doubt that Hegel’s insistence that the categories are dialectical is one of the things that most offends his critics about his philosophical system. This is because it so clearly runs counter to what Western philosophy has held to be true since Plato. Plato affirms that any individual thing can take on a form that is opposed to the one it already has. A thing can come to exhibit “beauty,” for example, and thereby shed the form of “ugliness,” or it can come to be the “same” as something else and cease being “different” from it. Indeed, it is only in this way, according to Plato, that individual things can change. But Plato insists that the forms taken on or shed by things cannot themselves change or turn into their opposites. The very form of beauty itself—what it is to be beautiful—cannot turn into or turn out to be the form of ugliness, and sameness cannot turn

into or turn out to be difference. Such forms are thus opposed to one another and simply are what they are. As Socrates puts it in the *Phaedo*, “the opposite itself could never come to be opposite to itself.”²⁰ This understanding of forms and of universal concepts and categories has largely governed Western philosophy since Plato’s day and also coincides with our ordinary intuitions about opposites.

In Hegel’s view, however, even though Plato’s position seems to be incontrovertible, we should not simply take it for granted in a fully self-critical philosophy. After all, the obvious may be misleading. Indeed, according to Hegel, presuppositionless thought actually shows that Plato’s position is wrong, or rather only half right, for when it is properly understood, each “universal” or category *does* actually “sublate itself in itself and is in its own self the opposite of itself” (*SL* 106/1: 112 [199]). There is certainly a difference between the categories of being and nonbeing or between the categories of finitude and infinity; Hegel never denies that. (This is the respect in which Plato is half right.) But the remarkable insight provided by presuppositionless philosophy is that this difference is not absolute because being *itself* invests things with nonbeing (in the form of determinacy and finitude); to be something is *itself* always to be other than something else; and finitude *itself* turns out to constitute true infinity. This insight may well disturb many readers of Hegel, but if Hegel is to be believed, such readers can only turn their backs on his findings by clinging uncritically to what Plato and the tradition have *assumed* to be true.

The precise reason why a specific category entails its own opposite varies in each case, but the general idea remains the same: each category in *being* what it is contains within itself its *negative* (*SL* 55/1: 51). The moment of nonbeing or negation is thus not simply opposed to being or “external” to it but is immanent in being itself. To *be* such and such is at the same time and in the same respect *not* to be such and such. In this sense for Hegel, the concept of being is profoundly contradictory, but it is no less valid for that. The insight generated by presuppositionless thought thus not only challenges the Platonic orthodoxy (which governs any thinking, however anti-Platonic it may deem itself, that considers beauty to be simply different from ugliness or sameness to be simply different from difference); it also challenges the even more ancient assumption of Parmenides that being simply *is* and does not in any way involve nonbeing.

For Parmenides, “what is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not.”²¹ True being is thus purely affirmative with no trace of negation or indeed change in it; it is “uncreated and imperishable.”²² This conception of being as purely affirmative continues to cast its shadow over

20. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. D. Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 60 [103b]).

21. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, eds. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (1957) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 247.

22. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 248.

subsequent philosophy right up to the modern period. It is to be seen, for example, in Spinoza's assertion that "the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence," and that consequently, "while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it."²³ (Spinoza talks here of "things" rather than being as such, but he remains recognizably Parmenidean to the extent that he thinks that things are not consigned to nonbeing and death through their very own being but can only be destroyed by something else outside them.)²⁴ Parmenides' conception of the purely affirmative character of being is also to be encountered in Descartes's idea of God as the supremely perfect being from whom no error, falsity, or defect can arise and in Kant's idea of God as the *ens realissimum*.²⁵

This Parmenidean conception of being is undermined, however, by the whole course of presuppositionless thought. According to Hegel's account, the category of being proves to harbor within itself the moment of negation in several forms: the concept of reality entails negation in the form of determinacy and difference; being something entails negation in the form of otherness and finitude; and infinite being also contains negation insofar as it lives in and through self-negating, finite being.

Recall that in insisting on the immanence of negation in the category of being Hegel is not deliberately or wilfully rejecting the legacy of Parmenides or flouting the law of noncontradiction. He is simply claiming that if we are prepared to suspend our cherished assumptions about thought (and about being) and follow the course laid down by presuppositionless thought itself, we will *discover* that the Parmenidean opposition between being and nonbeing is in fact unsustainable. The dialectical movement whereby a category turns through its very own structure into its opposite and so "shows itself to be the other of itself" (*SL* 833–4/2: 561) will certainly bewilder or annoy the reader of Hegel's *Logic* who wishes to maintain as absolute and unsurpassable the conceptual distinctions drawn by Parmenides and Plato (and common sense). For those, however, who are prepared to be guided, surprised, and transformed by the course of presuppositionless thinking, that dialectical movement proves to be the profound truth that such thinking brings to the fore but that the tradition of Western philosophy has largely overlooked.

It cannot be emphasized enough that that dialectical movement, dynamism, and "life-pulse" (*SL* 37/1: 27), is, in Hegel's view, inherent in the categories themselves. It is not some generalized "Heraclitean" flux attributed to the cate-

23. *A Spinoza Reader. The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 159 (*Ethics* III P4 Dem).

24. See Hegel, *SL* 94–5/1: 98: "with Parmenides as with Spinoza, there is no progress from being or absolute substance to the negative."

25. See *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 1: 130, and Kant, *CPR* 556–8/555–8 (B604–8).

gories by Hegel but “the spontaneous movement of the moments” (*die eigene Bewegung der Momente*) (*SL* 75/1: 75 [183])²⁶—the movement whereby each category turns into its negation simply by virtue of what it is *itself*. True, it falls to the philosopher to render explicit the self-negation that is implicit in a specific category, but the activity of the philosopher in so doing is determined by the nature of the categories themselves. Progress in the *Logic* is thus generated by nothing other than the tension intrinsic to the initial indeterminate thought of being and the subsequent categories to which it gives rise, and in this sense, it is nothing but the immanent unfolding or (self-) development of the opening category—the “movement of *being* itself” (*SL* 79/1: 80 [191]).

We do not advance in the *Logic*, therefore, by simply replacing an initial incorrect definition of being with a more adequate one or substituting different categories for a concept of being that proves to be too abstract (though it can appear to the untrained eye that that is what is going on). We advance in the *Logic* by specifying more clearly what is entailed by the initial indeterminate thought of being itself. That is to say, “the *progress* from that which forms the beginning is to be regarded as only a *further determination* (*weitere Bestimmung*) of it” (*SL* 71/1: 71 [177], my emphasis). In the course of this further determination of being (or, indeed, self-determination of being), new concepts do arise that go beyond the mere thought of being as such. The thought of being is not simply replaced by those new concepts, however, but itself becomes more complex and concrete in them (see *SL* 48, 840/1: 41, 2: 569). The thought of being thus itself gains what Hegel calls “extension” and “intensity” as what “being” actually means becomes more and more apparent in the new concepts that arise (*SL* 841/2: 570). We learn, for example, that to be is not just to *be* but to be *determinate*, to be *something*, to be *limited*, to be *finite*, to be part of the process of *infinity*, and so on. Each thought is a new thought that has not been entertained before by presuppositionless thought, but each new thought or category arises by simply refining the initial indeterminate conception of being. In the course of the *Logic*, therefore, the thought of being *itself* turns into all the other categories of thought through its own internal dynamic.

The most striking characteristic of Hegel’s *Logic* is thus that the initial category of being is actually *transformed* as it comes to be understood. Each new category or determination of being casts the thought of being in a new light and reveals it to be somewhat different from the way it was previously thought. Initially, the thought of being is taken to be just that—the thought of simple, immediate *being*. But on closer examination, the thought of being turns out not just to be that after all but to be the thought of determinacy, finitude, infinity, quantity, specificity, reflexivity, and eventually at the end of the *Logic*, self-determining reason (or “absolute Idea”) and nature. In the course of being un-

26. Translation revised.

derstood, therefore, the concept of being becomes steadily more complex and gradually *changes into* the concept of nature.

This process of conceptual (self-) transformation clearly distinguishes Hegel's *Logic* from a more conventional philosophical text, such as Leibniz's *Monadology*. In Leibniz's text, we begin with a definition of a monad (namely, that it is a "simple substance"), and we proceed through ninety paragraphs to learn more about the nature of such monads. At the end of Leibniz's analysis, we know much more than we did at the beginning, but in the process monads never cease being understood as monads; they do not turn out in the end to be anything other than they were first thought to be. They remain the fixed subjects of Leibniz's discourse, and his philosophical procedure is to provide us with a more sophisticated account of such fixed subjects. Hegel's procedure is different, for we begin with the concept of being, but the thought of being transforms itself in the process into the thought of becoming, infinity, and so on. We thus do not simply learn more about a subject that is clearly identified to begin with; on the contrary, the true subject matter of the *Logic* only becomes apparent *through* Hegel's analysis. (It is because the subject matter of Hegelian philosophy is not given at the outset but unfolds itself and emerges in the course of philosophy itself that it has to be presented by means of curious verbal nouns such as "coming-to-self" [*Zu-sich-selbst-Kommen*] [*SL* 841/2: 571].)²⁷

Many philosophers talk about the omnipresence of change and flux in the world, but few enact that process in their own texts. The distinctive feature of Hegel's thought is that it does not merely describe but actually articulates before our very eyes the process whereby concepts change into one another. In my view, unless one is prepared to move *with* that change and allow one's understanding to be constantly challenged and revised by these concepts themselves, one will never appreciate fully what Hegel discloses about thought.

In the process of conceptual (self-) transformation that Hegel articulates, earlier determinations of being are not simply left behind or set to one side but are taken up, or *aufgehoben*, into the more complex determinations that emerge. The concept of finitude thus incorporates the concepts of immediate being, determinacy, something, and limit (to be finite, after all, is to be limited, to be something, to be determinate, and indeed, to *be*). Similarly, the thought of infinity incorporates the thought of finitude, and the thought of the absolute Idea incorporates all the previous categories set out in the *Logic*. Thus, not only does "that which forms the starting point of the development [the category of 'being'] remain at the base of all that follows and . . . not vanish from it" (*SL* 71/1: 71 [177]), but in the case of every categorical transition "the first [category] is essentially *preserved* and *retained* even in the other" (*SL* 834, 840/2: 561, 569).

27. Miller's translation actually dispenses with the verbal noun and has "because truth only comes to be itself." The German text is: "weil die Wahrheit nur das Zu-sich-selbst-kommen. . . ist."

What becomes apparent in the course of the *Logic*, therefore, is that each category constitutes an irreducible element of our fundamental “conceptual scheme” yet none by itself defines or exhausts what it is to think. To think *is* to think in terms of being, determinacy, finitude, and infinity; it cannot be anything less or other than that. Yet it is not to think *just* of sheer being or *just* of determinacy, finitude or infinity, because none of these thoughts stands alone; each proves to be an aspect or a “moment” of a further, more complex thought, and all prove to be aspects of the thought with which the *Logic* culminates, that of the absolute Idea. The concluding insight of the *Logic*, therefore, is that thought, properly understood, entails *all* the general categories—taken together as a unity—that prove to be inherent in the initial thought of being.

As the category of sheer being gradually mutates into the concept of self-determining reason (or the “absolute Idea”) and then into the concept of nature, two important things happen, according to Hegel. The first is that the initial category of being comes to be seen as an inadequate determination of what is being thought. Through the movement of thought, Hegel says, “the subject matter has obtained for itself a *determinateness* that is a *content*, . . . [and] as this determinateness is the proximate truth of the indeterminate beginning, it condemns the latter as something imperfect” (*SL* 838–9/2: 567). Hegel’s language is not especially elegant, but his point is simple: insofar as the thought of being shows itself in truth to be the thought of the absolute Idea, it becomes clear that being is not thought properly insofar as it is thought merely *as* sheer being. The initial category of being is imperfect, therefore, because it fails to render explicit all that is entailed by the very thought of being itself. As Stace puts it, “in thinking of it simply as being we have not as yet seen the full truth about it, for we have not seen all that it contains.”²⁸

Indeed, not only is the opening category of being imperfect, but every category is imperfect compared to the more concrete determinations that emerge from it. This is not to say that we are simply in error to think in terms of relatively simple categories, such as “determinacy,” “something,” and “finitude.” Being does entail being determinate, being something, and being finite, but as we learn from the rest of the *Logic*, that is not all it entails. For being also entails being quantitative, having proportion, form, content, appearing, being rational, being mechanical, chemical, and organic, and so on. The defect of categories, such as “determinacy” and “something,” therefore, is that they *underdetermine* what it is to be or, in the words of Errol Harris, that they possess “a sort of vagueness or indeterminacy characteristic of the more primitive and rudimentary.”²⁹ Indeed, compared to the thought of being as self-determining reason or

28. W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (1924) (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 109.

29. E. E. Harris, *An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 32–3.

Idea, *all* the categories of the *Logic* underdetermine being (just as the concept of being as rational Idea will prove to be an underdetermination of the concept of being as nature and as history).

The *error*, for Hegel, consists not in employing less determinate categories as such, but in regarding them as exhaustive or definitive conceptions of being and as exhausting what it is to think. The error, therefore, consists in claiming that being is finitude to the exclusion of infinity or that being is sheer quantity or that it is merely the expression of force or the work of power. Such errors are, of course, all too frequently encountered in both pre- and post-Hegelian philosophy. In exposing such errors, Hegel's *Logic* thus exercises a *critical*, as well as a revelatory, function.

Although earlier categories prove to be imperfect in comparison with later categories, the disclosure of such relative imperfection is *not* what drives thought on from one category to another in the first place. Thought does not compare a specific category with the absolute Idea, judge that category to be deficient, and then move on to a new category that better approximates to the Idea. Some commentators, however, have interpreted Hegel's *Logic* in precisely this way. J. M. E. McTaggart, for example, maintains that

the motive force of the process lies in the discrepancy between the concrete and perfect idea implicitly in our own minds and the abstract and imperfect idea explicitly in our minds, and the essential characteristic of the process is in the search of this abstract and imperfect, not after its negation as such, but after its complement as such.³⁰

But it is clear that this cannot be the way in which Hegel proceeds. The *Logic*, after all, sets out the course of *presuppositionless* thought. This means that no "concrete and perfect idea" can be presupposed at the outset as the standard against which to determine the relative adequacy or inadequacy of a specific category. The truth, Hegel says, cannot serve from the start of philosophy as the (implicit or explicit) criterion of judgment because "truth only comes to be itself through the negativity of immediacy" (*SL* 841/2: 571) and so is not present "in our minds" (either consciously or unconsciously) at the start. Consequently, the only thing that can drive thought forward in the *Logic* is the tension inherent *within* the specific category itself that is under consideration. As Hegel writes, "the immediate of the beginning must be *in its own self* deficient and endowed with the *urge* to carry itself further" (*SL* 829/2: 555). Similarly, each further category must develop into a new one through its own immanent dialectic. In this way, the categories must "investigate themselves, [and] they must determine their own limits and point out their own defects" (*EL* 82/114 [§41 Add. 1]).

30. J. M. E. McTaggart, "The Changes of Method in Hegel's Dialectic," in *G. W. F. Hegel. Critical Assessments*, 2: 70.

The progress of thought in the *Logic* must thus be a wholly immanent one. Once a more concrete conception of being has emerged, however, the one from which it emerged is automatically determined—retrospectively—to be an *underdetermination* of that more concrete concept. Categories *are* judged to be deficient in relation to subsequent categories, therefore, but this only occurs as a consequence of the development to which they first independently give rise. A later category, of which an earlier category proves to be an underdetermination, is itself nothing but a further determination *of* that earlier category.

The second thing that emerges as the category of sheer being mutates into the concept of reason or Idea is the insight that the concrete thought of the Idea is itself the ultimate logical *ground* of the initial indeterminate thought of being. What one might call the historical ground of the thought of pure being is the act of abstraction undertaken at the beginning of the *Logic* by the thinker who wishes to suspend all his or her assumptions about thought and discover from scratch what it is to think. (This historical ground is itself rational insofar as it follows logically from the modern demand for radical self-criticism, but it is still an historical act.) However, the ultimate (and purely) *logical* ground of the category of being—what makes that category absolutely necessary—is the thought of the Idea (or the concrete, rational unity of all the categories) that thought ultimately proves to be.

The important point to note about this thought of the Idea is that it can only emerge after all the other basic general (or pure) categories have been derived, because it is the unity of all those categories. It is thus not a thought with which philosophy can begin but one that can only be the *result* of the process of conceptual (self-) transformation that philosophy articulates. Since such a thought can only be a result, it must arise from a beginning in which it is not already present or presupposed, that is to say, from a beginning in which the various categories of thought that it incorporates are not yet explicitly conceived. Such a beginning must be the beginning of *thought* but can be no more than the *beginning* of thought. It is to be found, of course, in the thought of sheer indeterminate being. The very fact that the true, concrete character of thought can only *emerge as a result* through a process of conceptual derivation and so can never be understood immediately thus requires that it be derived from the least that thought can be: the simple thought of being. “The method of truth,” Hegel writes, “knows the beginning to be incomplete, because it is a beginning; but at the same time it knows this incompleteness to be a necessity, because truth only comes to be itself through the negativity of immediacy” (*SL* 841/2: 571). It is in this sense that the true character of thought—as the unity of all its intrinsic categories, or the “Idea”—is the logical *ground* of the initial thought of indeterminate being. The (rational) historical requirement that we suspend our presuppositions and the logical requirement that the true, concrete character of thought be understood to emerge from thought itself thus coincide: for both make it necessary for the *Logic* to begin with sheer being.

According to Hegel, therefore, “the advance [in the *Logic*] is a *retreat into the ground*, to what is *primary and true*, on which depends and, in fact, from which originates, that with which the beginning is made” (*SL* 71/1: 70 [177]). Yet, unlike the historical ground of the thought of sheer being, the logical ground of that thought does not and cannot precede it precisely because that logical ground—the true character of thought as the unity of all its categories—can only emerge through the (self-) transformation of the thought of sheer being. The logical ground of that empty category of being grounds it, therefore, by *requiring it to come first*. It presupposes that category but is not its prior cause. But, of course, the true character of thought can in fact only *come to* presuppose the thought of pure being because it itself has to emerge as that which requires the thought of pure being as its point of origin.

Precisely because the true, concrete character of thought does require—or rather comes to require—the category of pure being to come first, “it is equally necessary to consider as *result* that into which the movement returns as into its *ground*.” In this respect, Hegel comments, “the first is equally the ground, and the last a derivative; since the movement starts from the first and by correct inferences arrives at the last as the ground, this latter is a result” (*SL* 71/1: 70–1 [177]). The thought of sheer indeterminate being thus itself *gives rise* to the thought of the absolute Idea, which in turn *requires* the thought of sheer being to precede it.

For this reason, presuppositionless thought proves to be a self-constituting circle. It begins with sheer indeterminacy and immediacy, then draws itself out, as it were, as the various categories are unfolded, and finally comes to be the whole circle—the unity of all the categories—of which sheer indeterminacy is retrospectively understood to be the necessary, but mere, beginning. This circle proves to be the ground of the initial category because that category itself proves to be required by that circle and to be nothing but a moment of that circle. But this ground—the circle—is not, and cannot be, presupposed at the outset of the development. Rather, the ground only *emerges*—and the circle only *constitutes itself*—through the self-negation of the sheer immediacy of the beginning. Accordingly, Hegel maintains, “the method, which thus winds itself into a circle, cannot *anticipate* (*antizipieren*) in a development in time that the beginning is, as such, already something derived; it is sufficient for the beginning in its immediacy that it is simple universality” (*SL* 841/2: 570, my emphasis). That is to say, the presuppositionless philosopher cannot, and does not, *start out* by understanding the category of being to be required by the thought of the Idea—or the circle of all the categories—as its abstract beginning. The philosopher has to begin with the thought of sheer, indeterminate being in the abstract and *discover* in the course of the (self-) transformation of that thought into the thought of the Idea that it is the category from which the thought of the Idea must proceed.

None of this makes much sense!

This holds true even for those who have read Hegel’s prefaces and introduc-

tion to the *Logic* (and introductory studies of the *Logic*, such as this one) and who, consequently, have already been told before they study the *Logic* itself that the category of being is the beginning of the thought of the Idea. For what such readers have also been told is that the category of being leads to the Idea and so constitutes the beginning of the thought of the Idea only insofar as it is understood initially as sheer indeterminate being and is not taken explicitly at the outset as the beginning of the truth. The only way for such readers to proceed, therefore, if they are to be fully responsible and self-critical, is to set aside the thought of the Idea, begin with the thought of sheer indeterminate being alone, and *discover for themselves* whether that thought leads immanently to the thought of the Idea or not. Hegel's own anticipatory assurance that the category of being is the beginning of the thought of the Idea therefore should not simply be taken for granted; rather, it should be interpreted as a call to readers to determine for themselves whether or not his claim is true. Winfield explains the matter well:

In order for all assumptions to be precluded, the point at which philosophy begins must involve no preconceptions of what it is a beginning of, no indication that it is a commencement, nor any given whatsoever. At its start, philosophy can only be an empty word, which is precisely why indeterminacy is all with which the quest for truth can begin. . . . Indeterminacy would not even stand as the beginning of what finally results until the very conclusion of the entire development. Then alone would what indeterminacy is a beginning of first come into view.³¹

The presuppositionless philosopher must begin with the category of pure being alone, without assuming in advance that that category is in fact the beginning of the thought of the Idea, the Absolute, or infinity. Indeed, he or she may not assume that the category of being leads to any further categories at all but must wait and see *whether* any such categories arise. The aim of the presuppositionless philosopher is thus not to set out to demonstrate that the thought of being generates a more complex—dialectical or nondialectical—view of the world; it is simply to consider the indeterminate thought of being itself, to dwell with that category for its own sake, and to observe where, if anywhere, it takes us. In this sense, presuppositionless philosophy is radically *nonteleological*: it presupposes and aims at no particular result, pursues no projected goal, and follows no prescribed path. Accordingly, as Alan White remarks, “the speculative thinker in the process of determining the categories, as they arise, for the first time does not know where, if anywhere, he is headed.”³² Indeed, he does not know if he is *headed* anywhere at all. All he knows is that he is thinking sheer indeterminate being without any further presuppositions or determinations.

31. Winfield, *Reason and Justice*, pp. 127, 129.

32. White, *Absolute Knowledge*, p. 57.

Nevertheless, as White puts it, the *Logic* does “make its own way” and create a path of its own.³³ As we shall see later, this is because the thought of pure being slips away of its own accord into the thought of nothing, and the thought of nothing itself slips away into the thought of pure being, thereby generating the new thought of this very slippage or “vanishing,” which Hegel names *becoming*. It is further because this thought in turn passes into those of determinacy, finitude, infinity, and so on. Even though no systematic development is presupposed or anticipated at the outset, therefore, Hegel argues that such a development does occur and a system does emerge precisely because of the initial indeterminacy of sheer being itself.

This systematic development is necessary, because it is simply the unfolding of that which is immanent in each category and so cannot not display itself. It is generated not by any arbitrary associations or stipulations made by the philosopher but by pure thought’s “own immanent activity” (*SL* 31, 55/1: 19, 51). Moreover, precisely because it is generated solely by pure thought’s own activity, the development set out in the *Logic* is not only necessary but also wholly self-determining and *free*.³⁴

The crucial thing to emphasize is that the systematic development of thought is *not* presupposed from the outset as the “truth” that philosophy is to disclose or as the “horizon” of all philosophical enquiry or as the “straitjacket” into which all thought and life are forced by Hegel. Rather, the system is what *emerges* when thought suspends all its assumptions about itself, considers nothing but the sheer indeterminate thought of being, and holds itself open to what that thought shows itself to be. Hegel stresses this in both the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology*. In the *Logic*, as we have already seen, he clearly states that “truth only comes to be itself through the negativity of immediacy” and that philosophy thus presents “the *immanent coming-to-be (Entstehung)* of the distinctions” (*SL* 841, 55/2: 571, 1: 51). The *Logic* thus traces the “self-constructing path” of thought; it does not follow a route that has been marked out for it in advance (*SL* 28/1: 17).³⁵ The preface to the *Phenomenology* strikes the same chord: the whole cannot be presupposed at the outset of philosophy because it only arises *as* determinations (i.e., shapes of consciousness or categories) turn into other determinations and so constitute a continuity, of which each determination is but a moment. “Through this process,” Hegel writes, “the simple, self-surveying whole itself *emerges (emergiert)* from the wealth in which its reflection seemed to be lost” (*PhS* 33/53, my emphasis).

In letting the category of indeterminate being determine itself and the whole

33. White, *Absolute Knowledge*, p. 57.

34. On the intimate connection between self-determining necessity and freedom, see Hegel, *EL* 73/102–3 (§35 Add.).

35. Translation revised. Miller’s translation has “self-construing” for *sich selbst konstruierend*.

system emerge in this way, Hegel thus completes the task he believes is bequeathed to him by Kant and Fichte: to derive the basic categories of thought from the very nature of thought itself. Furthermore, he completes that task by following Fichte in particular and “allow[ing] the entire range of our representations to *come into being gradually* before the eyes of the reader or listener.”³⁶ Hegel’s presuppositionless derivation of the whole array of categories that are intrinsic to thought is not completed until the end of the third part of his system, the *Philosophy of Spirit*. By the end of the *Logic*, however, immediately prior to the discovery that the thought of being is actually the thought of nature, all of the basic general (or pure) categories of thought—what Kant would call the “un-schematized” categories—have been derived and properly determined. By that point, therefore, the true character of thought has been disclosed—at least in its essentials—and we have begun to think *properly* (even if we do not yet know all that that will entail). We can now draw on this new understanding of true or proper thinking to render our nonphilosophical activity (both theoretical and practical) more intelligent. In this sense, for Hegel, “the study of this science [of logic], to dwell and labour in this shadowy realm, is the absolute culture and discipline of consciousness” (*SL* 58/1: 55).

36. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, p. 27, my emphasis.