

Hegel on Being

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With *Hegel on Being*, Stephen Houlgate presents an impressive philosophical analysis of one of the most obscure, but also most important texts of the whole Western philosophical tradition. Houlgate's book is an in-depth systematic investigation of the entire doctrine of being of Hegel's mature logical system. This work takes up and develops a series of reflections presented in *The Opening of Hegel's Logic* (2006), which were dedicated to the first two chapters of the section on quality in the *Science of Logic*, and extends them to the further two sections of the first part of Hegel's mature system. Houlgate's text is thus particularly interesting, especially if one considers that not many Hegel scholars have dealt with the difficulties of the sections dedicated to quantity and measure. This is probably due to the complexity of the dialectic of the categories involved in these sections of the *Logic* and to the necessity of approaching Hegel's dialogue with the exact and natural sciences of his time. On the interaction of Hegel's philosophy with these scientific contributions, Houlgate offers us particularly significant pages. Suffice to mention the excursus on differential calculus at the end of the section dedicated to quantity, or the analysis of the relevance of Galileo Galilei's and Johannes Kepler's discoveries in the context of the analysis of realized measure.

If I had to define Houlgate's approach to Hegel's logic in a few words, I would say that his intent is, first of all, to 'take Hegel seriously'. Houlgate's analysis therefore develops a critical reflection that follows, makes explicit, and critically investigates the dialectic of the determinations of the first part of Hegel's mature logical project. In this sense, the author literally assumes the weight, the difficulties, but also the challenging potential of a thought that, above all, embodies the modern spirit of freedom. To think of the structures of pure thought as the thought of freedom means to think of logic as a science free from any kind of presupposition, and therefore as a science that is completely critical and thoroughly non-dogmatic. The pure thought of speculative logic is therefore revolutionarily ready to question the content of its own categories, which are the categories permeating Western thought, and to criticize and redetermine the forms in which these categories have settled within the philosophical, scientific and cultural tradition of modernity.

Houlgate's work is therefore particularly interesting for those looking for a viable path to get introduced to the first part of Hegel's *Logic*, since the book offers a complete account of a relevant part of Hegel's logical system. However, *Hegel On*



Being is also rich with stimulating insights for scholars who already have a strong familiarity with Hegel's texts in so far as Houlgate approaches a series of problems that are at the centre of the current debate on Hegel and, more generally, on classical German philosophy. These critical reflections are oriented both to shed light on the general status of Hegel's logic and to clarify some specific issues on particular passages of the logical system. For instance, Houlgate reopens his critical discussion of Robert Pippin's reading of the metaphysical status of Hegel's logic (I: 127–32).¹ Or, in the analyses of the first and second antinomy of pure reason (I: 307–73; II: 171–79), Houlgate situates his reading in the wide debate on Hegel's interpretation of Kantian transcendental idealism.

This attention to the relationship between Hegel and Kant and to the post-Kantian character of Hegel's philosophical project is an example of another distinctive characteristic of Houlgate's work. The author develops an analysis that is certainly immanent with respect to the dialectical development of the logical categories, but at the same time he puts Hegel in dialogue with a series of authors from the Western philosophical tradition, in order to underline the originality and the still innovative character of the Hegelian philosophical proposal. It is worth mentioning Houlgate's critical investigation of the relationship of Hegel's philosophy with classical authors of the history of Western thought, starting with Plato and Aristotle, up to Kant and post-Kantian philosophers, passing through authors such as René Descartes and Baruch de Spinoza. However, the most interesting and original part of Houlgate's investigation is his comparative analysis of Hegel and Gottlob Frege: starting from some general points concerning logicism, the objectivity of logic, the critique of psychologism, etc., Houlgate enters into a profound comparative investigation of a series of problems internal to the philosophies of mathematics of the two authors, above all the very nature of numerical entities.

It is not easy to place myself in a critical perspective with respect to Houlgate's work. I am extremely sympathetic to his interpretation of Hegel's text and, in my view, his analysis and his reflections are extremely accurate and follow with impressive precision the immanent development of the dialectic of logical determinations. However, I take the opportunity to open a discussion on a couple of specific points of the first part of the *Logic*, which for me are still problematic. They are addressed by Houlgate in the initial and final parts of the text and, somehow, they are related to each other in so far as they both concern the moving principle of thought's process of self-determination, that is the negativity immanent in logical determinations themselves.

The first point to which I would like to draw attention is the one in which we see the rise of this negativity. The two determinations that we encounter at the beginning of the logical system—being and nothing—show the impossibility of their own subsisting in their immediate indeterminateness and the necessity for

them to immediately vanish into one another. This vanishing feeds on both the identity of and difference between being and nothing:

But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that *they are not the same*, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that *each* immediately *vanishes in its opposite*. (SL 2010: 60)²

Being and nothing are the same, but they are also, at the same time, absolutely different. If we give up the dogmatic assumption of the validity of the law of non-contradiction, it is not so difficult to understand the first component of this vanishing, namely identity. Yet, I find it much more complicated to shed light on the second one, which is the immediate difference between being and nothing.

In my view, accounting for the difference between being and nothing is one of the thorniest problems in the whole *Science of Logic*. The difference between being and nothing cannot be grasped from a properly conceptual perspective, because it is an absolutely immediate difference. In fact, it arises from two determinations whose conceptual content is, in the same way, absolutely immediate, indeterminate and abstract. As Houlgate points out (I: 144), the difference between being and nothing is ‘unsayable’ (*unsagbar*) and it ‘thus lies merely “in intention” (*im Meinen*)’ (I: 144). Nevertheless, this difference necessarily subsists between the two determinations of being and nothing, even if at the same time it immediately and necessarily vanishes in their passing over into one another. Difference is an absolutely necessary component for the unfolding of their conceptual content. If a logical space is not opened for this difference to immediately arise, even if it also immediately disappears, being and nothing would be simply one and the same content, absolutely abstract and indeterminate. The very logical nature of being and nothing is unfolded only in the passing over into one another through which each one realizes its own truth. This vanishing, that is the immediate negation of being and nothing’s immediate indeterminateness, is not possible without their being absolutely different. Without this difference, they would both be a simple and absolute indeterminateness which would remain simply identical to itself. Differently put, it would not be possible for the dialectic of being and nothing to unfold without their difference, since their immediate passing over into one another takes place if and only if each one is immanently forced to abandon its abstract identity with itself in order to pass over into what is purely and immediately different from itself.

In the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel claims that the difference between being and nothing is ‘something merely *meant*’ (*eine bloÙe Meinung*) (EL: §87R). Nevertheless, Houlgate points out that this difference is not one that subsists only for us, who intuit this difference and unfold it in the exposition of the dialectic of these two determinations. The difference between the two absolutely indeterminate

determinations pertains to being and nothing in themselves, since it depends on their conceptual content (even if this content is absolutely indeterminate). This difference is at the basis of the immediate vanishing of the two determinations into one another. The difference between being and nothing is a 'logical and ontological difference: being is pure and simple being, and nothing *by contrast* is utter nothing' (I: 145).

When Houlgate makes the nature of this difference explicit, he is moving, as well as Hegel, on very slippery ground, because he is talking about something that for Hegel himself is *unsagbar*. Houlgate states the following:

Being and nothing are immediately different because each is purely and immediately *itself* and thereby completely excludes the other. Being may not be defined explicitly as 'not-nothing', and nothing may not be defined as 'non-being', but each in being itself *in fact* shuts out the other. (I: 144)

However, I wonder whether one can legitimately claim, with respect to being and nothing, that 'each one excludes the other' or that 'each in being itself *in fact* shuts out the other'. In effect, as Houlgate himself points out, we cannot think of being or nothing in terms of a negation of the opposite determination. Exclusion always and necessarily implies some kind of relation, that is, some kind of mediation. Yet, being and nothing are the absolute absence of any sort of relation and mediation. Of course, one can justify the use of the notion of exclusion, as Houlgate does, by quoting Hegel's own words, for example when in the *Encyclopaedia* he clarifies the nature of the difference between being and nothing by using the notion of antithesis or opposition (*Gegensatz*): 'being and nothing are the antithesis [*Gegensatz*] in all its *immediacy*, i.e. without any determination already being *posited* in the one that would contain its relation to the other' (*EL*: §88R).

The situation that we face at the beginning of the *Logic* thus is highly paradoxical. On the one hand, there is an immediate difference that necessarily belongs to the logical and ontological nature of being and nothing. On the other hand, this difference does at the same time not entail any sort of relation between being and nothing, because it depends on absolutely immediate determinations, and it is thus immediately negated. Houlgate speaks of an immediate difference that is immediately sublated, or a difference that is 'unsustainable', because it immediately vanishes in the immediate passing over of being into nothing and vice versa. As Hegel claims: 'the distinction between them *is*, but equally *sublates itself* and *is not*' (*SL* 2010: 68).

This unsustainability finds its logical embodiment in the self-contradictory character that marks the difference between being and nothing. The very claim that the difference between being and nothing is absolutely immediate and indeterminate manifests the contradictory nature of this difference. Difference, in fact, is a

relation, and any relation implies some kind of mediation, that is, some kind of determination. A difference without determination, or a difference that does not entail any kind of mediation—the very difference that is at stake between being and nothing—is a difference that is not a difference or, one could say, a difference that has an absolutely self-contradictory character. Precisely for this reason, it is an unsustainable difference, or, differently put, it is a difference that immediately vanishes, is immediately denied and sublated.

But then how can we shed light on this difference which is a kind of impossible difference? What I am going to say is not intended to oppose what Houlgate presents in his book. Rather, I will try, in a certain sense, to complement his observations on one of the passages of which, paradoxically, we could not and should not say anything.

In order to grasp the logical and ontological nature of the difference between being and nothing, one does not have to focus on what occurs in between the two determinations in question, because, as Houlgate himself notes, nothing determinate occurs between being and nothing, except the immediate vanishing of one determination into the other. In order to understand the immediate difference of the two indeterminate determinations at the beginning of the *Logic*, therefore, we should not pay much attention to what we can intuit with respect to the relationship between the two opposite determinations, because such a relationship, as we have said, does not exist at all. To understand the absolute and immediate difference between being and nothing, it makes much more sense to focus on the vanishing of the determinations themselves and to try to grasp the nature of the negativity at the basis of this pure abstract and negative process. It is precisely on the basis of this negativity that the difference between being and nothing arises, even if only in an immediate and indeterminate form. Equally, it is still on the basis of this negativity, that the immediate difference of being and nothing immediately disappears. I think this is the point that Houlgate wants the reader to think through when he states that ‘pure being and pure nothing do not, therefore, reciprocally undermine one another, but each in its purity undermines or “sublates” itself of its own accord’ (I: 143).

We can then account for the immediate difference between being and nothing and their immediate passing over into one another if and only if we grasp the sense in which each of the two determinations undermines and sublates itself: each of them does not negate the other—being is not the negation of nothing and nothing is not the negation of being—but each of the two is primarily the pure and immediate negation of itself. Being as well as nothing is a determination that, on the basis of its own absolute indeterminacy, is immediately the pure and immediate negation of its immediate and abstract identity with itself. Each of the two determinations therefore cannot have any kind of logical and ontological subsistence. In itself each one is a simple abstraction, and its truth is its very vanishing, its immediate

negation in another determination which can only be absolutely and immediately different from it. As Hegel points out: ‘their truth is therefore this *movement* of the immediate vanishing [*Verschwinden*] of the one into the other: *becoming* [*Werden*]’ (*SL* 2010: 60). That is why Hegel claims that we understand this difference only in a third, which is becoming.

In this sense, in this first immediate absolute difference between the two absolutely indeterminate determinations we already glimpse the feature of Hegel’s notion of negativity that we encounter in further degrees of determination and complexity throughout the development of the whole logical system. This feature is the self-referential character of negativity at the basis of the immanent development of Hegel’s logic. At the same time, because of the complete absence of any kind of determinateness in being and nothing, the self-referentiality of negation, which will be the main source of the mediation of the logical categories from determinate being to absolute idea, ends up dissolving the pure abstractions of being and nothing.

When Hegel claims that ‘being and nothing are the antithesis in all its immediacy’ (*Sein und Nichts sind der Gegensatz in seiner ganzen Unmittelbarkeit*, *EL*: §88), the opposition or antithesis he is referring to is therefore not the one between being and nothing. There is no opposition through which one excludes the other, but there is just the opposition through which each one excludes itself and immediately passes over into what is immediately different from itself. Each one is characterized by an antithetic nature through which it is inherently driven to sublimate itself, or, as Hegel puts it, ‘they do not sublimate themselves reciprocally—the one sublating the other externally—but each rather sublimes itself in itself and is within it the opposite of itself’ (*SL* 2010: 81).

This passage is not simply the starting point of the system, because it can be taken as the paradigmatic example of the dynamic at the basis of the negativity on which the entire doctrine of being is built. The immediacy that characterizes the determinations of being consists in the negation of mediation, or in the supposed self-subsistence of the determination regardless of the relationship to other determinations. At the same time, this abstract and immediate self-subsistence gives rise to its own negation. This negation occurs with pure being which—in its abstraction and indeterminacy—is the negation of any determination and of any type of mediation, and then it ends up being an opposite of itself: being negates itself and it is its own passing over into nothing. Generally speaking, the same dynamic occurs with all the other categories of the first part of the *Logic*. In quality, for instance, the infinite that immediately subsists independently of any relationship with the finite and then negates any sorts of mediation of finitude, ends up implying the mediation with the opposite determination: ‘The infinite thus proves not to be simply infinite after all, but (in its new form) to be inseparably bound to the finite, from which it differs and which is itself other than the infinite’ (*SL* 2010: 232). In the same way, in

quantity, intensive magnitude, in its immediacy, is distinct and separate from extensive magnitude. In investigating the immanent constitution of the former, however, Hegel shows that intensive magnitude cannot avoid the mediation of that same externality that characterizes the opposite determination. Its supposed independent and self-subsistent immediacy, therefore, is, once again, negated: 'it [intensive magnitude] must have the amount to which it owes its determinacy *outside itself*' (II: 146). Or, once again, the indifference that we meet in the treatment of measure, in its immediacy, is absolutely indifferent with respect to the changing determinations through which it endures. Nevertheless, this very indifference is shown to be the negation of all the determinations of being, and thus it turns out to be an absolute indifference which is, at the same time, absolutely related to the determinations that it negates and through which therefore it mediates itself. Houlgate states that:

this substrate is indifferent to quantitative changes [...]; but it is also indifferent in a broader sense, since it endures as all three principal determinations of being—quality, quantity and measure—change and thereby suffer negation. Note, however, that it does not subsist at one remove from the determinations of being, but is inseparably bound to them. (II: 337)

Absolute indifference is the determination through which the passage from being to essence and, with it, the truth of being itself, is realized. This truth consists in the negation of the constitutive immediacy of being itself and of its determinations. What does it mean, ultimately, that the immediacy of the determinations of being is necessarily negated? What is the meaning of the *Aufhebung* of this immediacy—which is the very result of the entire doctrine of being, since its immediate character loses any kind of subsistence—to be proven to be a posited immediacy, or, a sublated immediacy? Houlgate gives an answer to this question in the final part of his book, when he analyses the passage from being to essence, by making explicit exactly what the negation of immediacy consists of and what is the result of the whole dialectic of the doctrine of being.

At the end of the doctrine of being we meet the absolute indifference that negates its own indifference and that proves to be sheer self-negation. The negation of indifference is the negation of the last residue of immediacy subsisting at the end of being. Essence is thus 'being [...] as the self-relating unity that arises through, and contains within itself, the self-negating and "disappearing" of immediate being' (II: 362). This does not mean that the immediacy of being disappears completely in essence, but it no longer subsists in the same way it subsisted in being itself. In essence, the immediacy of being is an immediacy which is negated, sublated, posited.

In the characterization of this process, Houlgate points out what follows:

the different forms of being are present (at first), not in their distinctive immediacy, but only as purely relative moments—moments that are reduced to mere illusion, and then ‘posited’ anew, by the process of *negativity* that constitutes ‘essence’. (II: 363)

And, again:

it is not so much a different sphere from that of being, but rather the non-immediacy that being *itself* proves to be. In this case, however, it is hard to see how being could continue to be itself alongside essence, because its ‘immediacy’ would now appear, in retrospect, to be an illusion. (II: 363)

In this account, the word I am not completely comfortable with is ‘illusion’. When we look at the relation of being and essence, what does illusion mean? What does it mean that the immediacy of being is illusory when we make explicit the unfolding of being’s conceptual content in the determinations of essence? If we think that essence’s *Schein* is precisely the result of the negation of being’s immediacy and if we follow Miller and choose the phrase ‘illusory being’ for translating this expression (*SL* 1969: 393), then saying that being’s immediacy is an illusion can make sense. However, the choice of this translation, in particular the word ‘illusion’, is not free of problematic implications when it comes to shedding light on the status of the negation of the immediacy of being at the end of the first part of the logic. In fact, normally the word ‘illusion’ is used to indicate something that does not have any independent consistency and what Hegel shows at the end of being is that the immediacy of being cannot preserve any kind of self-subsistence and is necessarily sublated in the movement of mediation of essence, through which this immediacy proves to be a posited immediacy, and so not a proper immediacy anymore. Yet, ‘illusion’ mostly refers also to something which is inconsistent in the sense of being merely false. The illusory character of the immediacy of being, according to Houlgate, does not seem to be equivalent to the necessity of eliminating completely this immediacy from the logical space of speculative truth: ‘the necessary forms of being—quality, quantity and measure—are not simply absent from essence, but they are present (at first) as merely relative, non-immediate moments’ (II: 365). Nevertheless, Houlgate also points out that these are ‘moments that are reduced to illusion, and then posited, by the negativity that is essence’ (II: 365). What does this claim imply with respect to the status of the whole doctrine of being? Being in itself is an immediacy which proves to be negated, posited, sublated, but Houlgate also points out that ‘it is not now true, at the end of the doctrine of being, that being was never immediate in the first place’ (II: 366). Nevertheless, Hegel himself claims that essence is the truth of being. Therefore, can we claim that

the immediacy of being, even if not false, is in some way untruth? And in which sense can we do that in the context of the whole development of the logical system, which ends up unfolding the absolute truth of the absolute idea?

At the end of the first part of the system, we can still account for things in their determinacy, in their being limited, finite, in their being characterized on the basis of qualitative and quantitative relations, etc. The logical and ontological forms of quality, quantity and measure have their own immanent truth, which is unfolded throughout the first part of the system. There is nothing illusory with respect to this truth. Nevertheless, this truth is proved to be negated, and so to be a limited truth, or, one could say, an illusory truth. Yet, is this truth illusory in itself or with respect to further developments of the system? Should the word 'illusion' not be contextualized, in order to shed light on what the negation of being's immediacy actually means?

I believe the answer to this question can shed light first of all on the nature of the entire reflection that Hegel presents in the first part of his logical system, because grasping the truth of being is nothing but making explicit the negation of its immediacy, that is to say, following Houlgate, it means to make explicit the meaning of the illusory character of this immediacy. It is therefore particularly important to understand the nature of immediacy that characterizes the determinations of being and what it implies to leave this immediacy behind, as something that is perhaps only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the elaboration of a complete account of the forms of being itself and of the thought that makes explicit its universal, necessary and objective truth.

Moreover, discussing the illusory character of the immediacy of being also opens the space for a discussion of the way in which the notion of truth in the doctrine of being and, more generally, in speculative logic needs to be intended. If illusion is something that is false or, better said, untruth, or, at least, something which is not able to display its own truth only in itself, how is this untruth of being to be grasped? What is the relation between falsehood, untruth and truth in the doctrine of being, especially if one looks at the dialectical passage from being to essence?

I have presented just a couple of issues on the basis on my reading of Houlgate's *Hegel on Being*, but I am sure this book will open once more the debate on Hegel's Logic at various levels of discussion, offering not only Hegel scholars, but also anyone willing to accept the Hegelian challenge to think freedom, an infinite source of philosophical insights, to reflect on Hegel, with Hegel and beyond Hegel.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise specified, volume: page numbers refer to Houlgate's *Hegel on Being*.

² Abbreviations used:

EL = Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part One of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

SL 1969 = Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969).

SL 2010 = Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Bibliography

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