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Houlgate's Presupposition

John W. Burbidge

Hegel's *Science of Logic* is one of the most challenging books in the philosophical library. Its primary text is a mass of abstract terms, woven into sentences that become quite complex. That text avoids illustrations or examples, but plunges on from paragraph to paragraph as the concepts being discussed subtly change their character, develop associations with contrary terms, become part of a complex network of reciprocal interaction, and then collapse into a new integrated thought which then serves as an immediate beginning for the next discussion.

Most secondary sources on the *Logic* try to find general patterns, or focus on a particular theme. Few struggle with the text itself, taking each abstract term seriously, figuring out how it fits into its immediate sentence, and how the sentences then lead one on to the next. The challenge is to find a conceptual pathway that leads from the beginning of any paragraph to its end, where Hegel introduces the next move in his argument. That requires not only some familiarity with Hegel's vocabulary (and with how that vocabulary is affected when it is translated into another language) but also the ability to think rigorously and in a disciplined manner.

Stephen Houlgate is one of the few who has undertaken that challenge. He has committed himself to developing a detailed exposition that covers all three books of the original. *Hegel on Being* presents the first stage of those reflections. And it is an impressive achievement! Houlgate takes the text seriously and presents a close reading; he has a good sense of the secondary literature; he sets Hegel's thinking into the context of his predecessors (particularly Baruch de Spinoza and Immanuel Kant) and successors; and he is prepared to take the time and space to do a thorough job. His analysis of Hegel's discussion of quantity, for example, opens up in an illuminating way the pathway that leads from discrete and continuous magnitude through number theory to ratios and proportions.

Every commentary, however, is an interpretation, and this is no exception. Houlgate is quite explicit about the interpretative principles he is using. Three are significant.

First, aware that logical theory in the late nineteenth century wanted to distinguish the rigour of logical necessity from the contingent ways in which people actually use their intellect, he has followed Gottlob Frege in seeking to avoid the



psychological fallacy. Logic is not concerned with the way people actually think; its primary goal is to establish the necessary links that bind concepts to concepts. The processes through which individual minds move from thought to thought are bedevilled with multiple contingencies, whether in the form of a casual stream of consciousness or in the form of rigorous, disciplined reflection. The task of the commentator, then, is to show the necessity inherent in the logic that provides the standard by which we can assess actual inferences. For Houlgate, pure logic lies in a realm of necessity, independent of any actual thinking.

Second, Hegel uses the thought of pure being, abstracted from all determinations, as the basic premiss on which to build his argument. Houlgate takes this premiss to refer not simply to the abstract thought of being, but rather to being itself, the metaphysical substratum of the cosmos. At each stage of the text, then, Hegel is articulating the characteristics of being, and each new concept introduces a new mode of being or combines a cluster of such modes already handled. For Houlgate, Hegel has reintroduced a form of the metaphysics that preceded Kant.

Third, these two principles are not independent, for it is because being is not simply a concept thought but is metaphysically independent that gives to logic its objective validity. And it is because thought is independent of actual thinking that it needs to be grounded in metaphysics. Pure thought and pure being are one and the same, two facets of the same reality.

Houlgate claims that this reciprocal necessity integrates these three principles into a presuppositionless starting point for Hegel's enterprise, and he makes this the prevailing theme of his commentary. But when one turns to what Hegel says about a presuppositionless beginning it is hard to find evidence that supports Houlgate's thesis. I cite Hegel's text in full:

If there is to be no presupposition, and the beginning itself be taken immediately, it [that beginning] is determined by the fact that it is to be the beginning of the Logic, of thinking on its own account. Only the decision (which one could see as an arbitrary decision), namely that one wants to consider *thinking as such*, is at hand. As a result the beginning must be an *absolute* (which is the same as an abstract) beginning; it is allowed in this way to *presuppose nothing*, must be mediated through nothing, nor have a ground; rather, it is to be itself the ground of the complete science. So it must be simply an immediate, or rather *the immediate* itself. Just as it cannot have a determination vis-à-vis another, it can contain nothing inherent, no content, for anything like that would be differentiation and an interrelation of diverse moments, that is to say a mediation. The beginning is thus *pure being*. (*WdL*: I, 54, my translation)¹

This passage comes after Hegel has provided a link that shows how the beginning of the logic can arise out of the culmination of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Once that work has arrived at pure knowing, he says, its complex structure of mediation is *collapsed* (*zusammengegangen*) into a *unity* that has sublated all relationships to others and all mediation. Lacking all differentiation, it ceases to be knowing at all and is only *simple immediacy*, which is the same as pure being (*WdL*: I, 54, Hegel's emphases). A presuppositionless beginning, then, is not the only option, but one that is offered to satisfy the radical sceptic.²

If one does want to follow the sceptic and start without *any* presuppositions, however, one cannot have any reason for venturing on the project. The logic, as reflection on the process of thinking, can only result from an arbitrary decision to '*will pure thinking*', as the *Encyclopaedia* puts it (*EL*: §78R—Hegel's emphasis). Those agents who arbitrarily decide to implement thinking would seem to be what Hegel calls finite spirits, or human thinkers. It would be hard to discern in what Hegel says that such a decision arrives at some kind of non-subjective realm of pure thought. For *Denken*, the noun Hegel uses, is an infinitive, stressing activity rather than any permanent realm.

Once thinking is on the scene, it looks for a thought that abstracts from all determinations. What comes to mind is the simple verb 'to be'. It can be predicated of anything whatever: pure possibilities and even impossibilities, mountains, dreams, the sciences, unicorns, garden parties, even nothing at all. So the most basic thought one can have is one of a kind of being which adds no determination to the subject of which it is predicated. Hegel stresses that this thought is, as a result, a deliberate abstraction; it can 'contain nothing inherent, no content'.

To be sure, he also says that this thought is being considered absolutely. But this does not mean that he is equating it to the absolute idea or absolute spirit. For Kant reminds us (in *CPR*: B381–82) that the adjective 'absolute' has two opposed meanings. It 'is often used merely to indicate that something is true of a thing considered *in itself* and therefore in its *inward nature* [...] which is the least that can be said of an object'. But it 'is sometimes used to indicate that something is valid in all respects, without limitation'. Hegel on occasion uses 'absolute' in Kant's first sense. Later in the *Logic of Being*, for example, he starts with a discussion of 'absolute indifference', and in the *Logic of Essence* he starts a section with a discussion of 'absolute difference'. By pairing '*absoluter*' with '*abstrakter*' in this text, Hegel makes clear that in this case he is using Kant's first sense.

Later, in his *Remarks on the discussion of 'Becoming'*, Hegel stresses the fact that the thought of pure being and the thought of pure nothing are mere abstractions which achieve their truth only in the concept of 'becoming'. So there seems to be little justification for the claim that this 'being' that can be predicated of anything whatever, including nothing, is identical with the 'being' of traditional metaphysics.

In any event, since pure being has emerged through an act of abstracting that is implemented by thinking, the two are hardly identical.

In other words, in this passage there is little justification for the claim that Hegel deliberately included Houlgate's three principles in his presuppositionless beginning. They seem to be significant presuppositions introduced by Houlgate himself.

Further evidence for this conclusion can be found in early sections of the *Logic* itself. In the first place, Hegel calls on two intellectual functions to implement the movements—from being to nothing and from nothing to being—that are traced in the first two sections: intuition and empty thinking. Houlgate tries to coopt the appeal to intuition for his purposes, by suggesting an analogy to Kant's intellectual intuition as a way of 'seeing' into the inside of being. But Hegel has a long chapter in his *Philosophy of Spirit* devoted to psychology, in which he situates intuition and thinking within a sequence of intellectual functions that characterize 'theoretical spirit' (*EPS*: §§445–68).

Intuition, which, for Hegel, involves the focusing of attention on whatever content is presented to the intellect's 'feeling', and empty thinking, which is simply trying to understand the thoughts it has in mind, both find that, when they concentrate on 'being', there is nothing there. Similarly, when they look carefully at 'nothing' it turns out *to be* an indeterminate thought, and so is the same as pure abstract being. The intellectual functions involved (including thinking) can hardly be identical with the content (pure being and nothing) they are focusing on.

In the second place, this discrepancy is reinforced when one turns to the third section of this first chapter in the *Logic*. This points out that both pure being and pure nothing disappear. But, if pure being starts out being identical with pure thinking, then thinking as well would have to disappear. Since, in Hegel's text, the disappearing happens *in* thought and that thinking continues even when being disappears, thought cannot be simply identical with being.

In the third place, Hegel points out that *the truth* is neither being nor nothing but the fact that each has passed over into the other. In a Remark he stresses that pure being and pure nothing remain abstractions and whatever validity they have is to be found in the process of becoming—in the double transition of coming into being and ceasing to be. This would suggest that, if one wants to find a metaphysical basis for Hegel's logical enterprise, it is to be found, not in being as such, but rather in becoming. That foundation would certainly fit much better with what happens when we actually think through what concepts and categories involve than with some structure of necessity inherent in the stability of pure being.

Houlgate is well aware of these passages but he cannot accept their implications. For he assumes that human reasoning is quite unreliable. To be sure it can solve differential equations and discover explanations for the origin of epidemics, but it is also affected by the contingencies of our personal experience that have

become enshrined in our representations and ideas. So he presupposes that it can never reliably establish the necessity required by the logic:

We follow this logical development and we articulate it in thought, but the development is not driven by *our* activity. It is not the result of assumptions that we make, nor is it produced by our reflection on the categories. Categories develop into one another, not because of judgements that we make about them on the basis of our reasoning, but because of what *they* are logically, that is, through their own immanent logic. (I: 69–70, Houlgate’s emphasis)

This distinction between our thinking and the thought inherent in the immanent logic of the categories thus becomes central to Houlgate’s argument. It is encapsulated in the following quotation:

At the outset [...] nothing determinate may be assumed about thought itself; we may begin, therefore, with no more than thought as such, with ‘thought in its pure lack of determination [*Bestimmungslosigkeit*].’ (EL [...] §86 A1) Yet what precisely does this mean? It means that we must begin with what Hegel calls the sheer ‘simplicity of thinking’ [*Einfachheit des Denkens*], and *nothing else*. Such ‘simplicity has no defining features and so is in fact no more than the simple, indeterminate *being* of thought. Speculative logic must begin, therefore, with the mere being of thought, or with thought conceived *as* mere being.’ (I: 52, Houlgate’s emphasis)

There are, however, several problems with this move. In the first place, ‘thought’ is ambiguous. It can refer to human thinking, and it can refer to the immanent logic of the categories. When Hegel refers to the lack of determination in thought he is referring to that imprecision in actual human thinking that Houlgate has found to be problematic. It is to be replaced with a kind of thought that is implicitly determined by the categories themselves. That second kind of thought, however, is determinate, and so cannot be as simple as Houlgate suggests. Its being cannot be established simply by appealing to its lack of determination.

This leads to the second problem. For it is that simplicity that leads Houlgate to apply being to thought. But if there has to be a reason for applying being to thought, that being cannot be the simple indeterminacy of a predicate that can be applied to any subject whatsoever (including the thinking involved in human reflection). After all, the purpose for making that move is to give logical thought a status that differentiates it from being a mere proposal made by Houlgate. It is concerned with establishing actual, and not merely possible, being. It involves

some staying power that can prevent thought from vanishing into nothing. And it is precisely that staying power that enables Houlgate, once he has identified the being of thought with the thought of being (which is his favourite phrase for the starting point of the Logic), to claim that the being at the beginning of the logic is not a simple placeholding predicate but has ontological significance.

Houlgate's interpretation, then, is based on two equivocations. He shifts, when convenient, from the indeterminate thinking of human reflection to the determinate thought of conceptual necessity and back again; and he moves back and forth from 'being' as an empty predicate that can be applied to any subject whatsoever to a 'being' that has some staying power and can differentiate the actual from the possible. These equivocations indicate that the beginning he attributes to Hegel is hardly presuppositionless, and limit the plausibility his argument might have.

But this leaves us with a challenge. Houlgate has identified the fact that human argumentation varies from the radically contingent to the conceptually necessary. This makes it impossible, he claims, to find in human reasoning the necessity that logic requires. Does this mean that Hegel's logic on its own, without Houlgate's assistance, is essentially flawed since it has no effective way of distinguishing between contingent and sound theoretical reasoning?

That question takes us to Hegel's 'Psychology', a section of his *Philosophy of Spirit* that Houlgate refers to from time to time, but conveniently ignores when comparing Hegel and Frege on their approaches to psychology (II: 45–49) and never discusses in detail.³

Hegel's 'Psychology' divides into a discussion of intelligence, in the section on theoretical spirit, and of will, in the section on practical spirit. Under the first, he considers the various ways the activity or functioning (*Tätigkeit*) of intelligence is determined. The basic function is *intuition* which takes up what impresses itself on the intellect's feeling, focuses its attention on this given and in this way makes it into its own possession. Then, in the general discussion of *representation*, he looks at the function of recollecting, in which the content of intuition's feeling becomes an image that disappears into the sub-conscious, only to be recalled when the intellect encounters a new intuition. That image can become a universal that stands for other intuitions that have the same content.

At this point imagination takes over. It starts by reproducing the content gathered in the subconscious and organizes it according to the patterns of association: similarity, or close contact in space or time. It is this stream of consciousness that makes up the realm of representations. But it does more, because it not only freely links images to each other through fantasy, but also gives the universals represented by its images an objective status by creating audible or visual signs that stand for that common content.

The link between content and sign is initially arbitrary. But as, through memory (*Gedächtnis*), one continues to use a sign in the same context and for the same

purpose (and as one modifies it over time to communicate effectively with other individuals) that connection is strengthened, and intelligence begins to use the name, rather than the image, to recall the content. Eventually one no longer needs to think about the relation between sign and content; the act of memory becomes mechanical, even to the point of rote memory. Consider the difference between the challenge, when learning a second language, of finding the right word for what one wants to say and the right content for a word one hears; and the freedom that emerges when that difference between sign and content has fallen away, and one speaks a language without having to think about it. A word which is inextricably bound up with its sense in this way is what Hegel calls a thought (*Gedanke*). And with that product of mechanical memory Hegel can make the critical move to *thinking*, reasoning, and the concept.

Hegel initiates his discussion of thinking by stressing that intelligence is re-cognizing (*wiedererkennend*). The German term suggests that the intellect looks at what it has already established, explores its implications, and discovers features that previously had remained hidden. In other words, the functions of thinking start with the thoughts generated by memory—the words that distil the representations that incorporate all that we have learned from experience—and unpack what is contained in their content. The universal products—the thoughts that have emerged—are the inherent way things are (*die Sache*): ‘the simple identity of subject and object’. ‘Intelligence knows’, Hegel writes, ‘that what is *thought is*, and that what *is* only *is* in so far as it is [a] thought’ (*EPS*: §465, Hegel’s emphasis, my translation). Instead of grounding the content of thought in some kind of metaphysical being, Hegel grounds it in the words we use to communicate and think about what we have learned from experience. And the role of thought is to distinguish within those universals what is true and what is false.

Initially intelligence uses *understanding* to shape the recollected representations into genera, species, laws and forces, *judgement* to work out how those various determinations are organized and subdivided, and *inference* to show how they are part of a formal, syllogistic structure. Once that is achieved, it reuses those same functions, to discover the dynamic logic inherent in the content underlying those forms: the understanding grasps the way individuals are explained through the use of universal categories; judgement works out how categories are divided into species and genera, into cause and effect; and inference develops the critical links that integrate category with category. In this way the functions of thinking discover the inherent necessity of logical thought.⁴

Whereas Houlgate’s presupposition is that all our reflections are grounded on a fundamentally indeterminate foundation, and so quite untrustworthy, Hegel’s ‘Psychology’ distinguishes the various functions of intelligence that range from the contingencies of intuition and representation to the necessity of thinking. He thus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how fallible humans

are nonetheless able to develop rigorous logical arguments. He explains not only how and why our representations wander about in the way they do, but also how we can use our minds to solve mathematical problems, explain why things function the way they do, and think through the way thoughts lead from one concept to another.

So Hegel does not need to appeal to some kind of direct contact with a logical necessity that is inherent in being itself. For he assumes that the cumulative experience of our human species incorporates in its use of language much of what it has discovered over the centuries, and that thinking can unpack that implicit contact into the categories, judgements and inferences of a reliable logic. An arbitrary decision to focus on thinking and avoid any reference to representations and (almost all) intuitions is sufficient to initiate Hegel's presuppositionless beginning.

Houlgate's 'presuppositionless beginning' may well, nonetheless, provide some insight into what Hegel is trying to achieve. The value of any commentary is its effectiveness in elucidating the primary text. So it is worth looking at several implications of Houlgate's enterprise. One becomes explicit in a passage from his introductory material:

changes to the circumstances in which we live would not change the course of presuppositionless logic: they would either mean that such logic would never arise in the first place (or would disappear), or that it would still follow the course determined by pure being. One may certainly understand that logic more or less well, as Hegel himself demonstrates by revising parts of the doctrine of being in the second edition. Yet such revisions do not indicate that alternative routes through speculative logic are possible (dependent, perhaps, on the conditions in which such logic is worked out). They indicate, rather, that it can take considerable time and effort to understand the immanent development of being properly. (I: 104)

In other words, Hegel is for Houlgate, as Muhammad is for Muslims, the sole human who has ever had direct access to the mind of God. After all, Houlgate's first principles do talk about a being than which none greater can be conceived.

The role of a commentary is to explicate the complexity of the author's text. Since Houlgate cannot appeal to the thoughts we focus on when working through the definition of a category or concept, he is limited to spelling out the significance of the language Hegel actually uses. Terms which are reasonably colloquial in German, like 'being for itself' or 'being within itself' are converted into technical terms. And the relationship between those terms is articulated using general descriptive language. In Houlgate's hands this approach does reasonable justice to what Hegel says, but it requires a good deal of effort on the part of the reader to hold those abstract terms in one's mind, and figure out how they are related to

the specific category being discussed, as one follows the pathway through each paragraph. One does not easily 'grasp' the evident necessity of the argument. An example serves to illustrate this characteristic.

Yet the one is not only a moment of the processes it constitutes, but, together with repulsion and attraction, it also constitutes self-relating *being* or immediacy. This is because all three relate *immediately* to themselves in their other: the one goes together with itself in the many ones, and then repulsion and attraction both presuppose themselves while presupposing one another. Moreover, they do not just constitute three separate spheres of self-relating being, but together they form a unity: since the one is a moment of both self-repulsion and attraction, and the latter are moments of one another, all three form a single sphere of self-relating being or immediacy. As Hegel puts it, therefore, the process of the one, or 'becoming', that has emerged here, 'in the instability [*Haltungslosigkeit*] of its moments, is the collapse, or rather the going-together-with itself, into simple immediacy' (SL: 145 / LS: 183). This new immediacy is, however, no longer qualitative being. (I: 290)

What one cannot do, using Houlgate's approach, is appeal to the way we fallible humans actually think: how the meanings of terms shift as we avoid ambiguities, take account of contraries, and work out the implications of those oppositions.

For example, if we consider the implications of the three thoughts of the one, repulsion and attraction, mentioned in the preceding quotation, we can trace the following itinerary. Starting from the thought of a unit, or one, that is a self-contained being, we realize that that term can be applied to a number of equally isolated units. To be isolated, however, they need to ensure that they do not become confused with each other, so the units or ones must repel each other. But a thoroughgoing repulsion would disperse them to the point where their multiplicity becomes irrelevant. So repulsion needs to presuppose a contrary attraction that draws them together, even as that attraction needs to presuppose the repulsion that drives them apart. When we look over what we have now arrived at, we have a complex, interrelated picture of many units that are both repelling and attracting each other; they are all part of the same continuous context, yet nonetheless discrete. By collapsing that complex picture into a single, integrated thought, we have the thought of a magnitude that can be thought of both as a continuum and as discrete. We have arrived at the thought of quantity.

Rather than referring to a necessity that is enshrined in metaphysical being, such a commentary invites its readers to experience the inherent necessity that emerges from simply thinking through what is involved in each term as it arises.

At the same time, however, it opens the *Science of Logic* to the contingencies of human existence and the way words change their sense over time. Because Houlgate has ignored the way Hegel's 'Psychology' distinguishes rigorous thinking from the vagaries of the conscious stream of representations and ideas, he cannot show how logical necessity can actually be experienced in thought, but can only appeal to the authority of Hegel's text.

Early in his discussion, Houlgate refers to the way the abstractions of the understanding, by isolating concepts from their contraries, generated the dogmatism of pre-Kantian metaphysics. Unfortunately, his isolation of the pure necessity of logical thought from the actual dynamics involved when we humans think concepts and categories compromises his whole enterprise, resulting in a dogmatism that makes it irrelevant to human life. Why should we take Hegel seriously if, sitting in his Platonic heaven, he cannot help us cope with the dramatic unforeseen changes that are engulfing our civilized world?

John W. Burbidge
Trent University, Canada
johnwburbidge@gmail.com

Notes

¹ Abbreviations:

CPR Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

EL Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

EPS Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971)/*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse III*.

WdL Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. G. Lasson (Hamburg: Meiner, 1967).

² See the remark to §78 in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* where Hegel has been talking about scepticism.

³ I explore how Hegel could respond to Frege's rejection of psychology in Burbidge 2013.

⁴ This paragraph is an attempt to unpack the rather difficult §467.

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