

The Scientific Status of Hegel's *Logic*, its Circular Structure, and the Matter of its Beginning

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ABSTRACT: This article is concerned with some of the criteria which Hegel believes apply to a scientific treatment of logic. I briefly address criteria which I take Hegel to inherit from German rationalism before focusing on two fairly idiosyncratic criteria: the requirement that a science of logic exhibit a circular structure and that it begin with the concept of pure being. I offer an explanation of these criteria which understands them as motivated by anti-sceptical concerns, before arguing that Hegel's mature treatment of the latter criterion is problematically ambiguous.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Logic; Scepticism; Circle; Beginning; Metaphysics

1. Introduction

This paper takes its lead from the following claim from Hegel's *Science of Logic*: "The essential thing for the science [of logic] is not so much that the beginning be a pure immediacy, but rather that the whole science is a circle, in which the first becomes the last and the last also the first. (5:71)"¹

Although passages of this kind are sometimes taken to be making a claim about how the beginning of Hegel's treatment of logic is justified, such a reading is mistaken.² Here Hegel is talking not about what is essential for the *beginning* of a science of logic, but what is essential for that science as whole. And what is essential for that science, Hegel says, is *not so much* the issue of its beginning, but that its exposition take, in some sense, a circular form. I think that the most natural way to read this passage, in its context at the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*, is as saying that while the issue of the beginning of such a science is of some importance and must

¹ All references to Hegel's works, with one exception, are to the *Werke in Zwanzig Bänden*, Eds. E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986. The exception is text of Hegel's 1831 lectures on logic, which is cited separately. References to the *Encyclopaedia* are labelled "A" for *Anmerkung* and "Z" for *Zusatz*, where appropriate.

² See, for example, CARLSON, D. *A Commentary to Hegel's Science of Logic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 26-27. See DUNPHY, R. "Hegel and the Problem of Beginning" *Hegel Bulletin* 2020, doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.11, p. 16-18, for criticism of this kind of view.



be addressed, *more* significant to Hegel's logical project in its entirety is that it have this circular structure.

One thing to notice straight away is that this passage clearly indicates that Hegel is operating with criteria for what constitutes a scientific treatment of logic. In **Part II** of this paper I briefly survey some of these criteria, which seem to me to suggest an important degree of continuity between Hegel and the rationalist tradition in Germany. After that, I turn to the more unusual criteria indicated in the passage above. In **Part III** I offer a suggestion as to why the circular structure of the *Logic* should be important to Hegel. Then, the remainder of the paper addresses at greater length the significance of the other topic mentioned in the passage above: that of the beginning of Hegel's science of logic. In **Part IV** I attempt to strengthen the suggestion made above, to the effect that, while it might not be the most important issue, demonstrating that the beginning of his treatment of logic can stand up to critical or sceptical scrutiny is nevertheless one of the criteria that must be met in order for that treatment to qualify as a scientific one, in Hegel's view.

In **Part V**, I argue that Hegel's mature works are in fact problematically ambiguous when it comes to this topic. He appears to go back and forth on the significance of legitimising the beginning of his science of logic. I argue that where he goes back, however, this amounts to a retrograde step in his philosophical engagement with scepticism, and threatens to undermine, to some extent at least, the scientific status that he wants to claim for his treatment of logic. I provide a short summary of the argument of this essay and a restatement of its results by way of a conclusion in **Part VI**.

2. *Criteria for a Science of Logic*

In the passage cited in the introduction, I take it that Hegel is concerned with some of the criteria that must be met by a project of logic, in order for it to qualify as a science (*Wissenschaft*). Other aspects of Hegel's presentation of his logic would appear to conform more or less straightforwardly to conceptions of scientific philosophy, and especially metaphysics, which Hegel inherits from the rationalist tradition (it is well known that Hegel understands his treatment of logic also to amount to a metaphysics, but the question of how he legitimises this

idealist claim is not under consideration here).³ Primary among these is the demand that the science in question be a systematic, demonstrative one.⁴ Hegel accordingly insists of his treatment of logic that it must amount to a demonstration of the necessity of its content (8: §1), or a 'systematic derivation' or '*proof*' of its results (8:11). Since the content of logic, in this context, is first and foremost the basic categories or determinations of thought,⁵ this demand for proof amounts, in Hegel's eyes, to the demand that each thought determination considered emerge from or proceed necessarily from the preceding ones that have been considered, in a manner that he compares to the making of mathematical inferences (although he admits that elements of his presentation do not live up to this ideal) (5:30-31).⁶

Such a commitment to a demonstrative philosophical science is shared by Kant, who endorses what he calls the "dogmatic procedure of reason" in the opening of his first *Critique*: 'science must always be dogmatic, i.e., it must prove its conclusions strictly *a priori* from secure

³ That Hegel supposes that his logic is also a metaphysics is important, since I will argue that his treatment exhibits significant elements of continuity with approaches to establishing a scientific metaphysics from his rationalist forbears. No further arguments I make in this paper depend on the fact that Hegel's logic is also a metaphysics, however. As such, the question of the legitimacy of Hegel's claim need not be addressed here: it makes no difference to the conclusions I defend if one takes Hegel simply to be engaged in presenting a scientific account of our fundamental conceptual scheme, although he is obviously doing rather more than that.

⁴ Such a characterisation is clearly present in Wolff's insistence that a systematic understanding proceed from propositions known to be true and prove, by way of the application of the appropriate principles, others to be true, thus developing a system of interconnected true propositions, in the fashion of a geometer. WOLFF, C. **Über den Unterschied zwischen einem systematischen und einem nicht-systematischen Verstand**, trans. M. Albrecht. Hamburg: Meiner, 2019, § 2, § 6. Of course, this idea receives one of its most powerful expressions in Spinoza's *Ethics*, but it is Descartes who is probably most responsible developing the idea that the elaboration of metaphysics approximate this kind of demonstrative model. In *The Search for Truth*, for example, he has his spokesman, Eudoxus, argue: "For all truths follow logically from one another, and are mutually interconnected. The whole secret is to begin with the first and simplest truths, and then to proceed gradually and as it were step by step to the most remote and complex truths." DESCARTES, R. **The Philosophical Writings of Descartes**, Eds. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 419-20.

⁵ The thought determinations treated in the first two books of Hegel's *Logic* overlap with, but greatly outnumber, Kant's account of the fundamental categories under the headings of quality, quantity, relation, and modality in the first *Critique*. KANT, I. **Critique of Pure Reason**, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A80/B106. Thus Hegel's account includes discussions of, for example, unity, plurality, reality, limitation, substance, causality, possibility, and necessity, but many, many others besides.

⁶ Despite Hegel's well-known rejection of the proposal that logic or metaphysics be expressed in the same manner as mathematics or geometry, it is clearly not the idea that later material is derived strictly from or entailed by earlier material that he finds objectionable. Indeed, the issues he has with appropriating a geometric model seem to be those which, to him, constitute problems for the claim that such a method enables one to elaborate a genuine proof, or to have established that one step of one's treatment follows necessarily from another. Hegel sees such problems occurring, for example, in the attempt to establish the relationship between the method and the content of what is considered (5:50-51), and those involved in establishing the axioms or lemmas of such a demonstration (5:35). Hegel's critique and transformation of the geometrical model of metaphysical demonstration is, however, not the subject of this paper. See BOWMAN, B. **Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.167-200, for a good discussion.

principles'.⁷ Kant goes on to insist that a future systematic metaphysics should conform to such a model.⁸

Hegel's *Science of Logic*, as well as being a logic, is the most fundamental part of his attempt to elaborate such a systematic metaphysics, and I believe that, in the context of that work at least, he follows Kant in emphasising firstly the apriority of its subject matter and procedure, and secondly the importance of developing such a science on the basis of secure principles or grounds. In fact, regarding the latter, I take it that Hegel is additionally committed to the more contentious view, widespread among post-Kantian idealists, that it is necessary to ground a scientific philosophical project on a single, secure foundation. These interpretative claims are not uncontroversial, and although I cannot defend them in full here, I will briefly provide some evidence which I take to support them.

That Hegel conceives of logic as an a priori science is made clear in the preface to the second edition of the *Logic*; there Hegel reiterates that the subject matter of logic is the set of fundamental concepts or categories of thought, and insists that such a concept 'is not sensibly intuited or represented; it is only the object, product, and content of *thought*' (5:30). If the elaboration of the fundamental determinations of thought in Hegel's logic does not rely on sensibly or empirically derived material, it must therefore be an a priori discipline.

As I indicated, I also think that Hegel, like several of his contemporaries, argues that such an a priori discipline must ultimately stand on a single ground or foundation. In his case this is not a fundamental proposition (*Grundsatz*), but rather the structure of "the concept", which functions as 'absolute foundation' to Hegel's science of logic (6:245) – as 'foundation of the determinate concepts' (5:30).⁹ Hegel's claim, more specifically, is that the various concepts derived and examined in his science of logic are grounded in *the* concept, as moments in the

⁷ KANT. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxxv.

⁸ A more detailed discussion of the transmission of the notion that metaphysics must amount to a systematic, demonstrative science from early modern rationalism to Hegel would need to take into account, among other things, Kant's transformation of the task of elaborating a doctrine of the categories into one of transcendental logic, and Reinhold's insistence, however problematic, on reformulating Kant's critical philosophy on the basis of a fundamental first principle. Such a task cannot be accomplished here, however. See, e.g. DE BOER, K. "Transformations of Transcendental Philosophy: Wolff, Kant, and Hegel" *Hegel Bulletin* Volume 32 Issue 1-2, 2011, p.50-79, for a case that emphasis lines of continuity across Wolffian metaphysics, Kantian transcendental philosophy, and Hegelian logic.

⁹ Here my reading is broadly in line with and indebted to those in DE BOER, K. *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 and BOWMAN. *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*. By contrast, see KREINES, J. *Reason in the World: Hegel's Metaphysics and Its Philosophical Appeal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, for a case against reading Hegel as a foundationalist in the context of the metaphysics elaborated in the *Logic*. I cannot address this disagreement here.

form of a totality, and that their position in the structure of this totality is ultimately responsible for the specific content that they express.¹⁰ Although the secure foundation which Hegel claims for his science of logic does not take the form of a principle, expressed in the form of a proposition such as “A=A” or “I am I”,¹¹ the claim would seem to be of the same general kind as that endorsed by Reinhold, Fichte, or the early Schelling: a properly philosophical science must be grounded on a single, secure foundation.

A problem plaguing pre-Hegelian approaches of this kind was that of convincingly arguing that the foundation in question was in fact secure. As Fichte put it, ‘the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle... can be neither *proved* nor *defined*’.¹² If it is derived then this derivation must be making use of material not grounded on the first principle in question, material the security of which is immediately questionable. If it is merely defined, then no one has any reason to accept its validity. In both cases attempts to derive scientific philosophical projects from supposedly secure first principles in the 1790s and 1800s tended to invite sceptical objections to the first principle, and thereby the entire project, in question. To some contemporary readers, sceptical objections of this kind seem to doom attempts to develop the kind of systematic metaphysics characteristic of German Idealism from the start.¹³

Hegel's innovation here is not to *begin* his treatment of logic with a statement of a secure foundation, but to argue that an a priori account of the determinations of thought can proceed in such a fashion that the foundation, and the demonstration that it grounds all of the thought determinations examined in that logical project, are the *result* of the treatment of thought carried out in that project.¹⁴ The progression of Hegel's logic is in this sense a ‘retreat into its ground’

¹⁰ Here I am loosely paraphrasing a passage from the preface to the second edition of the *Logic* (5:29-30). Insofar as (a) Hegel understands his logic to also be a metaphysics, (b) his account of the concept is of the foundation of the various logico-metaphysical determinations considered in Hegel's *Logic*, and (c) this account of the foundation is of the “totality” of those determinations, it looks to me as though there is a case to be made for understanding Hegel as endorsing metaphysical foundationalism. This is controversial, but further discussion of Hegel's metaphysics of the concept must be accomplished elsewhere.

¹¹ The reference is to FICHTE, J. **Science of Knowledge: Wissenschaftslehre**, trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs. New York, NY: Meredith Corporation, 1970, p. 94-96. Hegel is famously critical of attempts to construct a systematic philosophy on such a principle (3:27). Given his commitment to a kind of foundationalism concerning logic, however, it seems that what Hegel is rejecting is only the attempt to treat a single proposition as a suitable candidate for such a principle. His criticism presumably does not extend to the possibility that a reflexive structure in which the content of specific concepts is constituted might play such a foundational role.

¹² FICHTE. **Science of Knowledge: Wissenschaftslehre**, p. 94

¹³ See, for example, BERRY, J. “Sextan Scepticism and The Rise and Fall of German Idealism” in **Epistemology After Sextus Empiricus**, Eds. K. Vogt and J. Vlasits. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 154-172.

¹⁴ See (8: §159Z), for example. Note that Hegel is not returning to the pre-modern tendency to see metaphysics as the highest science precisely because it comes last in the order of cognition, and deals ultimately with material that has been abstracted from empirical data. Hegel's logic is envisioned as an a priori, demonstrative science from

(5:70). The issue of the beginning and the issue of identifying the foundation or first principle therefore come apart in Hegel's logic. Hegel begins instead, famously, with the meagre concept of 'pure being' (5:82), and thence derives the various fundamental thought determinations treated in the first two books of his *Logic*, before arguing that these have their foundation in the structure of the concept. The dilemma facing Fichte therefore does not appear to apply to Hegel: because it is a result, the secure foundation which Hegel claims for his a priori science of logic is indeed derived, even though this might leave us with questions concerning the legitimacy of beginning with the concept of pure being, and the derivation of categories which follows it.

This innovation on Hegel's part – that of claiming to derive the secure foundation of his science of logic as one of its results – connects to the passage with which I opened this paper, since Hegel will argue that the concept, when it receives its most adequate elaboration as what he calls the "absolute idea",¹⁵ gives rise again to the concept of pure being with which the logic began: 'logic, in the absolute idea, has returned to the simple unity that is its beginning; the pure immediacy of being' (6:572). Hegel accordingly points out that his treatment of logic has a circular structure (6:571). Unlike the other criteria for a scientific treatment of logic or metaphysics addressed so far, the demand that its exposition take the form of a circle does not seem to be one that Hegel has inherited from the rationalist tradition. Before returning to the question of the significance of the beginning of the *Logic*, I will now suggest a possible interpretation of importance of the circular structure of Hegel's logic.¹⁶

first to last (and back to first again). He later provides an account of cognition in his *Philosophy of Spirit* which is reminiscent of the pre-modern picture, but adds later that the philosophical activity developed on the basis of this account of cognition is one concerning 'the logical, with the meaning that it is the *proven* (*bewährte*) universality in the concrete content as in its actuality' (10: §574). I take this to mean that the reoccurrence of logical concepts in thinking which abstracts from sensible intuitions and representations is understood by Hegel as a *Realphilosophische* confirmation of the results of the a priori treatment in Hegel's *Logic*, and not that the account of cognition in the *Philosophy of Spirit* is the source of the approach taken in the *Logic*.

¹⁵ After arguing that the various fundamental concepts examined in the first two books of the *Logic* are grounded in the structure of the concept, Hegel undertakes an examination of the implications of this foundational structure, and finds that it expresses the basic conceptual framework for a metaphysics of nature (by way of a discussion of notions of mechanism, chemism, teleology, and life) and of mind (by way of a discussion of notions of cognition and action). This account culminates in the discussion of the absolute idea which encompasses and unites the material treated beforehand, provides a detailed discussion of the method of its exposition, and concludes in deriving again the concept of pure being with which the *Logic* began (6:548-572).

¹⁶ This suggestion should be treated as contribution to the discussion of the importance of the figure of the circle in Hegel's systematic philosophy. I do not claim that this suggestion exhausts its importance.

3. Circularity

Although Hegel's circularity criterion can look like an idiosyncratic addition to the criteria for a successful science of logic or metaphysics, it is not something unique to Hegel's presentation of a philosophical system.¹⁷ The most significant precursor here is Fichte,¹⁸ who demands that his *Wissenschaftslehre* exhibit a circular structure when he says that:

A foundational principle has been exhausted when a complete system has been erected upon it, that is, when the principle in question necessarily leads to *all* the propositions that are asserted [within this system] and when *all* these propositions necessarily lead back to that foundational principle.¹⁹

Fichte claims that such a circular procedure – of deriving all of the propositions of a philosophical science from its foundational principle and then finding that this derivation concludes in a return to such a principle amounts to a proof of the completeness, or systematicity of the science.²⁰ I think that the same applies to Hegel's remarks about circularity: the central function of the circular structure of Hegel's *Logic* is to facilitate a completeness proof in the context of the science: a demonstration that *all* of the fundamental concepts of thought have been derived, examined, and systematically related to one another, without leaving a remainder or exception which could serve as a focal point for a sceptical objection to the results of the science. If Hegel is to claim that he has presented a demonstrative, systematic account of the determinations of thought, then it is crucial that a sceptical interlocutor not be able to point to some fundamental concept which has gone untreated in the account, and the relations of which

¹⁷ Kant, for example, claims that 'Reason is driven... to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting systematic whole'. KANT. **Critique of Pure Reason**, A797/B825. How Kant's remarks about circularity, systematicity, and first principles were received by Reinhold and Fichte cannot be discussed here.

¹⁸ Hegel tends rather to refer to Reinhold who, during the period of his "rational realism" advocates for a circular procedure which begins from a hypothesis, and then proceeds to develop results on the basis of that hypothesis which ultimately confirm it. Hegel is explicit in rejecting the idea that it is adequate for a demonstrative science to begin by accepting a hypothesis, however (see 5:69-71 and 8: §10 and §10A).

¹⁹ FICHTE, J. **Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794-95)**, trans. D. Breazeale. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 172

²⁰ See FICHTE. **Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre**, p. 173. Fichte's remarks on circularity have led to a similar confusion as that which can arise surrounding Hegel's remarks on the same. Just as some interpreters have mistakenly taken Hegel to be appealing to the circularity of his system in order to justify beginning with pure being, some readers of Fichte have taken Fichte's appeals to circularity to count against the interpretation of Fichte as the foundationalist *par excellence* with his indubitable, intellectually intuited principle of a self-positing I. See BREAZEALE, D. **Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 272-300, for a convincing case in support of Fichte's foundationalist credentials in this context.

to the other concepts which Hegel has treated is left unclear.²¹ Were this possibility to be left open, then the introduction of such a missing element might demand the reworking of the relations that Hegel takes himself to have established between various fundamental concepts, or even threaten some of his more notable conclusions concerning logic, for example the claim that conceptual oppositions can be encompassed within further, more adequate concepts. Presumably all that it would take would be the presence of a concept not amenable to this dialectical treatment to cast doubt upon Hegel's results. Hegel and Fichte, it would seem, agree with Kant when the latter says of his own treatment of pure reason that 'it is never trustworthy unless it is *entirely complete* down to the least elements'.²² This is why Hegel insists that, in a science of logic, each of the various determinate concepts must be understood as 'a moment of the form as a totality' (5:30).

Hegel's way of arriving at such a self-sufficient totality is (a) to have the account proceed, as he insists that it does, by way of strict derivation, a priori, from concept to concept,²³ and (b), since strict derivation alone is not sufficient for completion, have the account also demonstrate that no further concepts are to be derived, by having the conclusion of the account give rise to its beginning again.²⁴ The result of such a procedure, in Hegel's eyes, is a complete, systematic, demonstrative science of logic.²⁵ If this interpretation is correct, then it is not surprising that Hegel puts so much weight on the circular structure of his treatment of logic: as I suggested at the opening of this paper, this circular structure has implications not merely for the beginning of Hegel's logical project, but for that project as a whole. It is crucial to the claim that the results he defends amount to systematic science, and thus to the claim that they are not vulnerable to sceptical refutation. I shall not here make any evaluative remarks about the strength of this kind of anti-sceptical strategy, nor of Hegel's specific use of it, but, with this suggestion about the

²¹ There will be many empirically informed concepts not treated in a science of logic, of course, some of which will be crucial to the metaphysics of Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, but the claim is that the account of a priori concepts in the *Logic* must be complete.

²² KANT, I. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, trans. G. Hartfield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 13

²³ Detailed discussion of Hegel's method of derivation must be accomplished elsewhere.

²⁴ I take it that this suggestion accords with Hegel's remarks at (6:572), to the effect that, in having the absolute idea return to the concept of pure being at the beginning of the *Logic*, the science of logic has become comprehensive, and developed into systematic science.

²⁵ It might be objected that, even if Hegel has succeeded in presenting a logic in a fashion that proceeds by way of strict derivation and, in forming a circle, exhibits a systematic unity, perhaps this still is not enough to demonstrate the genuine completeness of its elements in such a way as to rule out the possibility of some alternative determination of thought which falls outside and causes problems for Hegel's science of logic, since systematic unity just is not necessarily always the same as completeness. I cannot address this concern here.

importance of the circular structure of Hegel's logic in hand, I shall turn to the other significant element of the passage with which I opened this paper – the importance of beginning with the concept of pure being.

4. The Significance of Legitimising the Beginning

I suggested earlier that, for Hegel, the issue of identifying the foundation of his logical science and that of legitimising its beginning came apart. Unlike Reinhold or Fichte, then, the problem of beginning and the problem of the foundation are separate for Hegel, but this does not mean that the former is not a problem that must be addressed all the same. Against this interpretation, one might perhaps read the passage with which I opened this paper as one in which Hegel is really dismissing the importance of legitimising the beginning of his logical project, but as I suggested earlier, I think it is more reasonable to read it as suggesting only that the significance of this task, because it concerns *only* the legitimacy of the beginning, pales in comparison with the significance of the circular structure of the project, since, as I have just argued, the latter has significant implications for the scientific status of the results of Hegel's logic as a whole. This reading is compatible with it being the case that legitimising the beginning of that logical project is still of importance in guaranteeing its scientific status.

And it certainly looks as though Hegel ought to be concerned about legitimizing the beginning of his treatment of logic. If the account provided so far is correct, although the foundation of Hegel's logic does not face the dilemma that Fichte outlined for attempts to legitimise a first principle, Hegel is still committed to the claims (a) that a properly scientific treatment of logic must proceed by way of strict derivation, and (b) that this derivation begins from his account of the concept of pure being, even though it proceeds as a "retreat into its ground" and ultimately secures the results of the science in the structure of the concept. In the face of these claims, it seems perfectly reasonable for a sceptical interlocutor to object to the beginning of Hegel's account, in more or less the same manner as they might to an attempt to legitimise a foundational first principle. Such a sceptic need only scrutinise the legitimacy of beginning with the concept of pure being: has this concept been derived? If so, why should one accept the validity of this derivation, particularly if this concept is supposed to constitute the *beginning* of the science? Or has it instead been simply defined, or assumed? If so, why should one accept this assumption? Unless Hegel has answers to these questions, it looks as though the starting point of his logical project, and thus the derivation which follows it, will be subject to sceptical

doubt. And if it is doubtful in this manner, it cannot amount to a proof of its results. Hegel's logical project would thus fail to constitute a science, by his own lights.²⁶

Hegel appears to be awake to these kinds of concerns: 'one bare assurance is exactly as valid as another' (3:70), he acknowledges in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, precisely in the context of explaining that it is not satisfactory for a scientific philosophical project to simply assert its validity against sceptical opposition, but that it is necessary to demonstrate that validity. Even more explicitly, in his *Encyclopaedia Logic*, he acknowledges that it is clearly unsatisfactory to begin merely with 'presuppositions or assurances' (8: §1). Hegel acknowledges, then, that the beginning of a project which proceeds by way of strict derivation needs to be secure against sceptical objection if what follows is to be a science.²⁷

This acknowledgement on Hegel's part represents an improvement over his earlier attempts to guarantee the position he takes up in his philosophical work against sceptical objection. During his early years at Jena, he was content to claim that sceptical arguments were 'completely useless' (2:244) against a philosophical approach which helps itself to a notion of speculative reason according to which apparently opposed or contradictory concepts are 'sublated' or 'united' (2:229).²⁸ In this earlier work Hegel insists that sceptical argumentation, with its tendency to oppose equally plausible, yet incompatible claims to one another in order to generate a suspension of judgement, is nothing more than 'the negative side of the cognition of the absolute, and immediately presupposes reason as the positive side' (2:228). It seems as though Hegel here has simply assumed the validity of a form of reasoning in which sceptical argumentation and its constitutive oppositions are contained and superseded. Since the sceptic has no reason to accept the validity of this notion of opposition-encompassing reason, this claim is unconvincing.²⁹ By the time that he comes to write his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however, and certainly by the time that he writes the first edition of his *Science of Logic*, Hegel has clearly

²⁶ I assume that appeals to the circularity of the project are of no use here, since no such appeal will satisfy the sceptic: if they are unconvinced by the first step, they will be unconvinced by the case that one makes for some kind of virtuous circle on the basis of that first step. A possible alternative would be to treat the beginning as a working hypothesis which is confirmed later on, but as I have pointed out, Hegel explicitly rejects such an approach.

²⁷ The mere fact that he includes an essay dedicated to answering the question "With what must the beginning of the science be made?" at the beginning of his *Logic* suggests that the matter is not an unimportant one for Hegel.

²⁸ At this point, Hegel also seems not to have developed the idea of treating the foundation of a philosophical science as a result that can be demonstrated. In *Faith and Knowledge*, for example, he suggests that the 'highest idea' should be 'alone the beginning of philosophy' (2:302).

²⁹ See HEIDEMANN, D. "Hegel on the Nature of Scepticism" *Hegel Bulletin* Volume 32 Issue 1-2, 2011, p. 83, for a good treatment of this insufficiency.

shifted position, as the material just examined illustrates. Although the details of his development need not concern us here, it looks as though the mature Hegel has come to see that establishing the legitimacy of the beginning of a philosophical project belongs among the criteria according to which that project can be called a science, and must be addressed before such a science can make a case for the viability of Hegel's scepticism-encompassing speculative reason.³⁰

I take it that this brief account of the importance of addressing the matter of the beginning lends support to the interpretation I have defended of the passage with which this paper began. In that passage, Hegel does not mean to suggest that beginning with the concept of being is not essential to the science of logic at all, but only that, given that all that is at issue in considering the concept of pure being in this context is making sure that the *first step* of Hegel's logical project is not vulnerable to sceptical objection, meeting this condition for establishing the scientific status of that project appears rather less important than demonstrating its completeness by way of its circular structure, or indeed, the importance of demonstrating that each step of the derivation of the categories which follows from the beginning is genuinely necessary. Despite this qualification, it seems that the task of legitimising its beginning is essential to Hegel's idea of a science of logic.

5. Back and Forth on Legitimising the Beginning

In the remainder of this paper, my intention is not to provide a lengthy, detailed examination of the manner in which Hegel attempts to legitimise the beginning of his science of logic,³¹ so much as it is to suggest that Hegel's mature work in fact exhibits a problematic ambiguity when it comes to this topic. Hegel explicitly addresses the topic of beginning his account of logic with the concept of pure being in two places: in his greater *Science of Logic* and his lesser *Encyclopaedia Logic*.³² I will argue here that although the former contains a sustained attempt to overcome the kind of sceptical objection outlined in the previous part of this paper, the latter appears to row back on the crucial details of this attempt. In doing so, it seems

³⁰ Westphal has argued persuasively that Schulze's *Aphorisms on the Absolute* played a significant part in prompting Hegel to write his *Phenomenology* as a justification for the speculative standpoint from which his philosophical work would be carried out. WESTPHAL, K. "Editorial Introduction" to Schulze, G. E., "Aphorisms on the Absolute", trans. K. Westphal, J. Sares and C. Faul. *Owl of Minerva* Volume 51, No 1-2, 2020, p. 2.

³¹ For examples of such attempts, see DUNPHY, R. "Hegel and the Problem of Beginning", or Hentrup, M. "Hegel's *Logic* as Presuppositionless Science" *Idealistic Studies* Volume 49 No 2, 2019, p. 145-165.

³² The relevant material is present in both editions of the former and all three editions of the latter.

to me, Hegel risks slipping back to the inadequate engagement with sceptical challenges to a scientific philosophical project that vitiated his earlier work.

In the greater *Logic*, Hegel includes an essay with the title “With what must the beginning of the science be made?” There he shows that he is sensitive to the problem of sceptical objection to the beginning of his logical project, noting that, ‘The beginning of philosophy must be either *something mediated* or *something immediate*, and it is easy to show that it can be neither the one nor the other; so that either way of beginning finds its rebuttal’ (5:65).

As others have noted, this dilemma resembles Fichte’s challenge for the possibility of securing a first principle, cited above, which suggests that the sceptical questions I raised concerning the legitimacy of beginning with pure being in the previous part of this paper are those which Hegel is concerned to answer here.³³ I shall now present the outlines of Hegel’s response to this sceptical challenge to the legitimacy of beginning with pure being. A discussion of the details of this argument, or an evaluation of its success, go beyond what I can achieve here.

Hegel attempts to solve the dilemma for the legitimacy of the beginning in the essay in question by arguing that logic must begin with the concept of pure being precisely because only this concept, properly understood, is not vulnerable to the kind of sceptical objections that cause problems for beginning either merely with a bare assumption, or with something derived prior to the beginning of the logical project, where the validity of this derivation is then called into question. The basic steps of his argument are as follows:

- (1) Hegel argues that the problem concerning beginning expressed in the passage above depends on the assumption that the “or” in the phrase “something mediated *or* something immediate” must be understood exclusively,
- (2) He then states that it is possible to jettison this assumption (5:66). The suggestion is that while the sceptic may be able to rebut an attempt to begin a science of logic with some concept that is *only* mediated, or *only* immediate, the same might not be the case for a concept that combines these determinations.
- (3) Hegel accordingly proceeds to argue that the concept of pure being can be understood to be *both* mediated *and* immediate.

³³ Di Giovanni, for example, highlights the resemblance in his translation of the *Science of Logic* into English. This dilemma concerning how to begin appears to be modelled on material from ancient sceptical philosophy, which lends weight to the suggestion that Hegel takes overcoming sceptical challenges to be crucial to establishing logic as a science. See HENTRUP. “Hegel’s *Logic* as Presuppositionless Science”, p.151, or DUNPHY, R. “Agrippan Problems”. *Logos and Episteme* Volume 11 Issue 3, 2020, p. 259-282.

- (4) It is mediated, he claims, because a thoroughgoing examination of the insufficiencies or incoherence of everyday or dogmatic conceptions of thought – that is, those not developed on the basis of a scientific treatment of logic – of the kind he has carried out in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, justifies the abandonment of all such conceptions, resulting in a thought purged of any content at all. This mediated result is what Hegel calls the concept of pure being (5:67-68).
- (5) But, he argues, this ‘empty thinking’ (5:83) is so radically simple that it exhibits no relation to the mediation from which it derives (5:68-69). The concept of pure being is an ‘indeterminate immediacy’ (5:82)³⁴ (it is in this context that Hegel claims, notoriously, that the concept of pure being both presupposes the argument of the *Phenomenology* and, at the same time, is “presuppositionless”).³⁵
- (6) Understood as the unity of mediation and immediacy in this fashion, the concept of pure being, in Hegel's eyes, is open neither to the sceptical charge that it has merely been assumed, nor to the charge that it exhibits a problematic dependence on some prior derivation. It thus exhibits an anti-sceptical security that other candidates for the beginning of a science of logic will lack. It is thus not rebutted as other candidates for the beginning of a science of logic would be.

I think that it is worth pointing out that, while this attempted solution does feature that peculiarly Hegelian motif of a concept adequately unifying two opposing determinations, *unlike* in Hegel's earlier work, mentioned above, the sceptic is not asked to simply accept the notion of a form of speculative reason which proceeds in such a manner. Instead they are explicitly shown each step of the argument carried out in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and then shown that

³⁴ The question of how Hegel derives a rich system of categories from a discussion of this radically empty concept is obviously pertinent, but I cannot address it here. An excellent discussion of the opening steps is provided in HOULGATE, S. **The Opening of Hegel's Logic**. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006, chapters 14-22.

³⁵ This account of the course of the *Phenomenology* and of the relation between the latter and the beginning of the *Logic* is defended most notably by Maker in MAKER, W. **Philosophy Without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel**. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994. It receives support in WINFIELD, R. **Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Rethinking in Seventeen Lectures**. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013, p. 21 and 377-78, and COMAY, R. and RUDA, F. **The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing**. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018, p. 148, n.17. For criticism of the viability of this solution to the problem of beginning, see DUNPHY, R. “On the Incompatibility of Hegel's *Phenomenology* with the Beginning of his *Logic*”. **The Review of Metaphysics** Volume 74, n. 1, 2020, p. 100-119.

the result of this derivation coincides, in the concept of pure being, with the immediacy of the beginning of the *Logic*.³⁶

Whether this amounts to a convincing attempt to legitimise the beginning of Hegel's science of logic is not under consideration here. What matters for my purposes is that it is clear that Hegel is engaging seriously with the problem of how to render that beginning legitimate, and appears to recognise that being able to answer sceptical objections in this context is essential for the scientific status of his logical project. When one turns to the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, however, the matter is not nearly so clear.

Elements of Hegel's discussion in the introduction and preliminaries to the *Encyclopaedia Logic* overlap, unsurprisingly, with material from the essay, "With what must the beginning of the science be made?" from the greater *Logic*, in which Hegel sets out the solution to the problem of how to begin such a science that I have just outlined. Just as in the former text, Hegel acknowledges that the difficulty with legitimising the beginning of such a science springs from the fact that it looks as though such a beginning either rests on unproven presuppositions, or is itself, qua immediacy, merely an arbitrary presupposition (8: §1).

Later on, Hegel once again suggests that the exclusive opposition between mediation and immediacy which structures the above dilemma is itself an assumption that might be abandoned:

The opposition of a self-standing immediacy of content or knowing and an opposing, equally self-standing mediation which is incompatible with the former, is first of all to be set aside, because it is a mere *presupposition* and an arbitrary *assurance* (8: §78).

What he goes on to say appears to coincide roughly with the argument from the greater *Logic*, to the effect that the concept of pure being might be understood as the unification of the result of a presupposed "mediation", specifically an argument which would thoroughly eliminate dogmatic presuppositions about thought, and the consequent immediacy, or presuppositionlessness of thought (8: §78). There are two significant differences in the account, however. The first difference is that the mediation in question here is not explicitly identified with the

³⁶ It is therefore at the same time a contribution to the attempt to legitimise the form of reasoning which the rest of Hegel's *Logic* will develop.

argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but with that of a 'negative science' of 'completed scepticism' (8: §78A).³⁷

The second, more significant difference in the *Encyclopaedia* discussion of the beginning of logic presented in §78, however, is that Hegel appears to row back on the importance of understanding pure being in terms of the unity of the determinations of mediation and immediacy in this sense. Recall that, in the greater *Logic*, Hegel's argument was that precisely this was required in order for a candidate for the beginning of a science of logic not to be rebutted by the sceptic, since only such a concept had an answer available to both horns of the dilemma about beginning, because one could (at least, so the argument appears to go) respond that such a concept is neither merely arbitrarily assumed, since it has been derived, nor that it exhibits a problematic reliance for its justification on this derivation, because of its simple or presuppositionless character.

Here, however, although Hegel again insists on the immediacy of the beginning, characterising it in terms of 'total presuppositionlessness' and as 'the simplicity of thought' (8: §78A), he appears no longer to think that it is important to distinguish the concept of pure being from an arbitrary assumption by deriving it. Instead of insisting on such a mediation, or derivation, as he did before, Hegel writes that 'it would be not only an unpleasant but also a superfluous path' and suggests instead simply that 'the resolution to think purely' and freely abstract from

³⁷ I acknowledge that this passage does not amount to an explicit repudiation of the role of the *Phenomenology* in securing the beginning of the *Logic*, but the absence of any reference to the *Phenomenology* here is still striking, and suggests to me that its role, at least in the specific argument about the beginning of the *Logic*, has been rethought. But perhaps this is too quick. It might be objected that this could in fact be an indirect reference to the *Phenomenology*, since what Hegel here calls an "completed scepticism" (*vollbrachte Skeptizismus*) can recall his famous description of the *Phenomenology* as a 'self-completed scepticism' (*sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*) (3:72). Vieweg, for example, favours this interpretation. VIEWEG, K. **Skepsis und Freiheit: Hegel über Skeptizismus zwischen Philosophie und Literatur**. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007, p. 33. I am not convinced, however. If we consult Karl Hegel's record of his father's 1831 lectures on logic we find no explicit reference to the *Phenomenology* in the discussion of §78. Instead, there is a brief appeal to Descartes, and more significantly still, to the ancient sceptics, whose arguments, Hegel says 'proved of everything, that it is not stable' resulting in the 'thorough tranquillity of the mind, *ataraxia*' or 'nothing'. HEGEL, G.W.F. **Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte, Bd.10**. Hamburg: Meiner, 2001, p. 83-84. It seems to me that the "completed scepticism" Hegel has in mind in the *Encyclopaedia* is precisely not one that completes *itself*, by way of determinate negation, as in the *Phenomenology*, but one that would be accomplished by philosophers like the ancient sceptics. This is why he goes on to claim that such an introduction would be carried out 'only empirically and unscientifically' (8 §78A), as it would proceed by way of the abstract negation of whichever thought-determinations it encountered, ultimately resulting in "nothing". This clearly distinguishes the "completed scepticism" discussed here from the self-completing scepticism of the *Phenomenology* which has an explicitly scientific character, and which operates according to a model of negation the result of which is precisely *not* "nothing", according to Hegel.

all content (8: §78A) is sufficient to commence his science of logic with the concept of pure being.³⁸

If one allows Hegel the claim that the result of abstracting from all presuppositions, indeed, from all the content of thought, will result in his concept of pure being, this still seems to leave him in a position whereby declaring that a science of logic should begin with this concept looks troublingly indistinguishable from beginning with a mere assumption.³⁹ Certainly appealing to a resolution on the philosopher's part will not sway a sceptic concerned about the justification for beginning with pure being. The question that must be answered in the face of this adjustment, on Hegel's part, is that of why he no longer thinks it necessary to provide some justification for beginning as he does, or why, instead of demonstrating that the concept of pure being occurs as the result of the thorough elimination of all dogmatic presuppositions, he suggests that it is adequate simply to abstract from them. Abstracting from various possibilities, after all, is not the same as eliminating them.

The answer Hegel gives as to why he thinks that a scepticism that would 'go through all the forms of cognition' and 'would demonstrate the nullity' of their presuppositions (8: §78A) amounts to a superfluous task is that, 'the dialectic itself is an essential moment of the

³⁸ An anonymous reviewer for this journal has pointed out that I have not offered an explanation as to why Hegel might have changed his mind about the argument in favour of the legitimacy of the beginning of the *Logic*. I agree that such an explanation is desirable, but I think that providing a detailed investigation into Hegel's developing attitudes towards the argument of the *Phenomenology* and towards the presentation of his system cannot be accomplished here. A plausible, albeit somewhat speculative hypothesis, it seems to me, is that Hegel came to recognise that the *Phenomenology*, at least as he had published it, has done rather more than demonstrate the necessity of the standpoint of science, which was its original intention (8: §25A). Instead, as Hegel acknowledges, as the argument of the *Phenomenology* progressed, he found it necessary to address content which properly belongs to his philosophical science itself. 'The presentation is thereby made more complicated', Hegel says, as 'what belongs to the concrete parts [of the science] is already partly included in the introduction' (8: §25A). It seems to me that this feature of the *Phenomenology* brings with it problems for Hegel's original solution to the problem of the beginning of the *Logic*, since it implies that the conclusion of the *Phenomenology* amounts to more than the elimination of dogmatic presuppositions. This in turn makes it difficult for the conclusion of the *Phenomenology* to coincide with the presuppositionless beginning of the *Logic*. See DUNPHY, R. "On the Incompatibility", p.100-07, for a discussion of some of these problems. If Hegel were sensitive to this kind of concern, then it would make sense for him to entertain the possibility of replacing the *Phenomenology* with an alternative sceptical introduction, or to argue that the beginning of the *Logic* might in fact not require such an introduction at all. As I read §78 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel does indeed entertain both of these options and endorses the second.

³⁹ It is worth noting that this is not the same problem as the one that Hegel addresses in the preface to his *Phenomenology* when he discusses the topic of beginning and first principles (3:27-28). There Hegel is concerned with problems having to do with the insufficiency of any given beginning to adequately support a systematic science – a problem which he attempts to resolve in part by relocating the foundation of such a science to its results, and partly by rejecting the idea that it must have the form of a single proposition, as I have already indicated. In the material now under examination, Hegel is addressing the issue of the legitimacy of any particular candidate for beginning.

affirmative science' (8: §78A).⁴⁰ This sounds a little obscure, but what Hegel is saying is that the argumentative procedure by which the derivation of his logical categories proceeds is one that relies upon illustrating oppositions between concepts, oppositions of the kind that, in other circumstances, would give rise to a sceptical conclusion of the kind being suggested as a preliminary to the beginning of that derivation, and that, consequently, carrying out such a preliminary sceptical elimination of dogmatic assumptions is unnecessary.

Thus, in his sketch of the procedure of his logical investigation, Hegel claims that, if one considers two opposing or incompatible concepts ordinarily, this '*dialectical* moment... constitutes *scepticism*, it contains mere negation as a result' (8: §81-81A): the two concepts in question are seen to be incompatible and, in the absence of a compelling case for accepting the validity of one over the other, there is nothing to do but suspend judgement. In the case of the procedure of his logic, however, Hegel thinks that there is an alternative outcome, since he claims to exploit the possibility of 'grasping the unity of the determinations in their opposition to one another, the *affirmative* that is contained in their dissolution and their going over [into one another].⁴¹ This he refers to as the '*speculative or positive-rational*' side of the reasoning according to which he proceeds. (8: §82).

The suggestion seems to be that, as well as providing a scientific derivation of the fundamental categories of thought, Hegel's (objective) logic is, at the same time, a critique of any understanding of such categories which does not recognise the possibility of the speculative resolution of their oppositions in more adequate concepts, and ultimately in the structure of the concept. As it proceeds, then, it also illustrates the deficiencies in the ordinary or dogmatic grasp of such concepts. Because his "positive" treatment of logic also accomplishes this "negative" task, Hegel seems to be arguing, it is superfluous to insist on an additional "negative science" of scepticism in order to carry it out in anticipation of the science of logic.⁴²

⁴⁰ As I have already noted, Hegel also complains that such a sceptical project would have to engage with such presuppositions unscientifically, or merely as it encounters them, in an empirical fashion. This may or may not be the case, but this complaint does not alleviate the necessity of the task, if it is in fact a necessary one.

⁴¹ See also 8: §81Z2

⁴² An anonymous reviewer for this journal suggests that this material might be read as in fact being in line with Hegel's earlier reliance on the *Phenomenology* to secure the beginning of his logic, because of the overlap between the two projects (which I have already acknowledged) and because the *Phenomenology* also operates with the same scientific procedure as Hegel's logic. It may be that adequately addressing this concern would require a more detailed discussion of the relationship between phenomenology and logic in Hegel's thought than I can provide here, but I see no strong reason to think that Hegel is referring to the *Phenomenology* as well as to the objective logic specifically when he argues in §78 of the *Encyclopaedia* that the inclusion of scepticism within his affirmative scientific procedure renders the idea of a sceptical introduction to logic "superfluous". The context of this remark is an explanation of why the mere resolve to abstract from everything and think purely is sufficient for the

Obviously, much more would need to be said in order to really make sense of Hegel's dialectical or speculative logical procedure, but I propose, for the sake of argument, to simply accept this claim of Hegel's: to allow that his procedure is entirely valid, and that his project does indeed contain within itself, additionally, a thoroughgoing critique of dogmatic assumptions about the fundamental categories of thought. The problem, it seems to me, is that, in appealing to this feature of the speculative procedure of Hegel's logical investigation in order to reject the necessity of mediating or deriving the presuppositionless beginning of that investigation, Hegel has slipped back to his earlier tendency to simply assert the validity of a notion of speculative reason that encompasses and supersedes sceptical argumentation, without doing the work necessary to persuade the sceptic of the validity of such a notion.⁴³ I cannot see that this slippage amounts to anything other than a weakening of the case that Hegel makes for the scientific status of his logic, since a sceptical interlocutor has been provided neither with reason to doubt any dogmatic assumptions about the categories of thought that they have, nor with an argument for beginning a science of logic with the concept of pure being.⁴⁴

If he is to legitimise the beginning of his account of logic in the manner that his conception of a science demands, it seems to me that Hegel should either fall back on the anti-sceptical argument he provides in his greater *Logic*, or else substantiate this "negative science" of "completed scepticism" which he mistakenly describes as superfluous. As it stands, however, the *Encyclopaedia Logic* does not adequately legitimise the beginning of Hegel's project.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined some of the criteria that Hegel observes in making the case that his treatment of logic amounts to a genuine science. These have included the demand that it be systematically organised, that it prove or demonstrate its results a priori on the basis of a

beginning of Hegel's logical project. This indicates, I think, that the intra-scientific sceptical results that Hegel appeals to here are clearly those that are arrived at *after* beginning logic on the basis of such a resolve. This suggests that it is not a reference to the *Phenomenology*, since although it too amounts to a science according to Hegel and proceeds dialectically, it is still clearly an introduction which precedes the beginning of the logical science. Thus I would reiterate that, although I see no explicit repudiation of the argument of the *Phenomenology* here, its absence from the *Encyclopaedia* discussion of the beginning of logic suggests to me that its role in relation to that specific issue has been rethought.

⁴³ It is worth noting that, in the greater *Logic*, the material that spells out the dialectical procedure of the investigation occurs as one of its conclusions, in the section on the absolute idea (6:551-71).

⁴⁴ That this amounts to a "back and forth" on Hegel's part is made clearer if one bears in mind that he offers his original anti-sceptical argument for the legitimacy of beginning with pure being in the first edition of the first book of his greater *Logic*, then publishes three editions of the *Encyclopaedia* which appear to abandon that argument, yet then endorses the argument again in the second edition of the first book of his greater *Logic*.

secure foundation, and that it proceed by way of strict derivation, so that each concept addressed follows necessarily from the last. I have, however, focused my attention on two criteria peculiar to Hegel. Firstly, I have examined Hegel's insistence that it is essential that a science of logic exhibit a circular structure, and suggested that this criterion is a part of Hegel's attempt to prove the completeness of his treatment of the categories of thought.

Secondly, I have examined the significance of the beginning of Hegel's derivation of logical categories. I suggested that, for Hegel, the matter of the beginning was not identical to the matter of the foundation of the science, but that it appeared to invite sceptical objections in much the same manner as typical statements of a first principle tend to. I briefly made the case that Hegel, in his *Science of Logic*, makes an attempt to overcome sceptical objections which might threaten the beginning of his treatment of logic, but then showed that, in his *Encyclopaedia Logic*, he abandons this solution. Finally, I have suggested that this latter move on Hegel's part amounts to retrograde step in his philosophical development, towards merely asserting the validity of a notion of speculative reason in the face of sceptical doubts. When considering the beginning of Hegel's science of logic, then, it falls to the sceptic to engage seriously with the anti-sceptical argument of "With what must the beginning of the science be made?", but in the face of the presentation of the beginning of the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, the sceptic is within their rights to remain unpersuaded that Hegel has established his treatment of logic as a genuine science.

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