

Hegel on the Margins: Derrida and the Relapse into Metaphysics*

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ABSTRACT: The question of how to begin a philosophical system belongs to the internal logic of every systematic philosophy and involves the notion of absolute presuppositions. This article deals with the concept of such a *beginning* in Hegel and Derrida. First, the article thematizes the aporia of *beginning* against the background of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel. Second, it focuses on the introductory sections of the "Doctrine of Essence" in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which have not received sufficient attention in relation to this topic so far. In these sections, Hegel raises the question of the relationship between immediacy and mediation, which he has made central to the question of beginning. I argue that in these sections Hegel offers an instructive alternative to the absolutization and singularization of the beginning and the denial of its conceivability, while building a bridge to a "postmetaphysical" way of thinking that integrates critique with an awareness of the problem of ultimate metaphysical grounds. Finally, my key argument is that Derrida who, like Hegel, is critical of the notion of an *absolute beginning* still fails to escape the aporia of beginning with his concept of *différance*; and, consequently, in his critique of metaphysics, Derrida ends up returning to Hegel precisely at the moment when he tries the hardest to break from him.

KEYWORDS: Hegel, Derrida, Kierkegaard, metaphysics, logic, beginning, *différance*

1. Introduction

A short text from 1697 by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz entitled *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* begins in somewhat resigned tones:

For we cannot find in any of the individual things, or even in the entire collection and series of things, a sufficient reason for why they exist. [...] And so, however far back we might go into previous states, we will never find in those states a complete explanation [*ratio*] for why, indeed, there is any world at all, and why it is the way it is.²

Two things are noteworthy about Leibniz's reflection. First, his identification of "ground" (*Grund*) with "origin" (*Ursprung*): for Leibniz, as for the whole classical-metaphysical tradition of Platonic and Aristotelian provenance, that which realizes an optimum of being is that which comes first; the unity of genealogical *beginning* and founding *principle*

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¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments as well as Adrian Wilding for the translation and Nahum Brown for suggestions on how to improve the manuscript.

² LEIBNIZ, G.W. On the Ultimate Origination of Things. In: **Philosophical Essays**. Trans. R. Ariew; D. Garber. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1989, p. 149.



is what constitutes the *ground* of the metaphysical tradition itself. Second, Leibniz's words already point to a certain paradox of beginning: the initial ground must be present in the "series of things" as its principle, yet that same ground cannot be conceived as part of the series itself. The grounding principle is at once inside and outside of that which it grounds. Here we see an essential determination of the *concept* of beginning: it represents, in every sense of the term, a limit concept (*Grenzbegriff*). Since the exploration of such "limit concepts," in which thought strikes the "bedrock" of categorial foundations, has always been the peculiar preserve of philosophy, it is not surprising that in every great systemic philosophy the problem of beginning has been at the heart of conceptual endeavors.

This article deals with the concept of beginning as thematized by Hegel in his *Science of Logic*, before assessing Derrida's critique and revaluation of Hegel's concept. Hegel's *Logic* arguably counts as a new beginning on a par with the heights of *classical* metaphysics, since it poses the question not merely of the "what" of beginning, but also, in reflexive manner, the question of the "how." In other words, it poses the question of what conceptual demands are needed to satisfy a concept of beginning. Hegel's logic of beginning, it will be made clear, already builds a bridge to a "postmetaphysical" way of thinking which knows how to integrate critique with an awareness of the problem of ultimate metaphysical grounds.³ I do not claim that Hegel does *not* have a metaphysical approach; I claim, instead, that he builds a bridge to a postmetaphysical way of thinking by criticizing the *traditional* metaphysical way of thinking of a beginning as expressed in Hegel's "Logic of Being". In the "Logic of Essence," Hegel claims that the characterization of something as "essential" presupposes a *different* conceptual architecture, or, more precisely, a different semantic *infrastructure*, from the one presupposed by the concepts of Being. Traditional metaphysics distinguishes Essence from Being by understanding Essence as something that lies "at the back of this being."⁴ From the start, Hegel criticizes this abstract conception of Essence as a relapse into the logic of Being, which it had aimed to transcend. When Essence is conceived as the product of an external reflection and as the "negation of all Being" and thereby stands in opposition to Being, it falls back into the "*pure being*"⁵ of the beginning. According to this traditional conception of metaphysics, essence is

³ For a detailed discussion of Hegel's conception of metaphysics see DE LAURENTIIS, A. (Ed). **Hegel and Metaphysics: On Logic and Ontology in the System**. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016. As for the interplay between Hegel's *Logic* and metaphysics, see Elena Ficara's article in the same volume (FICARA, E. The Interplay Between Logic and Metaphysics. In: DE LAURENTIIS, A. (Ed). **Hegel and Metaphysics: On Logic and Ontology in the System**. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016, p. 109-118).

⁴ HEGEL, G.W.F. **Science of Logic**. Trans. A. V. Miller. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999, p. 389.

⁵ HEGEL. **Science of Logic**, p. 389.

whatever happens to be left over once all determinate Being has been stripped away. This critique of the traditional concept of Essence uncovers two requirements for an improved concept of Essence. First, Essence must be able to develop *out of itself*. As something “absolute,” it must not have the appearance of being a “product” or “something made”⁶ generated by a reflection that is external to it, but must instead be what it is *through itself*. Second, Essence must not lose its determination as a *determinacy in general*, even though it maintains this in *another form than that of Being*, namely as *self-determination*. “Being-in-and-for-itself (*Anundfürsichsein*),” which he also conceives as “absolute *being-in-itself*,”⁷ is Hegel’s term for an expression that meets all of these requirements as the overall constitution of Essence.

Accordingly, the final part of this article shows, via an evaluation of Derrida’s critique of Hegel, why Hegel’s concept of beginning cannot simply be dismissed as “metaphysical” (in this traditional sense of metaphysics), and why Derrida’s own concept of *différance* shares the Hegelian critique of an absolute beginning (as developed in the “Logic of Essence”) without doing justice to it.

(1) This article proceeds by first considering a key objection to Hegel’s account raised by Kierkegaard. (2) It goes on to develop a Hegelian response to this objection and argues that Hegel finds a path between the absolutization and singularization⁸ of the beginning and the denial of its conceivability, which makes the problem of the beginning precisely the motor of a more complex concept of itself. (3) Finally, this article explores the claim that Derrida shares Hegel’s critique of the demand for a presuppositionless, or ineluctable, beginning of philosophical discourse, just as he shares Hegel’s view of the contradictory character of such a starting point. Time and again, in explaining his concept of *différance*, Derrida rejects the idea that it is a founding principle, arguing instead that this fundamental concept lies beyond the logic of beginning. (4) However, as I argue in the final part, the aporia that arises from this cannot be resolved by means of Derrida’s concept itself. The movement of *différance*, in effect, returns to first principles precisely when Derrida denies that *différance* can be established as a first principle and as the form of something “primary” in his philosophy. Ironically, Hegel’s philosophy (Hegel’s own metaphysical approach) often reappears on the margins precisely

⁶ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 390, trans. amended.

⁷ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 390.

⁸ Here Hegel’s *Differenzschrift* with its critique of the singularity of Fichte’s *Grundsatz* is relevant (HEGEL, G.W.F. *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*. Trans. H. S. Harris; Walter Cerf. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977, p. 103-109).

where Derrida is most keen to “cross him out.” This proves that Derrida is guilty of the same charge he levels at Hegel: namely universalism.

In conclusion, therefore, I make a plea for a just hearing of Hegel’s reflections on the *beginning* in philosophy, especially in light of post-structuralist reflections on the “endless” and “groundless” narrative of philosophy. From Hegel’s philosophy one can come to terms with the multidimensionality of the beginning, of a beginning which must be counterposed to the beginning’s supposed “irrationality” or ideologically “metaphysical” character. The beginning of every conceptual process is a point at which diverse lines of thought (epistemological, practical, aesthetic) intersect and sustain each other, and where solely epistemological or merely critical perspectives produce uncertainties.

My intention here is not to survey and reconstruct the field of discussion in an exhaustive way, but rather to gather sufficient evidence for the systematic thesis of this article based on Hegel’s and Derrida’s positions. The reason why neither the key chapter from Hegel’s *Logic*, “With what must the Science begin?”⁹ nor the writings of Derrida that explicitly address Hegel, form central parts of this investigation¹⁰ is due to my concentrating on *systematic* issues for which the philological and textual are only means to an end. This is why I concentrate on the introductory sections of the “Logic of Essence,” particularly on the short chapter called “Positing Reflection.”

The Logic of Reflection not only employs some of the fundamental conceptual building blocks of Hegel’s *Logic* as a whole; it also announces the “basic structure”¹¹ of his thinking. Here, Hegel focuses on the logic of the relation between immediacy and mediation, determinations of reflection which, in his section “With what must the Science begin?” he had already made central to the question of the beginning, but which he was not yet able to explain. In other words, the transition from being to nothing cannot yet be made through a dialectical determination of reflection; it can only be captured retrospectively within the “Logic of

⁹ In the translation from George Di Giovanni, the chapter title has been translated as “With what must the beginning of science be made?” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *The Science of Logic*. Trans. G. Di Giovanni. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For an extensive and still ground-breaking study of the problem of the beginning in Hegel, see HOULGATE, S. *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic: From Being to Infinity*. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ The essay “Le puits et la pyramide” (1972) is a critical as well as appreciative reception of Hegel’s theory of signs. According to the essay, Hegel’s theory is equivalent to Derrida’s famous critique of phonocentrism. “La différance” (1972), on the other hand, is a synthesis of the preceding critique and represents a culmination of his own theory of signs, in which Derrida explicitly deals with the conception of identity. The question of the possibility of concepts of beginning and origin has become more central in the context of the discussions of *différance* and therefore forms the central subject of this investigation.

¹¹ HENRICH, D. *Hegel im Kontext*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 148.

Essence” for the first time in an adequate way. This is why I think it is necessary to explain the logic of beginning with pure being through the logic of positing reflection. Thus, this article does not leave aside the section on the beginning of the *Logic*, but takes a different perspective on the problem by justifying the beginning retrospectively. The question, then, is not how the beginning can be conceived *prospectively* as an initial point, but how the beginning relates to itself *retrospectively* as the actual reason or ground [*Grund*] of what it has become. By raising the question of a beginning in this way, my article assumes that immediacy is always already a sublated immediacy.¹² For an appropriate grasp of the logical form of *beginning* in philosophy, it is necessary to rethink the exclusive contradiction between immediacy and mediation. This is the key determination of the beginning that establishes it as presuppositionless and thus as not mediated by anything else, which raises the question of how the beginning can be thought of as determinate without, at the same time, negating its determinateness *as* the beginning.

2. *The Aporia of the Beginning*

“The dialectic of the beginning must be made clear. What is the almost amusing thing about it – that the beginning is and again is not, because it is the beginning – this true dialectical observation has for some time now been a kind of game played in good Hegelian society.”¹³ So writes Kierkegaard in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, referring thereby to Hegel’s “Doctrine of Being”: “Pure being makes the beginning, because it is pure thought as well as the undetermined, simple immediate, [and because] the first beginning cannot be anything mediated and further determined.”¹⁴ When Kierkegaard insists that the beginning should be “made clear,” he insinuates at the same time that Hegel’s thematized Being fails to make this clear.

¹² I thank the second anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. Angelica Nuzzo proposes a fruitful distinction between “first truth” and “second truth.” While first truth refers to the unity of “being and nothing” at the very beginning of the “Logic of Being,” the “last truth” reconsiders (from the perspective of “absolute method”) “the logical development in terms of ‘beginning,’ ‘advancement,’ and ‘end.’” (NUZZO, A. *Thinking Being: Method in Hegel’s Logic of Being*. In: Baur, M.; Houlgate, S. (Eds.). *A Companion to Hegel*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2011, p.127.) The last truth is that kind of truth that is justified retrospectively by taking all the other preceding steps from the beginning to the end into account.

¹³ KIERKEGAARD, S. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*. Trans. A. Hannay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 94.

¹⁴ HEGEL, G.W.F. *The Encyclopedia Logic. Part 1 of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*. Trans. T. F. Geraets; W. A. Suchting; H. S. Harris. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1991, §86, p. 136.

“The System,” Kierkegaard writes, “begins with the immediate and therefore *without any presuppositions* and therefore absolutely; i.e., the system’s beginning is an absolute beginning.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard thereby poses a critical question, *how* does the system begin with the immediate, i.e., how does it begin with it immediately? To answer this question, Kierkegaard offers the following hypothesis:

If the system is assumed to come after existence itself ... then the system does of course come afterwards and therefore does not begin immediately with the immediacy with which existence itself began; even if in another sense it may be said that existence itself did not begin with the immediate, since the immediate never is but is sublated as soon as it is.¹⁶

Kierkegaard has already made the following fundamental distinction, which places in question the absolute beginning in its immediacy, and which is designed to show why the beginning “is not” in such an immediate sense¹⁷ and thus why, as immediate presupposition, it can never be determined as existing in a conceptual-systematic manner. Kierkegaard’s distinction comes down to the question of whether the system starts (1) *through* or (2) *with* the beginning.

Let us take in (1) first. If it is *through* the beginning that the system begins, then the beginning *is* immediately *before* the system; and as such the beginning is itself presuppositionless, though *as presupposition* (of the system) it is not inherent to the system itself. In any case, such a beginning would be unthinkable, precisely because it takes place before any possible determinations of thought, which it is meant to ground in the first place. For Kierkegaard, therefore, the idea of the immediacy of the beginning is conceptually mistaken inasmuch as it immediately presents itself (so to speak, as an independent entity) *before* every manifestation of being; it always already *is*. However, as such an immediacy, i.e., as an “absolute beginning,” it would be unthinkable. If it were not inherent in the system itself, it would be incomprehensible to it. Outside of all possible thought determinations that first arise from it, such an immediacy would be the primal leap (*Ursprung*) into the unthinkable, into the abyss (*Abgrund*) or primal ground (*Urgrund*). However, if this immediacy is unthinkable, it also *is not* (how can it exist if it is not thinkable?). Moreover, it cannot exist, because it has no

¹⁵ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 94, my emphasis.

¹⁶ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 95, trans. amended.

¹⁷ See KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 94.

content beyond itself, since the beginning would “begin with nothing”¹⁸ other than itself; it would at most have itself as a presupposition.¹⁹ As *absolute* beginning, i.e. as the beginning of a system of *all* reality, it would be the beginning of all being; but this would mean that being would not be one of its attributes but would, rather, first follow from it. In this sense, the beginning would *not be*, since to say “that the beginning is not and that the beginning begins with nothing are wholly identical propositions, and I have not budged.”²⁰

When we take in possibility (2), on the other hand, we recognize that the beginning is nevertheless *the* beginning, which means, in turn, that it *is*. From this perspective, one could say that the system begins *with* the beginning, and as such the beginning is – as a (still presuppositionless) presupposition of the system – part of the system. But how can it be the presupposition of something that it itself is? To be this would mean to be its own presupposition (albeit within the system). But in that case, as the beginning *of something* of which it is at the same time a part, it would no longer be *purely determined by itself* (i.e., its absolutely independent character would be abolished). Therefore, if it is a part of that which it itself initiates (within the system), it would be at one and the same time a conditional and an unconditional element. And so the beginning would no longer (really) be the beginning, since, if the beginning is a part of the system, it would always already be in existence, from which it is categorially distinguished as the immediate beginning. This would mean, furthermore, that the beginning would no longer be the beginning as something immediate, because it would be in the midst of being while being at the same time *being*. The system “therefore does not begin immediately with the immediacy with which existence itself began; even if in another sense it may be said that existence itself did not begin with the immediate, since the immediate never is but is sublated as soon as it is.”²¹

What Kierkegaard tries to point out vis-a-vis Hegel here is a kind of “impossible” dialectic: in its immediacy, the beginning of the system cannot be thought of meaningfully. But, contra Kierkegaard, this points to the *systematic* nature of knowledge. In other words, what is at stake is the unity of the system in its beginning and end. What Kierkegaard’s critique aims to establish is that the immediate has an existential dimension which points beyond

¹⁸ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 97.

¹⁹ This is the classical concept of divine substance as “*causa sui*,” i.e. cause of itself. “By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing... By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself” (Spinoza, B. *Complete Works*. Trans. S. Shirley, ed. M. Morgan. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 2002, p. 217).

²⁰ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 97-8.

²¹ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 95, trans. amended.

conceptually systematic thought as such. However, Hegel's philosophy of beginning in the *Science of Logic* is not so easily overcome; it is more complex and reflexive than Kierkegaard's polemic takes it to be.

At the start of "With What Must the Science Begin?," Hegel claims that "it is only in recent times that thinkers have become aware of the difficulty of finding a beginning in philosophy, and the reason for this difficulty and also the possibility of resolving it has been much discussed."²² The beginning of the *Science of Logic* reflects the beginnings of the logical in general and shows that the beginning in philosophy forms, in a sense, the *beginning of thought* and thus the origin of philosophy itself. Hegel's philosophical system is thus distinct from all other philosophical systems because its starting point is not only the beginning, but also a *reflection on the beginning*. In "With What Must the Science Begin?" Hegel poses the question: with what must the beginning begin? As a system of "pure thought,"²³ in which "logical forms"²⁴ become the sole content and where the "system of pure reason"²⁵ is established, logic is thus obliged first of all to examine the concept of the beginning. The very thought-formation of the beginning should not simply be taken for granted in the sense of an "unfounded presupposition,"²⁶ which one "holds to be ultimate"²⁷ and which, as a "restricted determination,"²⁸ requires no further examination. On the contrary, modern Cartesian philosophy, which understands the beginning of philosophy as the firm ground of its thought-structures, now demands a greater understanding of *how* to think the beginning (beginning in thought) before it can agree on *what* to begin with (thinking of a beginning).

Hegel treats the problem of the beginning simultaneously from the perspective of mediation and immediacy. "What philosophy begins with must be either *mediated* or *immediate*, and it is easy to show that it can be neither the one nor the other."²⁹ The fundamental *logical* question raised by the beginning is whether that with which one begins either starts immediately from itself (*causa sui*), or whether it arises out of something prior, from which it is mediated. For Hegel, mediation and immediacy behave here in structural terms as contradictory opposites (*tertium non datur*). The beginning cannot be absolutely immediate

²² HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 67.

²³ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 50.

²⁴ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 48.

²⁵ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 50.

²⁶ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §14, p. 39.

²⁷ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §28A, p. 67.

²⁸ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §28A, p. 67.

²⁹ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 67.

because, as such, it would be empty of content (abstract) and wholly indeterminate, with the result that nothing would be able to follow from it. At the same time, it would contradict the logic of beginning to be something mediated, since any absolute beginning must define itself as something no longer mediated. In this “neither-nor” of mediation and immediacy, Hegel is also criticizing the traditional logical-grammatical form of “either-or” and thus the form of abstract relations of the understanding implicit in it, whose essence consists precisely in “making one-sided and abstract determinations valid in their isolation.”³⁰ This is why Hegel sketches the aporia of the beginning, preparing the field for his own “solution,” which will rearrange the relation of mediation and immediacy according to the speculative nature of the concept. “A closer look shows that the finite is not restricted merely from the outside;” Hegel writes, “rather, it sublates itself by virtue of its own nature, and passes over, of itself, into its opposite.”³¹ The seemingly exclusive relation between mediation and immediacy is a finite one which is subject to the mode of determination of the understanding – this is clear from Hegel’s approach.

3. “Positing Reflection” as a Form of the Beginning in Hegel’s “Logic of Essence”

“The question of origin is at first confounded with the question of essence.”³²

It is worth recalling the system-logical determination of the beginning, which Hegel addresses in the “beginning text” of the *Science of Logic*. The absolute beginning as empty abstract Being is already “truth.”³³ The reason for this is, First, because the system of “pure knowledge,” as the overall context of thinking, returns at the end to its beginning; in this way this primal beginning is also simultaneously the “raw form” of what comes last and thus of the

³⁰ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §81A1, p. 129. “The abstract *either-or*” (Hegel. *Encyclopedia*, §80A, p. 128) as “relapse into the metaphysical understanding” (HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §65, p. 114) is treated by Hegel as a “relationship of external mediation based upon clinging to the finite; i.e., to one-sided determinations” (HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §65, p. 114) and thereby as an altogether false alternative.

³¹ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §81Z, p. 129.

³² DERRIDA, J. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G.C. Spivak. Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press. 1997, p. 74. In Foucault’s powerful updating of Nietzsche’s ‘genealogical method’ one can also find formulations that identify the ‘origin’ with the metaphysical ‘essence’ of the thing: “Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*), at least on those occasions when he is truly a genealogist? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession” (FOUCAULT, M. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In: Rabinow, P. (Ed.). *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p. 78).

³³ See HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §86, p. 137.

whole. The second reason is because “pure knowledge” in the end reclaims the determination of “immediacy” which characterizes its primal beginning, but now as “mediated immediacy.” Hegel illustrates this in historical terms, explaining via Parmenides’ ontology why Being must count as the “first definition” of the Absolute.³⁴ It must count as this because God must be conceived in his unlimited nature, and that means, first, without any definiteness (delimitation) and, second, as the ground of all that exists, i.e., as that being which is inherent in all beings. God is the “*sum total of all realities*,”³⁵ the “*Supremely Real*.”³⁶ “What is *first* in the *science* had of necessity to show itself *historically* as the first”³⁷ and so the concepts of pure being coincide in their abstraction. Hegel’s objection lies in grasping this abstract unity as something that is latent with its own ever more concrete self-unfolding. Already in this macrological tension between the beginning and the fulfilling movement of the whole system of knowledge, we find the dimension of reflexive constitution which Hegel will explore more closely in the chapter on “Positing Reflection” in the “Logic of Essence.”³⁸

Before we do this, it is necessary briefly to present Hegel’s basic ideas from the start of the “Logic of Essence,” as context for the chapter on “Positing Reflection,” which is central to the present argument. In a nutshell, the crucial question of the “Logic of Essence” is: what makes something what it is? Whereas the characteristic of thought-determinations in the form of being (immediacy) is that “in their distinction they are *others vis-à-vis* each other”³⁹ and that in their transitions they relate to each other *externally*, Hegel will show in the “Logic of Essence” that the selfhood of a thing (its identity or its essence) is *solely* and *essentially* determined by its relation to something else.⁴⁰

In the “Logic of Essence,” the meaning of relations of immediacy and mediation fundamentally changes. Whereas the only immediate relationship that a thing can possess at all is its relation to itself (self-relation as essential immediacy thus forms the identical core of a

³⁴ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §86, p. 137.

³⁵ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 389.

³⁶ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §86, p. 137.

³⁷ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 88 R1.

³⁸ For a more detailed discussion of how “positing reflection” relates to the other “forms of reflection,” see WIRSING, C. *Die Begründung des Realen. Hegels “Logik” im Kontext der Realitätsdebatte um 1800*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021.

³⁹ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §84, p. 135.

⁴⁰ HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §83A, p. 134: “*Being*...is...only what is *immediate*, and *Essence*...is...only what is *mediated*.” Only in the concept do both come together as “what is mediated through and with itself, so that it shows itself to be at the same time the genuinely immediate” (HEGEL. *Encyclopedia*, §83A, p. 134).

thing's being-in-itself),⁴¹ mediation occurs precisely in the thing's relating (as a relation) to something other, indeed to everything that is not itself, i.e., as a movement of determinacy that qualifies the thing. Thus, to think about the essence of a thing is to see what it is (what constitutes its self-identity) as inseparable from its relationship to something else: a thing's self-relation is also its other-relation, i.e., we have a unity in difference of self-relation and other-relation. One of Hegel's great achievements is to have recognized and formulated this *dialectic* of self-relation and other-relation against the Platonic *separation* of essential being-in-itself and its relation to something else.⁴² These relations, which exist independently of one another in the sphere of being, exist in Hegel's "Logic of Essence" as "mere illusory being"⁴³ (*bloßer Schein*). In their mere opposition, they are to be sublated.

Hegel applies these ontological relationships to that between "being" (*Sein*) and "illusory being" (*Schein*). Thus, while the ontological notion of being works with two completely disconnected relationships standing in abstract antithesis (the immediate relation of being to itself and the mediated relation of being to non-being), Hegel finds in illusory being the possibility of a transition to a proper logic of essence. Thus, illusory being acts as a bridge leading to the determinations of essence, allowing a thing to be grasped and comprehended in its infinite variety and in the infinite diversity of its attributes. In illusory being, self-relation and other-relation coincide in a *dialectical unity*. In its self-relation, illusory being is merely an other-relation, because it is determined solely by (and thus consists solely in) being a negation of being (as its opposite). Illusory being's immediacy to itself is thus completely determined by its other-relation. Its immediacy is something *determinate* through its relation to what is other, namely its relation to being as what is not-illusory. The immediacy of illusory being consists precisely in the negative determinateness of being. Illusory being is thus negativity par excellence, in that it consists solely in the negativity of being; it is "reflected immediacy."⁴⁴ As such, the identity of self-relation and the difference of other-relation are understood as mediated

⁴¹ Derrida expresses this "Being in itself" in his concept of phonocentrism: the self-presence of the selfhood of identity is anchored in the spoken word as a self-enclosed sound and contrasts with the mediacy (disintegration) of writing.

⁴² "For the Greeks' understanding of being and nature, *ousia* and *phýsis* are almost synonymous terms. What constitutes beings as beings is that they rest on themselves, come out of themselves – and not on what comes to them, what intervenes – beings rest on what they are in their essence, their character of self-carrying (*ousia*). But this fundamental feature of beings as beings is read from the essence of nature: the natural being carries the principle of its being and becoming (*entelecheia*) in itself" (BLUMENBERG, H. *Das Verhältnis von Natur und Technik als philosophisches Problem*. In: Haverkamp, A. (Ed.). *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, p. 255).

⁴³ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 534.

⁴⁴ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 396.

by each other, as each other's opposites, in short, in the totality as an immediacy mediated by reflection. Hegel turns the classical Western concept of illusory being (*Schein*) as mere unreality completely on its head: "illusory being in essence is not the illusory being of an other, but is illusory being *per se*, the illusory being of essence itself."⁴⁵ What can be said about illusory being is also true of essence: here the relationship to otherness and immediate self-relation (at first undetermined) also coincide.

However, this commonality raises two questions. The answers to these two questions will reveal two essential differences between illusory being and essence. (1) What is the nature of the relationship between self-relation and other-relation? (2) What exactly is referred to by "self-identity"? Whereas the relationship in illusory being is characterized by *immediacy* (reflection as immediate), self-relation and other-relation in 'essence' are conceived in a *mediated* way, i.e., as a self-comprehending unity with their respective others. And whereas in illusory being the self-identity consists precisely in referring negatively to *something other* (being), the self-identity of essence defines itself by referring negatively to *itself*.⁴⁶ In "reflected immediacy," therefore, the determinations do not refer to something external (as mere illusory being) but to themselves, i.e., they refer to other determinations in the form of a self-relation. In other words, essence is constituted and maintained by the fact that it constantly negates and undermines itself. Through (or in) the forms of reflection (positing reflection, external reflection, - and determining reflection), pure negative self-reference gives itself its content. This brings us to the crucial point: identity as negative self-reference and immediacy in mediated self-relation appear as the basic determinations of essence with which Hegel will work in the chapter on "Positing Reflection." This will be developed below.

What Kierkegaard tried to expose in the Hegelian conception of the beginning, namely, that the system begins with the "most immediate"⁴⁷ and thus undermines itself, is already overcome by Hegel in the "Logic of Essence" by means of a logic of reflection, specifically by re-thinking immediacy as the central determination of the beginning. For Hegel, "this immediacy, instead of being able to form the starting point is, on the contrary, immediacy only as the return or as reflection itself."⁴⁸ If, as Kierkegaard notes, the immediate, when sublated,

⁴⁵ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 398.

⁴⁶ In Adorno's words, "what is, is more than it is" (ADORNO, T.W. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge, 1973, p. 161). What is (in its identity) always has its otherness or difference in itself, i.e., it is more than it actually is (in its simple essence).

⁴⁷ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 94.

⁴⁸ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 401.

is no longer the immediate, then the “beginning of the system that begins with the immediate”⁴⁹ must itself be determined by its opposite, by what is mediated; thus, the immediate “beginning of the system [...] is then *itself attained through a reflection*.”⁵⁰ As a criticism of Hegel, Kierkegaard’s remarks, although they adhere to the criterion of genuine immediacy in the concept of beginning, nevertheless miss their target. This is because in the “Logic of Essence,” Hegel conceives the relationship of immediacy (beginning) and mediation (system) in a way that goes beyond their abstract opposition. In the concept of “Positing Reflection,” Hegel offers the formal model of a reflected concept of immediacy. The manner in which the immediacy of beginning appears from the perspective of the “Logic of Essence” must now be clarified.

“When beginning with the immediate is achieved by a reflection, the immediate must have a meaning other than the usual.”⁵¹ Kierkegaard is, in this respect, right. In the section on “Positing Reflection,” Hegel describes immediacy as “self-sublating immediacy,”⁵² as a mediated or “reflected immediacy.” Yet, first it must be clarified *in what relationship* this immediacy consists, and *to what* it is related. On this, Hegel explains that “positing reflection,” as the “self-related negativity of essence” is “therefore the negating of its own self.”⁵³ But here we must ask, (1) what does it mean to be “self-related,” and (2) what does it mean to be *negatively* “self-related?”

(1) In order for the essence to be able to refer to itself, it must, from a logical point of view, already exist immediately as something presupposed for the act of reflection. If this were not the case, then what else could it refer to? The essence itself would then be the ground for the consequence of a reflection upon itself. But the essence for Hegel is *first generated in self-reflection*; the *immediacy* of essence, to which reflection refers, is first posited (presupposed) by self-reflection, i.e., the presupposition is first posited (presupposed) in the result. In short, the immediacy of essence is not one which underlies reflection but is, instead, one which first arises when the movement comes to its end, i.e., returns into itself. Posited reflection is, therefore, not a beginning but a return. “Reflection therefore is the movement that starts or returns only in so far as the negative has already returned into itself.”⁵⁴ Essence retains its immediacy in relation to itself; only in its self-relation can its other-relation exist at the same

⁴⁹ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 95.

⁵⁰ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 95.

⁵¹ KIERKEGAARD. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 96.

⁵² HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 401.

⁵³ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 400.

⁵⁴ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 401.

time; “reflected immediacy” as “*self-relating* reflection”⁵⁵ correlates the retroactive and the proactive, self and other. “What is thus found only *comes to be* through being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublated immediacy. Conversely, the sublated immediacy is the return-into-self, the *coming-to-itself* of essence.”⁵⁶

(2) What does the *negation* in the phrase “self-relating reflection” consist in? As *negative* “self-relating reflection,” reflection sublates (*aufheben* in the sense of *negare*) itself in its own process, i.e., in the act of self-relating, it negates the self in its immediacy, to which it relates (first negation). When the result is the immediacy of the beginning, however, positing reflection negates the mediation process of the first negation through a second negation (autonomous negation).

For the capacity of autonomous reflection to apply itself (that is, to become self-referential), it has to ensure that it is definite, i.e., it has to ensure that it is an intrinsically determinate negation of its own autonomy. Because it negates itself, it constitutes itself in a “self-negating” manner as its own *object* while, at the same time, qua “negating itself,” remains the *agent* of the act of self-determination. As Manfred Frank puts it: “negation which negates negation, negates itself.”⁵⁷ The negation is neither related to something other, i.e., to its external object, nor is it dependent on a subject standing outside of it which performs a negation on it. It is itself autonomous “in the sense of self-sufficient,”⁵⁸ without destroying itself in the act of self-negation. “Autonomous negation is,” Frank writes, “the relation to something other, but not to something independent and antecedent but to an other which is a result.”⁵⁹ Its result is always itself, even though it is as something modified. It is the immediate beginning as *reflected*. Hegel explains this when he writes, “the transcending of the immediate from which reflection *starts* is rather the outcome of this transcending; and the transcending of the immediate is the *arrival* at it.”⁶⁰ In short, what the essence is at the beginning, it is only when it is already at its end; and what it is at its end, it actually (in an unreflected form) always was at the beginning. In its negative self-relation, the process of reflection produces presuppositions

⁵⁵ Cf. HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 473.

⁵⁶ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 402.

⁵⁷ FRANK, M. “Différance” und “autonome Negation.” Derridas Hegel-Lektüre. In: **Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare. Studien zur deutsch-französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 452.

⁵⁸ FRANK. *Différance und autonome Negation*, p. 452.

⁵⁹ FRANK. *Différance und autonome Negation*, p. 454.

⁶⁰ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 402, my emphasis.

that it recognizes as its own product; its immediacy is the effect of the special quality of absolute self-determination.

Two basic features are noteworthy here: (1) the beginning as immediate bears in itself the antithesis of being mediated by a reflection. And (2) the beginning is only reached in the process of becoming. Or, what has become in achieving the result is the beginning in its reflected immediacy. In “Positing Reflection,” Hegel provides the logical basis for bringing the beginning back from its isolated understanding to the rationality of the overall context of thought, which had been compromised by the isolated treatment of relations of being and nothingness. Here, it is worth mentioning that a school of thought has emerged in Hegel research on the topic of the beginning, a school which goes against Henrich’s interpretation. For instance, Giancarlo Movia argues for construing the beginning by means of the categories of the *logic of reflection* in terms of the whole system, and contends that “the first categories undoubtedly initiate a dialectic. They do so by expressing the need for an immediate beginning and showing how the immediate necessarily dissolves into its negation, thus initiating a movement.”⁶¹

4. Derrida’s *Différance* as the Principle of Origin without *Arché*

Now, let us take a closer look at the notion of the beginning, as Derrida understood it in relation to his fundamental concept of *différance*, a concept which he developed, arguably, from a reading of Hegel. The focus will not be to track this philosophy of difference through all of its fundamentals, ramifications and consequences. In the context of this article, this turn to Derrida serves merely to mark the difficulty of the logic of the beginning, as Hegel revealed it, as a problem inherent to overcoming the metaphysics of systematic thinking.

I will not here discuss Derrida’s texts that deal explicitly with Hegel. As is well known, Derrida confronted Hegel directly in his essays “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” and in his book *Glas*. The reason why I will not address these works here is because the essential concern of these texts takes us beyond our present focus. Derrida’s chief aim in these and other related texts is to demonstrate the “phonocentrism” of Western metaphysics, i.e., to demonstrate that philosophy typically rests on assumptions about the presence of the voice, i.e., that all its

⁶¹ MOVIA, G. Über den Anfang der Hegelschen Logik. In: Koch, A.F.; Schick, F. (Eds.). **G.W.F. Hegel. Wissenschaft der Logik**. Berlin: Akademie, 2002, p. 23.

essential notions are oriented towards the values of being-present, towards self-givenness, and unity.⁶² The question of the necessity or the possibility of concepts of the beginning, on the other hand, rests on Derrida's specific discussions of *différance* (although it also plays a role – albeit a marginal one – in his readings of Hegel). This is why, in the following remarks, I limit myself to the problem of *différance* and to the systematic question of how far Derrida's critique of metaphysics (with all due respect to the merits of his philosophy) falls prey to precisely that which he tries to escape from.

The focus here will be precisely on the “origin problem” of *différance*, i.e., on the question of the extent to which (1) as a “movement of supplementarity,”⁶³ *différance* erases or defers the possible origin of every other signified, and (2) how, if it is also the generator (i.e., the original principle) of all signifieds, it itself has no origin. In other words, how, because it is the very “absence of an...origin,”⁶⁴ is *différance* possible in the first place? The question is whether or how *différance*'s erasure of its own originality is even possible and what the consequences of this are.

It must be noted that when he speaks of the (non-) origin, Derrida himself is unclear about whether he is referring to an origin of meaning-bearing elements (signifieds) or to the origin of *différance* itself. Although Derrida makes no such distinction – since such a distinction would be inadequate to the concept of *différance*, which has no systematic character, and since the idea of *différance* is precisely to erase all distinctions of origin (ground and consequence) – the question of the origin of *différance* can nevertheless be posed. So, even if it appears to go against the principle of *différance* to determine where and when it begins or whether something precedes it, the present article aims to explore just such a determination of origins.

In response to question (1), we should recognize that there is a letter in the spelling of the word that is fundamental to Derrida's philosophy of *différance*, namely the letter “a,” which he inserts into the word difference. Through this “graphic difference (*a* instead of *e*),”⁶⁵ Derrida develops, among other things, his theory of “supplementarity,” which decenters the concept of

⁶² In “The Pit and the Pyramid,” Derrida attempts to show that Hegel conceives “a theory of the sign on the basis of being-present, but also, and by the same token, *in sight* of being-present, in sight of presence” (DERRIDA, J. *The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology*. In: **Margins of Philosophy**. Trans. A. Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 72, trans. amended.). Only in the ‘voice’ is the free existence of spirit in the medium of the sign guaranteed.

⁶³ DERRIDA, J. *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science*. In: **Writing and Difference**. Trans. A. Bass. London, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 365.

⁶⁴ DERRIDA. **Structure, Sign, and Play**, p. 365.

⁶⁵ DERRIDA, J. *Différance*. In: **Margins of Philosophy**. Trans. A. Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 3.

structure, a concept which is fundamental to the problem of the *arché* of meaning. “This movement of play,” Derrida writes, “permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a supplement.”⁶⁶ The center as the “organizing principle of the structure” – “one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure” – is “that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality.”⁶⁷ By having no part in the play of structure itself, *différance* lies not inside but rather *outside* the structure; still, by organizing and balancing the structure, and thus controlling it, *différance* also lies *within* the structure. “Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center,” Derrida continues, “that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being . . . that it was not a fixed locus but . . . a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.”⁶⁸ Derrida thus reveals a void in metaphysical thinking that not only refutes any notion of presence and the existence of a center, but establishes meaning as a “movement of supplementarity.”⁶⁹ The concept of a closed structure cannot meaningfully be conceived as starting from a “center” ostensibly inherent in it. As a result, it is necessary to elaborate the set of metaphysical ideas in a completely different way. This different way, “deconstruction,” involves thinking through metaphysical ideas to their very foundations in order to turn them against themselves and thus – at least in part – to overcome them.

Derrida’s critique of metaphysics does not, however, straightforwardly seek to overcome it. Metaphysical thinking should not be brought to an end (*fin*), he suggests, but should be brought, instead, to a closure (*clôture*). One cannot escape from metaphysics: “there is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics.”⁷⁰ The reason for this is because the very concepts of metaphysics organize our language and are ineluctably bound up with it. It is, therefore, “with the help of the concept of sign” that “the metaphysics of presence is shaken.”⁷¹ The history of metaphysics, in its logocentrism, is itself “a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center.”⁷²

⁶⁶ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 365.

⁶⁷ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 352.

⁶⁸ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 353ff.

⁶⁹ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 365.

⁷⁰ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 354.

⁷¹ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 354.

⁷² DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 353.

According to Derrida, throughout the history of philosophy foundational metaphysical terms have become distinguished from each other and have thus involuntarily become subject to *différance*. Though these foundational terms differ, each expresses a will to presence: “eidos, arché, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God,”⁷³ etc... The history of metaphysics is thus involved in what Nietzsche calls the “drive to form metaphors” and is thus incorporated into a “game of movement,” which makes itself subject to the law of *différance*, since the “history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies.”⁷⁴ Derrida here draws on the fundamental idea behind structuralist linguistics, namely that – in a closed system of signs – meaning rests on differentiability, i.e., the meaning of a sign derives from its difference from other signs in the same system. For structuralism, the signified is the result of the difference between the signifiers, i.e., meaning occurs as a by-product of a “play of signifiers;” there is no autonomous idea inherently paired together with the signifier. “The signifier does not yield us up a signified directly, as a mirror yields up an image”⁷⁵ but rather evokes it through its relationship to other signifiers in an endless chain. Here, Derrida radicalizes structuralism. Since the identity of the sign is constituted precisely in its difference from others, the sign’s meaning is never immediately and unequivocally present. The presence of the signified “tree,” for instance, is determined by what tree as a signifier *is not*, that is, by the absence of “sea,” “key,” etc. These signifieds are in turn determined by the *absence* of all the other signifiers, such as “knee,” “tea,” etc. The *presence* of each signified is determined by the *absence* of other signifiers. Meaning as such cannot be fully grasped because it is never wholly there in the sign but exists, rather, in a perpetual play of presence and absence.

The mechanical juxtaposition of words does not capture the meaning of a sentence; meaning arises because each sign refers to the “traces”⁷⁶ of other signs that it excludes so that it is itself. No sign ever purely or fully carries meaning, since to do so it would have to be a center that completely encloses its signified: “the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.”⁷⁷ The absence of the center means that the

⁷³ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 353.

⁷⁴ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 353.

⁷⁵ EAGLETON, T. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 110.

⁷⁶ Wolfgang Iser points out “that the trace actually takes the place of the classical *arché*, i.e. what is most original” (WELSCH, W. *Vernunft. Die zeitgenössische Vernunftkritik und das Konzept der transversalen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996, p. 269).

⁷⁷ DERRIDA. *Structure, Sign, and Play*, p. 354.

“play of signification”⁷⁸ is extended to infinity and radically transposed. “The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more.”⁷⁹ In addition, the materiality of the sign dissolves the identity of the sign. This happens because the sign always gains new meanings through its reproducibility and iterations in different contexts. Because of these constant contextual changes, it is difficult to discern the context which a sign *originally* had. Moreover, because of the logic of *différance* itself, the sign is never identical with itself. The signified is constantly subjected to change as a result of its entanglements in the equally variable chain of signifiers.

It turns out, then, that the elements of the structure, which in turn are governed by the play of *différance*, cannot in any way be traced back to an identifiable beginning. Neither do these elements ultimately arise from themselves, since they are already conditioned by other elements. Nor do they arise in some other identifiable element, since such an element would always have to refer to others and would always have to be conditioned by them. The beginning is merely a “cipher” of unmediated presence whose starting point always exists in the “temporization”⁸⁰ of the play of signs. Thus, the beginning is not even presupposed as being mediated, as it is in Hegel; the differential force of the play of signs penetrates into every unit of meaning that it mediates, and thereby proves to be *fundamentally* conditional. According to Derrida’s absolutized differentiability of *différance*, mediation does not coincide with “mediated immediacy,” as it does in Hegel, which means that it does not transcend itself and become its opposite; here mediation does not “sublate itself in the mediation.”⁸¹ On the contrary, according to Derrida, immediacy is only an effect, the face of an infinitely differentiating mediation which has no substantiality whatsoever, neither as cause nor as telos. In this way, however, the essentiality of the beginning with its core feature of immediacy – whether as pure or mediated – is removed from the logical ground. From here it seems difficult to be able to pose the question of the logic of the beginning at all without thereby exposing it as a misplaced question.

5. The Return of Origin: the Reflexive Construction of Différance

⁷⁸ DERRIDA. **Structure, Sign, and Play**, p. 354.

⁷⁹ DERRIDA. **Structure, Sign, and Play**, p. 365. In his “Structure” essay, Derrida refers explicitly to Nietzsche’s “affirmation...of the play of the world, a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (DERRIDA. **Structure, Sign, and Play**, p. 369).

⁸⁰ DERRIDA. **Différance**, p. 8.

⁸¹ HEGEL. **Encyclopedia**, § 75, p. 121.

The problem of origin considered so far has focused exclusively on the reality of the play of signs within which there is no self-presence and for whose infinite context there is no starting point. And yet the question remains: why does this system, which is not a system, behave in the way that it does? Is there a principle that could be independently formulated which would give rise to this endless play? As for *différance*, which appears as the principle and the cause of this play, Derrida claims that it is neither cause nor effect.⁸² *Différance* seems to be a ground for the playful behavior of signs, an apparent principle that Derrida himself denies is a principle, since it neither has an origin nor represents such a “principled origin.” What he claims to put into question “is precisely the demand for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure” and with this, the “value of the *arkhē*.”⁸³ The “*différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple and unmodified – in-different – present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name ‘origin’ no longer suits it.”⁸⁴ What Derrida here ascribes to *différance* is no longer the mere “substitution” of a center, its postponement in the play of differences; rather, the point is to put into question the origin as the first beginning of *différance* itself, the assumption that it is the condition of the possibility of the center, i.e., as pure cause. As something that is almost “treacherous,” the assertion that *différance* simultaneously “*produces* differences” (my emphasis) seems to point to a missing origin. Does this mean that Derrida unintentionally reveals himself as a “thinker of origin,” as Habermas suggests?⁸⁵

It seems, at any rate, that *différance* – precisely because it itself is not subject to any origin, since the beginning may itself be “replaced” by the play of signs, potentially dissolving itself differently – “produces” the play of differences. *Différance* must therefore be an origin without origin, a “non-original origin.”⁸⁶ If this is the case, there are essentially three different ways of interpreting *différance*. Its status as non-original origin can mean that (a) there is, as Derrida maintains, actually no origin at all or no originality to the play of differences; or (b)

⁸² See DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 16.

⁸³ DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 11.

⁸⁵ Cf. HABERMAS, J. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. F. Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity, 1987, p. 178-9: “It is important to note that in the course of pursuing this line of thought Derrida by no means breaks with the foundationalist tenacity of the philosophy of the subject; he only makes what it had regarded as fundamental dependent on the still profounder – though now vacillating or oscillating – basis of an originative power set temporally aflow. Unabashedly, and in the style of *Ursprungsphilosophie*, Derrida falls back on this *Urschrift*, which leaves its traces anonymously, without any subject.” Also, see Karin de Boer on Derrida’s *différance* as a “critical principle” (DE BOER, K. *Différance as Negativity: The Hegelian Remains of Derrida’s Philosophy*. In: Houlgate, S.; Baur, M. (Eds.). *A Companion to Hegel*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2011, p. 595.

⁸⁶ KIMMERLE, H. *Jacques Derrida zur Einführung*. 5th Edition. Hamburg: Junius, 2000, p. 80.

there is an origin conceived in a classical-metaphysical sense as a final ground, which, as an absolutely first beginning, and precisely because it is immediate, has no origin in itself and is therefore a non-original; or (c) there is an origin, which is not “absolute” as in (b), but which as “non-originality” consists precisely in being first constituted in a process. The third possibility, namely the possibility of considering the origin as “no longer original,” as Derrida puts it, comes close to the idea that Hegel describes in his discussion of “positing reflection” as a “dialectic of the beginning,”⁸⁷ and which takes a systematic perspective on the beginning as opposed to an isolated approach in the sphere of being.

In what follows, I want to suggest how Derrida’s supposed transgression of the origin in *différance* can be described more adequately by the complex logic of positing reflection, and how it thereby sublates itself. If the supposed lack of origin of *différance* is taken literally, it turns, I suggest, into a metaphysical principle of origin. Hegel’s dialectic of the beginning in “positing reflection,” so I argue, successfully moves away from the classical metaphysical attempt (as it is derived from Plotinus) to conceive the beginning as absolute, simple, and immediate (self-present). It does so by sublating (with the emphasis on the “conservare” in sublation) the absolute beginning.

“The non-original origin,” the Derrida scholar Heinz Kimmerle writes, “is not a present before a time that follows it. It is in the process of becoming. It is neither cause nor effect.”⁸⁸ What Kimmerle means here is that *différance*, in its origination of a missing origin, has not emerged from a temporal succession, within which one could have established its beginning at a specific logical time x (t_1). In this respect, the origin is not subject to any particular presence, from which all of the following could be deduced at certain times (t_2 , t_3 , t_4 , etc.). It does not exist as a first, immediate, i.e., as an absolute beginning. Thus, if the origin is in the process of becoming, then it may not be graspable at any time but must, instead, be determinable retrospectively. The very essence of the origin is precisely to not be present at any time, to always appear belatedly, to be no-longer-existing. This could be a first indication of a secret relationship between *différance* and positing reflection. *Différance* appears only as non-presence and belatedly mediates its presence via its own opposite. Its presence consists precisely in not being present or in being mediated by its opposite (absence). It involves a mediated presence, a presence which belatedly posits itself in the process of becoming (that is, in the endless play of differences) as that which it latently was at the beginning. To put it in

⁸⁷ Hegel himself does not use this term.

⁸⁸ KIMMERLE. *Jacques Derrida zur Einführung*, p. 80.

Hegel's terms, "what is thus found only *comes to be* through being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublated immediacy. Conversely, the sublated immediacy is the return-into-self, the *coming-to-itself* of essence."⁸⁹ One might assume, therefore, that the origin of *différance* is precisely an origin insofar as it produces its own origin as an effect in the other; this would explain its belatedness. But in this case there would be an indissoluble paradox, since the origin for Derrida is "neither cause nor effect." But since Derrida tries to take this dialectical approach in the direction of a pure negation of origin, he must ascribe *différance* – in contrast to Hegel – to an unmediated origin as described in (b). If *différance* is neither cause nor effect, it falls out of all contexts of mediation and begins only (or again) with itself. Thus, Derrida creates an unwanted dialectic of (a). There is no logic of origin within *différance*, and (b), *Différance* must be thought of as a pure origin, an origin which Hegel escapes from by conceiving the origin in terms of positing reflection as rationally mediated (c).

Kimmerle argues that Habermas "came to the false thesis" that Derrida was a "thinker of origin" and "that Derrida wants to place the origin one floor lower than Heidegger."⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Kimmerle insists that "both thinkers [Heidegger and Derrida] are concerned precisely with rejecting the idea of a *single* origin, whether highest or lowest, underlying all being."⁹¹ Because Kimmerle recognizes this, the debate not only clarifies how controversial this issue is in the research, but also establishes that the standpoint one takes in it is decisive for the application of positing reflection in terms of *différance*. We cannot apply the logic of positing reflection to *différance* if it cannot be ascribed either within the structures of cause-effect nor within ground-consequence relationships. This void arises from a paradox: Derrida wishes to deny, on the one hand, that *différance* has an original and systemic character, while at the same time he wishes to treat it as a "principle of origin" that "produces" all differences and which thereby necessarily becomes a logical, causal, and real ground of individual differences. In addition, within the play of differences, *différance* reveals a hidden context of effect, since in its singularity (in other words, within the "simplicity" of occurrences of meaning⁹²), it embraces all elements of the play of signs as a "hidden" unity. Within this context, *différance* cannot function otherwise than by (secretly, as it were) referring to itself,

⁸⁹ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 402.

⁹⁰ KIMMERLE, H. Hegel und die Philosophien der Differenz. In: Heidemann, D.; Krijnen, Ch. (Eds.). *Hegel und die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007, p. 302.

⁹¹ KIMMERLE. *Hegel und die Philosophien der Differenz*, p. 302.

⁹² Bertram has convincingly demonstrated the "simplicity" of Derrida's *différance*, i.e. the unity and closed nature of the differential context of occurrences of meaning (BERTRAM, G.W. *Hermeneutik und Dekonstruktion. Konturen einer Auseinandersetzung der Gegenwartsphilosophie*. München: Fink, 2002, p. 136-155).

and doing so as an autonomous negation. The origin is, therefore, decomposed by the play of signifiers. As each element of meaning refers to something else, it negates itself, just as it also alters itself in reference to other signifiers. But these elements of significance exist only in and through their difference from their respective others. They exist only through the trace of others trace, which they exclude from themselves in order to be what they are in difference: “Every seemingly present Element of meaning refers to something other than itself.”⁹³ The first negation, one might say, is the negation of an absolutely first origin. It is the absence of meaning-bearing elements via the play of differences. Thus, the sign is a transformation of itself into new contexts and the decomposition of an *original* origin into the “non-original origin,” which is only “in the process of becoming” and thus erases itself. *Différance* is precisely because it *is not*. Its existence expresses itself solely in never being present and in no way being the origin that it would have to be “to be” (that is, to fulfill its concept as a principle).

“Now if *différance* ~~is~~ (and I also cross out the ‘is’),” Derrida writes, “what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present.... Reserving itself, not exposing itself... it exceeds the order of truth... without dissimulating itself... as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge.”⁹⁴ If it were to appear, this would make it disappear, and then it would be lost. But if *différance* is at *no* time, how can it be at *any* time at all? When would it be and when would it not be, or where does it start and where does it end? Derrida notes “that *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*)... and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.”⁹⁵ *Différance* is, simply put, everything and nothing. And yet, it is also not this.

Derrida develops here a figure of thought which, I maintain, describes *différance* as a self-grounding principle. More precisely, *différance* is the principle of its own non-identity and is thus implicated in a context of recursion which attributes its temporal non-identity to the same principle which establishes its identity and which determines the playful non-identity of the series of signs. Its difference from itself, as the principle of every differentiation, can only have been effected by itself. *Différance* thereby repeats the classical center-structure of the “*causa sui*”⁹⁶ without being itself a center. In this respect, it is analogous, once again, to Hegel’s

⁹³ KIMMERLE. *Jacques Derrida zur Einführung*, p. 80.

⁹⁴ DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 6.

⁹⁵ DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ SPINOZA. *Complete Works*, p. 17.

reformulation of the “causa sui” in *Positing Reflection*.⁹⁷ This can be summarized quite pointedly: the more different *différance* is from itself, i.e., the more radically one attempts to think *différance* as different from a principle of origin, the more firmly it becomes a metaphysical principle. This differentiability can only have been attained by itself – in the sense of a self-causing “causa sui.” In Derrida’s conception of meaning and being, there is no other principle which this differentiation can be attributed to. The second negation that follows from the first negation of the originating character is the negation of the mere differentiability in the play of signs. This negation leads to a beginning which constantly and simultaneously decomposes and is thus ineluctably constituted as the original principle. *Différance* is the (hidden) presence of a mediated origin of itself and is thus completely reconstructable within the framework of the Hegelian logic of origin: “mediation itself becomes a kind of ground.”⁹⁸ *Différance* is the principle of its own non-identity as a meaning-generating unity that seeks to escape it. It is precisely the negation of its original character, which it signifies, that takes place only in the self-referential negation of this negation. In order to be able to negate its original character, i.e., to represent itself as different from an origin, *différance* must enact upon itself the very principle of differentiability which it embodies and which it seeks to establish by means of this act; but it thereby becomes the origin of itself and at the same time the ground of every difference.

When Wolfgang Iser describes *différance* as a principle that is subjected to itself – as “*différance* under the law of *différance*”⁹⁹ – Iser thereby implicitly points to *différance*’s self-referential constitution. *Différance*, in its never-present presence and non-originality, has to subordinate itself to its own principle and thus has to testify to the origin of the difference that it itself represents: it has to “[d]islocate itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions.”¹⁰⁰ The fact that Iser regards Derrida’s *différance* as a “non-

⁹⁷ Hegel, of course, does not adopt the traditional signature of the common concept of “causa sui” as expressed by Spinoza. On the contrary, as Hegel has shown himself in the chapter “The Absolute” in the “Doctrine of Essence,” his main critique is that Spinoza “considered the substance as given to an ‘external reflection’” (LONGUENESSE, p. 116). Béatrice Longuenesse has correctly pointed out that “he [Spinoza, C.W.] did not know how to think what he had discovered. He imagined he was defining a reality independent of reflection while he was defining the highest product of reflection.” (LONGUENESSE, B. *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009, p. 116). Nevertheless, Hegel seems to be intrigued with the very notion of such a concept, and thus, wants to reformulate it.

⁹⁸ GAMM, G. *Der Deutsche Idealismus. Eine Einführung in die Philosophie von Fichte, Hegel und Schelling*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997, p. 111.

⁹⁹ WELSCH. *Vernunft*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁰ DERRIDA. *Différance*, p. 26.

fundamentalist”¹⁰¹ philosophy of modernity,¹⁰² that is, as having no foundation or principle, can be seen in his description of *différance*'s essential function: it is “more original than the various positings of origin. But its originality is not a type of ground.”¹⁰³ In the context of the program of Derrida's philosophy, this can be unequivocally endorsed, but the question remains whether this can be meaningfully comprehended on the basis of Derrida's own precepts.¹⁰⁴

Inadvertently, what Derrida achieves with *différance* is exactly what he tries to destroy. Ironically, he falls into the very trap he once ascribed to Husserl.¹⁰⁵ What he criticizes as the search for a center in philosophy, an “organizational principle of the structure” which would orient the structure and keep it in balance – is a charge one could equally level at the concept of *différance*. The play of differences is the logic of language and at the same time the logic of all beings, for all beings exist only as linguistic meaning; i.e., *différance* officiates as the principle of origin of all signifieds and thus of all beings. The subject can therefore never be present before *différance*, since it is first created by it. “Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*,” Derrida writes, “an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*.”¹⁰⁶ He adds that “language, and in general every semiotic code... are therefore effects, but their cause is not a subject, a substance, or a being somewhere present and outside the movement of *différance*.”¹⁰⁷ *Différance* acts as the ultimate causative principle of origin, from which everything, subject and object, indeed being as such, emerges, and which, in its own difference from the principle of origin, is the origin of precisely that difference. By attacking metaphysics with its own weapons, Derrida is struck down by those same weapons, unintentionally

¹⁰¹ WELSCH. *Vernunft*, p. 408.

¹⁰² Cf. WELSCH. *Vernunft*, p. 408: “Modern thinking no longer operates with a first or last *arché*. To attempt it is not only considered impracticable, but even the idea of a first or last foundation is considered contradictory and misguided. We have been able to learn this from Rorty and Derrida and for the last time in the work of Nelson Goodman.”

¹⁰³ WELSCH. *Vernunft*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁴ Kimmerle argues in the context of Derrida's argument and against Habermas, that “Derrida's conception cannot be read at all as a philosophy of origins” (KIMMERLE, H. *Ist Derridas Denken Ursprungsphilosophie? Zu Habermas' Deutung der philosophischen 'Postmoderne'*. In: Raullet, G. et al. (Eds.). *Die Frage nach dem Subjekt*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 269). Of course, Kimmerle must also admit an “original” character to *différance*, but he views this from the perspective of differentiality: “Différance, if it differs, is not the origin of differences, and if it makes differences, i.e. has something original about it, it is not a ‘simple origin’ but a ‘structured and difference-differentiating origin’” (KIMMERLE. *Ist Derridas Denken Ursprungsphilosophie*, p. 271). Yet, contra Kimmerle, even the origin whose structure “is not simple but intrinsically complex” (KIMMERLE. *Ist Derridas Denken Ursprungsphilosophie*, p. 271) does not shed its original character. Kimmerle does not inquire into the internal logic of *différance* but simply adopts Derrida's view that the differentiation of origin means its dissolution in the metaphysical sense.

¹⁰⁵ See DERRIDA, J. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison & Newton Garver. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ DERRIDA, J. *Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva*. In: *Positions*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ DERRIDA. *Semiology and Grammatology*, p. 28.

demonstrating that the original principle cannot be thought through simple negation. Hegel, by contrast, already made clear in “Positing Reflection” how the original principle can be conceived as a negation: how the immediacy of the beginning, precisely in its negation of mediation as mediated immediacy, establishes the ground. In this ground we find the meta-text to Derrida’s principle of *différance*.

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