

## Hegel's Logic as Presuppositionless Science

Dr. Miles Hentrup  
Florida Gulf Coast University  
mhentrup@fgcu.edu

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Abstract:

In this article, I offer a critical interpretation of Hegel's claims regarding the presuppositionless status of the Logic. Commentators have been divided as to whether the Logic actually achieves the status of presuppositionless science, disagreeing as to whether the Logic succeeds in making an unmediated beginning. I argue, however, that this understanding of presuppositionless science is misguided, as it reflects a spurious conception of immediacy that Hegel criticizes as false. Contextualizing Hegel's remarks in light of his broader approach to the problem of beginning, I contend that Hegel's Logic is presuppositionless not in the sense that it satisfies a formal epistemological demand to begin free from all mediation, but in that its self-mediating structure facilitates an immanent deduction of the categories.

It has become customary since at least the time of Descartes to associate philosophy with the pursuit of a form of thinking that is free from all presuppositions. For Descartes, the task of philosophy is to provide a firm and unshakeable foundation for scientific knowledge, one purified of any and all dogmatic assumptions. On this view, a philosophy can be evaluated by considering how successfully it has been purified of such prejudices. Hegel too claims at several points that his account of philosophical science, the Logic, must achieve the "complete absence of any presupposition" [*gänzliche Voraussetzungslosigkeit*].<sup>1</sup> All "presuppositions or prejudices" [*Voraussetzungen oder Vorurteile*], he remarks in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, "must be surrendered at the entry of science, whether they be taken from representation or from thought" (*EL* 125/167 [§78]). Similarly, Hegel tells us in the *Science of Logic* that logic cannot presuppose any "forms of reflection" or "rules and laws of thinking."<sup>2</sup> It is tempting, then, to understand Hegel's

remarks on presuppositionlessness in terms of the modern project of foundationalism and to assess the success of the Logic by determining the extent to which Hegel managed to achieve a thinking free of presuppositions. Indeed, this is precisely what a number of commentators suggest. In this paper, however, I will argue that such an approach runs the risk of obscuring Hegel's original contribution to the philosophical problem of beginning by assigning to the notion of presupposition a meaning that Hegel was in fact attempting to revise.

In the first section of the paper, then, I consider how certain commentators, namely, Richard Dien Winfield, William Maker, and Stephen Houlgate, have sought to defend the Logic against the popular charge that it fails to begin without presuppositions. I go on in the second section to examine the interpretive error regarding the Logic's presuppositionless status that I find common to all parties in this debate. Hegel is quite clear that the Logic generates its own evaluative criteria through an immanent deduction and that it therefore cannot be evaluated by means of any concepts that it does not immanently deduce. I argue, however, that this is precisely what occurs when readers impose upon the Logic the requirement that it begin free of all presuppositions. Thus, I argue that, when Hegel describes the Logic as presuppositionless, he is referring, not to the argument's having satisfied some external methodological requirement which, once met, would secure its scientific status, but to the self-mediating structure of absolute reality. In the third section of the paper, I attempt to further clarify the sense in which the Logic is presuppositionless by showing how the text offers a plausible resolution to the skeptical problem of the Two Modes as presented by Sextus Empiricus. Hegel's solution to this dilemma, I argue, turns upon his clarification of the concept of immediacy – a close conceptual cousin to the notion of presuppositionlessness. In the fourth and fifth sections, I indicate how Hegel's concept of immediacy operates within the structure of the Logic and relates to its proof

procedure. This important point of clarification – namely, that the Logic is presuppositionless only in the sense that it is its *own* presupposition – is crucial, I argue, to understanding how Hegel approaches the philosophical problem of beginning, and serves to distinguish his Logic from the foundationalist project of the modern period. Finally, I conclude by distinguishing my interpretation of the presuppositionless status of the Logic from that of other commentators.

## **I. Debating the Success of Hegel's Logic**

As indicated above, many commentators have taken the success of Hegel's Logic to hinge upon its ability to achieve a presuppositionless beginning. Some, like Schelling and Kierkegaard, have suggested that Hegel falls short of achieving such a beginning, and on this basis, consider the Logic a failed project.<sup>3</sup> Others have sought to defend Hegel's claim concerning the Logic's presuppositionless status, arguing that the Logic does in fact achieve a presuppositionless beginning. Richard Dien Winfield (1989) and William Maker (1994), for instance, argue that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* clears the way for a truly presuppositionless science through its unique, self-eliminating structure. Because the *Phenomenology of Spirit* demonstrates through a process of immanent critique that knowledge cannot depend upon any external criteria for its justification, Winfield and Maker contend that it is the negative, ground-clearing work of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – namely, its refutation of the foundationalist claims of natural consciousness – that allows the Logic to make an absolute beginning.<sup>4</sup> For Maker (1994), the “antifoundational outcome of the *Phenomenology* discloses the argumentative force of the Logic” (97) because it liberates readers from the radical opposition between subject and object *presupposed* by all forms of consciousness. Accordingly, Maker finds that the *Phenomenology* is the “presupposition for presuppositionless science” (77) since it articulates the

requirements of a truly autonomous and self-determining mode of thinking.<sup>5</sup> For Winfield as for Maker, however, because these requirements cannot be specified prior to its commencement, presuppositionless science can only begin with the negative outcome of the *Phenomenology*, that is, with the thought of sheer indeterminacy. To say, therefore, that the Logic makes a presuppositionless beginning is, on this interpretation, to say that it begins with a “freedom from givenness so radical that it can only be conceived to issue from nothing at all” (Winfield 2016: 12).

Not all commentators who defend Hegel’s claim to presuppositionlessness proceed in this way, however. Stephen Houlgate (2006) rejects the solution offered on the Winfield-Maker interpretation on textual and philosophical grounds, arguing that “between the end of the *Phenomenology* and the beginning of the Logic there must occur an act of abstraction in which we specifically set aside the determinate conception of being and spirit reached at the close of the *Phenomenology*” (162n24). For Houlgate, the Logic wins its presuppositionless status not through the negative, ground-clearing work of the *Phenomenology*, but rather through what Hegel describes in the *Encyclopedia Logic* as “the resolve to engage in pure thinking” [*dem Entschluß, rein denken zu wollen*] (EL 125/168 [§78 Add.]). Houlgate is quite clear that this resolve on the part of the thinker to consider nothing more than pure thought as such must be presupposed at the opening of the Logic.<sup>6</sup> Like Winfield and Maker, however, Houlgate maintains that this presupposition for presuppositionless science does not constitute a “founding presupposition” which would determine in advance the course of the logical investigation. Rather, he conceives this decision as an “act of liberation” that frees thought from the ordinary assumptions that would otherwise hinder its self-determination. Thus, for Houlgate, “to philosophize without presuppositions is... not to reject in advance all that traditionally counts as

‘thought,’ ‘concept,’ or ‘rationality,’” but merely “to suspend our familiar assumptions about thought and to look to discover in the course of the science of logic *whether or not* they will prove to be correct” (30).

The interpretations elaborated by Winfield, Maker, and Houlgate each offer an important rejoinder to the prevailing wisdom within the Continental tradition regarding the success of Hegel’s philosophical project. Hegelian philosophy, Schelling (1994: 148) complains, “boasts of being a philosophy which presupposes nothing, absolutely nothing,” but surreptitiously employs a host of concepts which it makes no effort to justify. Kierkegaard (2009), Heidegger (1988), and Levinas (1996), to name but a few of Hegel’s best-known critics, all raise similar concerns regarding the Logic’s supposed presuppositionless status.<sup>7</sup> For such thinkers, the Logic tells a tragic tale of Teutonic hubris – a testament to the failure of Enlightenment rationality.

The interpretations of Hegel developed by Winfield, Maker, and Houlgate challenge this inherited wisdom by attempting to demonstrate how the Logic plausibly satisfies the requirement of making a presuppositionless beginning. However, in accepting that the success of the Logic is contingent upon its satisfaction of this requirement, they cede too much ground to Hegel’s anti-foundationalist detractors, subjecting his text to a requirement it was never meant to fulfill and inadvertently contributing to the popular misreading of Hegel as a failed foundationalist. After all, if Hegel were to suppose that the scientific status of the Logic depended in any way upon its ability to begin free from all presuppositions, then he surely would have to presuppose the legitimacy of this very requirement. Though this simple point is in fact crucial to Hegel’s understanding of the problem of beginning, it has received little attention among scholars.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, is this understanding of the Logic as presuppositionless science consistent with Hegel’s comment regarding this problem in “With What Must the Beginning of Science Be

Made?” that “the beginning of philosophy must be either *something mediated* or *something immediate*, and it is easy to show that it can be neither the one nor the other; so either way of beginning runs into contradiction” (*SL* 45/1: 65)? If Hegel’s interest in the problem of beginning is not Descartes’ (1984: 16) interest in securing for science a “firm and immovable point” from which it may safely proceed, safeguarded against the possibility of error, then what exactly is it? Is Hegel out to show that there are certain necessary but unproblematic presuppositions which mediate every philosophical inquiry? Or, does his interest rather lie in showing that the foundationalist aspirations of modern philosophy and the anti-foundationalist concerns of its skeptical critics are *both* premised upon a spurious conception of immediacy? And is it perhaps this conception of immediacy that has led critics and supporters alike to misconstrue the Logic’s status as presuppositionless science? If this is the case, then, while Winfield, Maker, and Houlgate each offer a compelling defence against some of the Logic’s most strident critics, they overlook something quite important, namely, that in his characterization of the Logic as presuppositionless science, Hegel is not merely attempting to solve the philosophical problem of beginning but is trying to revise the notion of presuppositionlessness itself and, hence, to shift the terms of the debate.

## **II. Evaluating Hegel’s Logic on Presupposed Criteria**

In the Preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel describes an interpretive error that he has observed in many of the objections that have been directed against his work. Too often those who object to his work, Hegel claims, are

incapable of the simple consideration that their opinions and objections imply categories which are presuppositions [*Voraussetzungen*] and themselves in need of being criticized first before they are put to use. Lack of self-awareness in this matter is incredibly profound; it is responsible for the misunderstanding which is

the cause of all others, the nasty and uneducated practice of taking for a category under consideration *something other* than this category itself (*SL* 20/1: 31-2).

Hegel's point, upon first glance, seems quite simple: all too often have the various criticisms aimed at the *Logic* been made thoughtlessly and without an adequate understanding of the nature of the concepts which they employ to this end. To fully appreciate what is at stake in Hegel's remark, however, we must consider it in light of the unique task that he sets out to accomplish in the *Logic*.

Hegel's *Logic* attempts to articulate the structure of reality through a clarification of the necessary categorial relations which account for its intelligibility. Like Kant, Hegel's foremost concern in his deduction of the categories is to demonstrate the extent to which such categories or "thought determinations" [*Denkbestimmungen*] can count as true.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Kant, however, who considers the categories to hold mere empirical validity as the necessary rules by which the physical world appears *to us*, Hegel takes the categories, grasped in their systematic ordering, to constitute the very nature of what is. Thus, for Hegel, "*Logic*... coincides with *metaphysics*" (*EL* 58/81 [§24]): the science of the forms of pure thinking and the science of the "essentialities of things" are ultimately one and the same.

Since, however, it is only in the *Logic*, Hegel claims, that the categories are considered "in and for themselves," that is, are immanently deduced from the movement of pure thought alone, any objections against this work made on the basis of some presupposed criterion can be rejected out of hand as mere dogmatism.<sup>10</sup> The *Logic*, in other words, is only open to criticism that proceeds from an adequate treatment of the categories, such as the *Logic* purports to provide. In Hegel's eyes, therefore, critics of the *Logic* have only two legitimate options at their disposal: they can either (a) accept Hegel's deduction of the categories and argue that the *Logic* nevertheless fails on its own terms, or (b) ground their objections on a deduction that proves to

be more immanent than Hegel's own account. Understandably, most critics of the Logic have chosen to pursue the first option. Hegel suggests, however, in the passage cited above, that he has not found these attempts to be particularly successful. This is because he finds that such attempts all too often involve that "nasty and uneducated practice of taking for a category under consideration *something other* than this category itself." As we will see, it is precisely this sort of error that is responsible for the prevailing confusion regarding the Logic's claim to achieve "total presuppositionlessness."

In the lines immediately following the passage cited above, Hegel explains that this error is conspicuously present in "the vast majority of the objections and attacks on the first concepts or propositions of the logic, on *being* and *nothing*, and on *becoming*..." (SL 20/1: 32). Given that it is the category of being with which the Logic begins, it stands to reason that Hegel sees this error as an obstacle for understanding the starting point of this work. This interpretation finds further support in the following passage:

Thoroughness [*Die Gründlichkeit*] seems to require that the beginning, as the foundation [*den Grund*] upon which everything else is built, should be examined before all else, in fact that we should not proceed further until its solidity has been demonstrated, and if the contrary should be the case, that we reject all that follows. [...] Having good right to occupy itself at first *only* with the principle and therefore not to let itself be involved in *anything else*, this industrious thoroughness in fact does the very opposite, for it *does* bring in the 'else,' that is, other categories besides just the principle, extra presuppositions and prejudices. Such presuppositions as that infinity is different from finitude, content something else than form, the inner something else than the outer, likewise that *mediation is not immediacy*..., are didactically presented, narrated and affirmed, rather than demonstrated (SL 20-1/1: 32-3, my emphasis).

Here, Hegel inveighs against a demand that has come to define the shape of modern philosophy – the foundationalist demand for an absolute beginning, free from all presuppositions. He suggests, as many of his critics would readily allow, that presuppositions are an ineradicable feature of human cognition, such that any attempt to purify thought of all its prejudices and



assumptions will ultimately run aground. But, though Hegel is remarkably sensitive to the myriad factors by which knowledge is mediated, we must resist the tendency to read this passage, and others like it, as a concession. Hegel is not here rescinding his claim concerning the Logic's presuppositionless status. Rather, he is taking critics of the Logic to task for evaluating the starting point of the Logic on the basis of their *own* presupposed criteria as opposed to those that are immanently deduced within the Logic itself.<sup>11</sup>

In particular, Hegel points out, they presuppose, rather than prove, the antithesis of infinity and finitude, of content and form, of inner and outer and, most importantly for our purposes, of immediacy and mediation, in challenging the Logic's claim to "total presuppositionlessness." It is just such a spurious conception of the category of immediacy – one according to which immediacy is understood in simple opposition to mediation – that has led readers to misinterpret the presuppositionless status of the Logic, and thus, to misconstrue Hegel's approach to the problem of beginning. Indeed, in taking for the category of immediacy "*something other* than this category itself," commentators have foisted upon the Logic a requirement it was never meant to satisfy. In the following section, then, I will distinguish between two alternative conceptions of immediacy – one spurious and one speculative – that Hegel employs throughout his writings. As we will see, it is because some readers of the Logic have overlooked the relevance of this distinction to the problem of beginning that they have come to mischaracterize Hegel's project as a work of foundationalism.

### **III. Genuine and Spurious Immediacy in Hegel's Logic**

Hegel opens "With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?," an introductory essay to the *Science of Logic*, by articulating a skeptical challenge to the very possibility of

beginning in philosophy: “The beginning of philosophy must be either *something mediated* or *something immediate* [*ein Vermitteltes oder Unmittelbares*], and it is easy to show that it can be neither the one nor the other; so either way of beginning runs into contradiction” (*SL* 45/1: 65). Though Hegel does not elaborate on his reasoning here, given his well-known interest in ancient skepticism,<sup>12</sup> it is reasonable to assume that he has in mind the skeptical dilemma of the Two Modes presented by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.<sup>13</sup> “Since everything apprehended is thought to be apprehended either by means of itself or by means of something else,” Sextus (1994) writes, “they [the skeptics] are thought to induce puzzlement about everything by suggesting that nothing is apprehended either by means of itself or by means of something else” (43). If I am correct in reading Sextus’ concern here into Hegel’s discussion of the beginning of philosophy, the latter can be reconstructed as follows:

1. The beginning of philosophy cannot be something immediate since “nothing is apprehended by means of itself” (43) and thus any potential starting point requires justification, and hence, mediation by some other.
2. But neither, for that matter, can the beginning of philosophy be something mediated since “that by means of which something is apprehended will itself always need to be apprehended by means of something else” (43) and so on ad infinitum.
3. Thus, the beginning of philosophy can be neither something immediate (since “nothing is apprehended by means of itself”) nor something mediated (since this would entail an infinite regress).

Unlike Sextus, however, Hegel does not take this argument to occasion the suspension of judgement or mental tranquility. Rather, Hegel's suggestion is that this skeptical dilemma concerning the possibility of beginning in philosophy is itself fallacious since it is predicated upon a spurious conception of immediacy – one that takes immediacy to exclude mediation.

Typically, something is thought to be immediate if it is simple, self-evident, unconditioned, or otherwise unrelated – if, in other words, it excludes mediation. Similarly, something is thought to be mediated if it depends upon, is conditioned by, or related to, some other. Accordingly, to say that something is immediate is to deny its mediation, and to say that something is mediated is to contest its claim to immediacy. For Hegel, however, to regard the relationship of immediacy and mediation in this way, as a mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive opposition, is to consider this relationship only from one side, to overlook their necessary unity, and thus, to fail to recognize their full categorial import. It is only the “most wooden understanding,” Hegel (1995) explains, “which thinks that an immediacy can be something on its own account, without a mediation within itself” (421). It is precisely such a spurious conception of immediacy, I suggest, that informs the skeptical problem of beginning and, accordingly, the same conception of immediacy which has led readers to misconstrue the sense in which the *Logic* achieves a presuppositionless beginning.

When, on the other hand, the categories of immediacy and mediation are considered not on the basis of some external criterion but examined “in and for themselves” through an immanent deduction of the movement of pure thought, the true, categorial import of immediacy comes to the fore. For Hegel, genuine immediacy, far from excluding mediation, necessarily includes the latter. Indeed, in the *Science of Logic* Hegel goes so far as to claim that there is “nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much

immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be *unseparated* and *inseparable* and the opposition between them nothing real” (SL 46/1: 66).<sup>14</sup> Hegel’s point here is not only that immediacy and mediation are so inextricably tied that it is impossible to employ one category without simultaneously employing the other. Nor is it merely that these categories remain unintelligible so long as they are considered in abstraction of that unity that obtains among all opposing determinations. Hegel is making the deeper metaphysical claim that the categories of immediacy and mediation adequately articulate the structure of reality only when they are grasped in their systematic interconnection – that is, only in their sublation.

Accordingly, it is only the true, speculative conception of immediacy which Hegel regards as a valid determination of the absolute idea. The absolute idea – reality in its most determinate, concrete expression – is immediate, for Hegel, not in the sense that it excludes all mediation from itself, but only insofar as it constitutes a self-mediating totality which sublates each of the one-sided determinations by which it is mediated.<sup>15</sup> The absolute idea is, therefore, “the immediate,” Hegel claims, “but the immediate *through sublation of mediation*” (SL 747/2: 565).<sup>16</sup>

To be clear, to say that it is only the speculative conception of immediacy that pertains to the absolute idea is to say that it is only immediacy so understood that qualifies for Hegel as true. Because Hegel conceives of the Logic as an immanent deduction of the categories through which absolute reality determines itself, it is only when the category of immediacy is understood in terms of the self-mediation of the absolute idea that it is grasped “in and for itself” rather than according to some external criterion.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it is only such a conception of immediacy that will allow us to recognize how Hegel resolves the skeptical problem of beginning, and thus, to appreciate the sense in which the Logic achieves “total presuppositionlessness.”<sup>18</sup>

#### IV. The Problem of Presuppositionlessness in Light of Sextus' Two Modes

Now that we have understood what is problematic about “taking for a category under consideration *something other* than this category itself,” let us return to the beginning to see how Hegel’s distinction between true and spurious immediacy bears upon the problems we have been examining. If, as Hegel argues, genuine immediacy includes, rather than excludes, mediation, then it would follow that the skeptical dilemma suggesting that “the beginning of philosophy must be either *something mediated* or *something immediate*” but can be neither the one nor the other, rests upon an unclarified and spurious conception of immediacy. To suppose, therefore, that the beginning of the Logic must either be something immediate or something mediated is to presume the legitimacy of a requirement that Hegel’s own account calls into question. Rather than embrace one horn of the dilemma, then, Hegel’s strategy in “With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?” is to reject both: the beginning of science is neither something immediate nor something mediated, but something *self-mediated*.<sup>19</sup>

One can see the impact of this insight for Hegel’s approach to the problem of beginning exhibited in the organization of the Logic itself. While it cannot be my task here to offer an exhaustive account of the logical progression from pure being to absolute idea, it behooves us to consider for a moment how, in its organizational structure, the Logic exhibits the speculative concept of immediacy that we have been developing up to this point. The Logic begins with “pure being” – a category so indeterminate that it is “equal only to itself” and has “no difference within it, nor any outwardly” (*SL* 59/1: 82). Indeed, pure being is so conceptually underdetermined that one cannot even say what it is – for this would necessarily involve the introduction of new categories<sup>20</sup> – but merely *that* it is. Pure being is pure, therefore, precisely in

its abstract self-reference – that is, in its claim to exclude all reference to, and hence, all mediation by, some other. The Logic begins, then, with something immediate in precisely that spurious and one-sided sense of excluding all mediation: “*Pure being* constitutes the beginning,” Hegel explains, “because it is pure thought as well as the undetermined, simple immediate, and the first beginning cannot be anything mediated and further determined” (*EL* 136/182-3 [§86]).

Nevertheless, this initial claim to immediacy is renounced soon after it is raised, for in positing pure being as immediate (that is, as mediated by nothing), we find that this category already contains some determinate content which it cannot conceptually accommodate. It is this problem which motivates the logical transition from the category of being to that of becoming. Indeed, the entire logical progression from pure being to absolute idea can be understood as the immanent deduction and conceptual clarification of this indeterminate and thus spurious immediacy, where each successive logical category yields a more determinate, more comprehensive conception of pure being than the last. It is only at the end of this progression, where being is grasped not merely as immediate starting point but also as the mediated result and first form of the absolute idea, that it becomes fully intelligible. As Hegel puts it: “what constitutes the beginning, because it is something still undeveloped and empty of content, is not yet truly known at that beginning... only science, and science fully developed, is the completed cognition of it, replete with content and finally truly grounded” (*SL* 49/1: 71). This process reaches its completion in the Logic’s final chapter on the absolute idea.

The absolute idea emerges in Hegel’s text when the opposition between the true and the good gives way and an “objective world whose inner ground and actual subsistence is... the concept” (*SL* 734/2: 548) comes into view. For Hegel, the absolute idea has the significance of Aristotle’s νόησις νοήσεως – of thought thinking itself as absolute reality.<sup>21</sup> Because the absolute

idea is in this way thought comprehending its object as its own activity, Hegel contends that it is in fact the same abstract self-reference that we encountered in the category of being, except that it now has the concrete significance of being both the content and form of pure thought. That is, the content that thought comprehends in its most determinate, concrete shape as absolute idea is “nothing but the entire system, the development of which we have considered up to this point” (EL 300/389 [§237 Add.]). Accordingly, the final stage of the Logic consists in an examination of the entire logical development as the articulation and proof of the “absolute method” in which the form and content of pure thought converge as one. Hegel’s discussion here of the methodological significance of the beginning of the Logic is especially significant for our purposes, as it bears directly on the question of its presuppositionless status:

In fact, the demand that being should be exhibited [*die Forderung, das Sein aufzuzeigen*] has a further, inner meaning in which more is at issue than just this abstract determination; implied in it is the demand for *the realization of the concept*, a realization that is missing at the *beginning* itself but is rather the goal and the business of the entire subsequent development of cognition. [...] The authentication of the *determinate content* with which the beginning is to be made seems to lie *behind* it, but is in fact to be regarded as an advance, in so far as it is a matter of conceptual cognition. The beginning, therefore, has for the method no other determinateness than that of being the simple and universal; this is precisely the *determinateness* that makes it deficient (SL 739/2: 554-5).

In this passage, Hegel draws attention to three significant implications for the beginning of the Logic that follow from the identity of content and form in absolute method. Since the content under examination in the Logic has proven to be nothing other than the unpacking of the purportedly “simple and universal” beginning, this means (1) that the indeterminate immediacy of pure being, that is, its lack of any discernible content, is itself what generates the methodological demand for justification that sets the entire logical investigation in motion; (2) that the conceptual clarification of this indeterminate immediacy is also the proof or authentication of this content; and thus (3) that pure being must be seen not only as the

immediate starting point that it claimed to be, but also as the mediated result of this self-mediating process of justification.

With this, however, the presupposition that stands at the beginning of the Logic – the category of pure being – loses its immediate, one-sided character, since it proves to be mediated by that systematic totality of which it is a mere moment.<sup>22</sup> It becomes, in this respect, not unlike "the old man who says the same religious sentences as the child... but [for whom]... they have the meaning of his entire life" (*EL* 300/389 [§237 Add.]). It is only, therefore, when the category of pure being is grasped in its full, systematic context – not simply as immediate starting point, but equally as mediated result – that it is taken "in and for itself" as the self-mediating totality that Hegel calls the absolute idea. Thus,

each step of the *advance* in the process of further determination, while getting away from the indeterminate beginning, is also a *getting back closer* to it; consequently, that what may at first appear to be different, the *retrogressive grounding* of the beginning and the *progressive further determination* of it, run into one another and are the same [*das rückwärtsgehende Begründen des Anfangs und das vorwärtsgehende Weiterbestimmen desselben, ineinanderfällt und dasselbe ist*] (*SL* 750/2: 570).

The Logic begins with pure being, but the progressive movement forward toward greater determinacy is also the "retrogressive grounding" of this most abstract of categories upon the most concrete. Because pure being proves to be grounded upon – that is, mediated by – the absolute idea, its initial claim to immediacy turns out to be a mere presupposition, supplanted by the subsequent demonstration of its absolute self-mediation. This, I submit, is how Hegel attempts to resolve the skeptical dilemma he articulates in "With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?" Rather than accept the exclusive disjunction upon which it rests, Hegel defuses the dilemma by demonstrating that immediacy, in its true, speculative sense, includes rather than excludes mediation. Thus, the entire course of the Logic speaks against the skeptical



problem of beginning, since the dialectical development from pure being to absolute idea reveals this problem to be predicated upon an unclarified concept of immediacy.

It is in this same sense that we must understand Hegel's claims regarding the Logic's presuppositionless status. The Logic is presuppositionless not in the sense that it excludes all presuppositions, but in that its presupposition, pure being, is nothing other than its result, the absolute idea, posited in advance of its full systematic exposition. In beginning with pure being, the Logic sets out from a category that it does not yet prove, but simply presupposes. For Hegel, however, there is nothing illicit in beginning in this manner. In fact, Hegel maintains that it is impossible to begin in any other way: "The difficulty of making a beginning arises at once," he writes, "since a beginning is something *immediate* and as such makes a presupposition, or rather it is itself just that" (*EL* 28/41 [§1]).<sup>23</sup> Though the Logic begins with something immediate, something not yet proven, but simply presupposed, this does not mean that its beginning is therefore arbitrary. For Hegel, to say that the Logic begins by presupposing the category of pure being is to say no more than that it begins with the absolute idea taken in abstraction of the categorial relations by which it is mediated and through which it is constituted – that is, that the Logic begins with the absolute idea taken up as something immediate, prior to its full systematic development and proof as self-mediating totality. Thus, the beginning of the Logic is no less necessary, for Hegel, than its conclusion, even if this necessity is only grasped retrospectively.<sup>24</sup>

Pure being is so devoid of determinate content that it can only be presupposed at the outset. Because it lacks any kind of determinacy that would distinguish it from any other category, in the beginning of the Logic there is, strictly speaking, nothing yet to prove. The logical proof gets underway, however, when this most abstract of all determinations is shown to depend upon further categories for its own intelligibility, and reaches its conclusion only when

this first presupposition is found to be grounded in its final result. With this, pure being is “no longer something merely taken up but is *deduced* and *proved*” [*Abgeleitetes und Erwiesenes*] (*SL* 748/2: 567). To some, Hegel’s insistence on describing this process as a form of proof will sound strange, since it departs from the most familiar ways of thinking about philosophical justification. In the next section, then, I would like to clarify the unique proof procedure of the Logic, explaining in particular how it reflects the speculative conception of immediacy that we have examined up to this point.

## **V. The Path of Rational Proof**

It is ordinarily understood that a deductive proof is complete when one has shown the conclusion to follow from a given set of premises granted at the outset. In this way, the proof proceeds one-sidedly from condition to conditioned, ground to consequent, immediate to mediated. This sort of proof procedure, in which “one makes a presupposition, something fixed, from which something else follows” (*EL* 77/105 [§36 Add.]), is specific to that mode of cognition which Hegel calls “understanding” [*Verstand*] and which he characterizes in terms of its penchant for abstraction and for positing fixed oppositions. Although this procedure would seem to be indispensable to any rigorous, systematic inquiry, it is nevertheless inappropriate for the unique task that the Logic sets out to accomplish. There are chiefly three reasons for this. First, if this mode of proof can demonstrate, as Hegel says, nothing more than the “dependency of a determination on a presupposition” (*EL* 77/105 [§36 Add.]), then it is obvious that it can only presuppose, but never prove, the starting point of a given inquiry.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Hegel could only employ such a procedure in the Logic at the price of renouncing its claim to presuppositionless science. Moreover, to the degree that this proof procedure takes the results of

an inquiry to depend upon its presuppositions, the consequence to depend upon the ground – but not vice versa, it evidently assumes the mutual exclusivity of immediacy and mediation at the level of method. That is to say, because such a proof proceeds one-sidedly from something immediate to something mediated, it fails to approximate the self-mediating structure of the absolute idea. Consequently, if the Logic were to proceed upon such a path – operating with an unclarified conception of immediacy embedded within its very method, its deduction of the categories could not be considered truly immanent and self-grounding, as it would be informed by methodological assumptions which it could not itself justify. Since, for Hegel, absolute method is the “consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content of logic” (*SL* 33/1: 49), it can be exhibited and legitimated in no other way than through an examination of the categories through which pure being determines itself. For this reason, the Logic’s own proof procedure must reflect the self-mediating structure of the absolute idea.

In following an alternative route, in which “what appeared as a consequence shows itself equally as a ground, and what presented itself at first as a ground is demoted to a consequence” [*was als Folge erscheint, sich auch als Grund zeigt, und was erst als Grund sich darstellte, zur Folge herabgesetzt wird*] (*EL* 77/106 [§36 Add.]), the Logic articulates a proof procedure that reflects what Hegel regards as the true, speculative conception of immediacy. Hegel calls this alternative procedure “rational proof”:

To be sure, the manner of proving engaged in by reason [*das Beweisen der Vernunft*] equally takes something other than God for its point of departure, and yet in its progression it does not leave this other standing as something immediate and as a being. Rather, by exhibiting this other as something mediated and posited, it leads at the same time to the result that God is to be regarded as that which is truly immediate, primordial, and self-subsistent, containing mediation as sublated within himself (*EL* 77/105-6 [§36 Add.]).

The Logic's own immanent deduction is not only a forward progression in which pure being acquires increasing conceptual determinacy; it is also at the same time a "retrogressive grounding" where its presupposition is shown to be mediated by its result. If, for Hegel, as for Heraclitus (2011: 48), "the road up and the road down are one and the same," this is because the Logic follows a circular path upon which "the first becomes also the last, and the last also the first" (SL 49/1:70). It is in this sense that the proof procedure exhibited in the Logic reflects the self-mediating structure of genuine immediacy. It is not, therefore, in relinquishing, but rather, in retrogressively grounding what first appears as immediate in its self-mediating result that the Logic turns out to be totally presuppositionless and to depend upon nothing other than what it already contains. Rather than abandoning all presuppositions at the outset, the Logic achieves its presuppositionless status by demonstrating the philosophical problem of beginning itself to be predicated upon an unclarified and spurious conception of immediacy which receives its full clarification only with the work's final conclusion.<sup>26</sup> Hence Hegel writes that "the *opposition* between a self-standing immediacy of content or knowing and a mediation that is equally self-standing but incompatible with the former must be set aside... because it is a mere *presupposition* and an arbitrary *assurance*" (EL 125/167 [§78]). Accordingly, the presuppositionless character which Hegel ascribes to the Logic – namely, its self-mediating structure – must not be confused with that demand, so ubiquitous within the modern period, that philosophy begin free from all presuppositions.

I have just argued that Hegel's remarks concerning the presuppositionless status of the Logic are best understood in light of his approach to the skeptical problem of beginning. As I have shown, Hegel's ability to defuse the dilemma he introduces in "With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?" depends upon a clarification of the category of immediacy that

is only achieved by means of the Logic's own immanent deduction. Accordingly, Hegel considers the Logic to be truly presuppositionless not because it manages to twist free from all mediation, but because it succeeds in proving that its presupposition, pure immediate being, is nothing other than the absolute idea taken in advance of its full categorial exposition – or, to put the same point a different way, because the Logic sublates the opposition between immediacy and mediation upon which the problem of beginning rests. In arguing in this way that Hegel's solution to the problem of beginning can be found embedded within the structure of the Logic itself, I hope not only to have thrown light on Hegel's unique approach to this enduring question, but also to have shown that Hegel remains concerned with the philosophical significance of skepticism well into his most mature period.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as I have tried to suggest, the conceptual determinations which sustain the skeptical problem of beginning are precisely the sort that Hegel insists can only be philosophically clarified within the Logic itself.

In what remains, I would like to return to the interpretations of Maker, Winfield, and Houlgate and to clarify where my understanding of the Logic's presuppositionless status departs from their accounts. Each of the aforementioned commentators acknowledge the crucial connection between the scientific status of the Logic and its claim to strict immanence in its categorial deduction. Thus, Maker, for instance, observes that “the salient distinguishing feature of systematic philosophy as science is its claim to rationally autonomous self-constitution or self-determination” (84). I too consider the Logic's claim to strict immanence in its deduction of the categories to be essential to its scientific status, that is, to its claim to rational self-determination. I further concur with these authors that the scientific status of the Logic is tied to its ostensive presuppositionless character.<sup>28</sup> Finally, as I hope to have shown, I find that Hegel makes a compelling case that the Logic does in fact achieve “total presuppositionlessness.” My dispute

with these authors chiefly concerns how the Logic attains its presuppositionless status and what Hegel understands by the notion of presuppositionlessness.

As I have argued, the Logic reveals the problem of beginning to be premised upon a spurious conception of immediacy, one which excludes mediation. Thus, to insist that it begin free from all presuppositions is to impose upon Hegel's text a fundamentally *non-scientific* requirement, that is, to foist upon autonomous science a requirement that it does not immanently deduce – in other words, a presupposition. But this is just what Maker, Winfield, and Houlgate have done in maintaining that the Logic achieves such a one-sided beginning. To be clear, the problem is not that they introduce presuppositions into an otherwise presuppositionless science. As I have indicated, Hegel does not think that the Logic is presuppositionless in the sense that it excludes all presuppositions. The problem, rather, is that they project onto Hegel's text presuppositions that the Logic cannot justify through its own immanent self-grounding operation. The Logic begins with a presupposition, pure indeterminate being, but proceeds to ground this presupposition in its result, the absolute idea, in accordance with that proof procedure in which “what appeared as a consequence shows itself equally as a ground, and what presented itself at first as a ground is demoted to a consequence” (*EL* 77/106 [§36 Add.]). It is not the radical indeterminacy of the Logic's beginning that makes it presuppositionless, regardless of whether one takes this indeterminacy to result from the “self-eliminating” structure of consciousness, per Maker and Winfield, or as the achievement of a radical “act of abstraction,” as Houlgate suggests. As I have tried to show, the Logic is presuppositionless only to the extent that it immanently deduces its initial presupposition from its final result by virtue of its own “rational proof.” To suggest otherwise is to abstract Hegel's remarks from the systematic argument

through which the Logic's status as presuppositionless science is established and to overlook his original contribution to the skeptical problem of beginning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel (2010a), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. K. Brinkmann and D. Dahlstrom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 125; G. W. F. Hegel (1970), *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830). Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 8. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 168. Further references to the *Encyclopaedia Logic* will be cited parenthetically in the following form (EL 125/168 [§78 Add.]).

<sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel (2010b), *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 23; G. W. F. Hegel (1969), *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, 2 vols., *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vols. 5 and 6. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1: 35. Further references to the *Science of Logic* will be cited parenthetically in the following form (SL 23/1: 35).

<sup>3</sup> For Kierkegaard (2009), Hegel's system fails on its own terms since, in his estimation, it cannot make good on its claim to begin immediately: "The system begins, so it is said, with the immediate; some people, delinquent in the dialectical, are even oratorical enough to speak of the most immediate of all, although the very notion of a comparison implied here could prove hazardous for the beginning. The system begins with the immediate and therefore without any presuppositions and therefore absolutely; i.e., the system's beginning is an absolute beginning. This is quite correct and has also been sufficiently admired. But why is it that before making a beginning with the system, the second, equally, yes precisely equally important question has not been raised, its implications made clear and respected: How does the system begin with the immediate? I.e., does it begin with it immediately? To this the answer must be an unconditional No" (94-95).

<sup>4</sup> "Logic," Winfield (2006) writes, "begins absolutely in that neither its content nor its method has any given character at the outset of logical investigation" (22).

<sup>5</sup> Maker's interpretation attempts to reconcile Hegel's two apparently inconsistent claims that, on the one hand, the Logic is totally presuppositionless and, on the other, that the *Phenomenology* is the presupposition of the Logic, by distinguishing between two senses of "presupposition" operating in Hegel's text: "The *Phenomenology* can... be understood as the presupposition for presuppositionless science not because it establishes, grounds or predetermines the nature or principles of true, valid, and scientific cognition – for, according to Hegel that can be done only within the logical science, and because it is done therein he claims this science has its ground within itself and begins without presupposition. Rather, the *Phenomenology* is the presupposition for presuppositionless science because it indicates what science must begin with if it is to begin without any presuppositions concerning knowing: not with some knowing, but with the self-cessation of knowing understood as the knowing of consciousness, with this knowing's coming to establish itself as absolute" (77).

<sup>6</sup> Drawing from Kierkegaard's engagement with Hegel, Houlgate (2006) acknowledges that "however necessary it may be that the categories of thought be derived presuppositionlessly, someone still has to take the decision to set aside his or her assumptions about thought and being and undertake such a derivation" (89).

<sup>7</sup> Houlgate (2006: 54-114) offers a comprehensive discussion of the versions of this criticism elaborated by Hegel's nineteenth and twentieth-century European critics.

<sup>8</sup> Maker, Winfield, and Houlgate each acknowledge at least one presupposition for presuppositionless science – historic, phenomenological, linguistic, etc. In spite of this, however, none of the above commentators suggests the possibility that Hegel is attempting to revise the notion of presuppositionlessness itself.

<sup>9</sup> In his introduction to the Transcendental Logic, Kant (*CPR* A57/B81) explains that the latter can be conceived as a *science* "which would determine the origin, the domain, and the objective validity" of the forms of pure thinking. Such a science, however, insofar as it is to remain confined to the mere *forms* of thought, can only give rise to what he calls, a "canon," (which can furnish no more than a system of the principles for reason's proper use), but not an "organon" of pure reason (which would serve as a kind of tool for the expansion of thought into a particular object domain).

<sup>10</sup> "The relationship of such forms as concept, judgment, and syllogism to others, e.g. causality and so forth, can emerge only within logic itself. However, this should be made clear in preliminary way, that insofar as thought tries to come up with a *concept* of things, this concept (and with that also its most immediate forms such as judgment and syllogism) cannot be made up of determinations and relationships which are alien and external to those things" (*EL* 58/81 [§24R]).

<sup>11</sup> Houlgate (2006) acknowledges Hegel's rejection of external criticism: "Hegel does not... recognize as legitimate any criticism that charges him with riding roughshod over basic conceptual distinctions (for example, between what is infinite and what is finite), with confusing the 'is' of predication with the 'is' of identity, or with simply contradicting himself, if the critics concerned base those charges on the authority of formal logic or tradition and fail to show that the development of presuppositionless thought itself leads to the prohibiting of contradiction or conceptual 'confusion'" (36). As I argued in the previous section, however, Houlgate's interpretation of the presuppositionless status of the Logic comes quite close to imposing onto Hegel's text an external requirement it was never meant to satisfy.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding Hegel's ongoing interest in ancient skepticism, see Forster (1989), Hentrup (2018), Vieweg (1999, 2007), and Westphal (2003).

<sup>13</sup> In *Die Evolution des logischen Raumes*, Anton Friedrich Koch (2014) suggests that it is chiefly Jacobi's critique of rationalist metaphysics that provides the context for Hegel's discussion of the problem of beginning. While I do not deny the significance of Jacobi for Hegel's discussion, I would point out that Hegel had already encountered a version of this same problem by 1801 in his engagement with the Two Modes of Sextus Empiricus. Although Hegel does not make explicit reference to the Two Modes in the Logic, his 1801 essay on the "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy" shows that he was quite familiar with the modes of skepticism in general and the Two Modes in particular. In the Skepticism essay, Hegel (1985) reconstructs the Two Modes as follows: "that what is comprehended, is comprehended either of itself, or through another; - but not of itself, for there is disagreement about the source and the organ of cognition, as to whether it is sense or understanding; nor yet through another, for then we fall either into the trope of infinite regress or into that of circularity" (335).

<sup>14</sup> See also *EL* 40/56 [§12R], *EL* 115-6/156 [§65R], and *EL* 125/167 [§78].

<sup>15</sup> For Taylor (1975), the immediacy of Hegel's system as a whole is "an immediacy which is founded on mediation, which has overcome mediation in the sense that it closes the circle of a set of mediations back on itself" (268). Taylor suggests that Hegel does not consider the problem of beginning to be a legitimate philosophical question, but he does not acknowledge how Hegel's solution to this problem bears upon the Logic's presuppositionless status.

<sup>16</sup> Marina Bykova (2013) acknowledges the regress problems which result on the spurious conception of immediacy. She does not explicitly relate these difficulties to the problem of beginning, however: "Instead of leading 'from something *conditioned* to something else *conditioned*' (ibid.) in an infinite regress, thinking transforms the conditioned into the self-conditioning and so discloses the infinite and unconditioned within the finite and conditioned. Likewise, true immediacy does not result from transcending mediation; it has its beginning in the subsumption or sublation of the mediation into a higher synthesis of mediations. True immediacy is thus nothing but perfected mediation (*EL*, §50R); what is immediate is a fully self-mediated content (*EL*, §74)" (248).



<sup>17</sup> “A content can be recognized as genuinely true only insofar as it is not mediated by an other, is not finite, and thus mediates itself with itself and so is mediation and immediate relation to itself in one” (*EL* 122/164 [§74]).

<sup>18</sup> Houlgate considers the relationship between the notion of immediacy and the structure of presupposing as it pertains to the logic of essence, but he does not acknowledge the significance of this connection for the beginning of the Logic. See Houlgate (2011: 143-5).

<sup>19</sup> “One may well say, therefore, that every beginning must be made with the *absolute*, just as every advance is only the exposition of it, in so far as *implicit in existence* is the concept. But because the absolute exists at first only *implicitly, in itself*, it equally is *not* the absolute nor the posited concept, and also not the idea, for the *in-itself* is only an abstract, one-sided moment, and this is what they are.” (*SL* 740/2: 555).

<sup>20</sup> “Just as it cannot have any determination with respect to an other, so too it cannot have any within it; it cannot have any content, for any content would entail distinction and the reference of distinct moments to each other, and hence a mediation” (*SL* 48/1: 69).

<sup>21</sup> “Up to now *we* have had for our object [*Gegenstand*] the idea in the development through its diverse stages; now, however, the idea is objective with respect to itself [*sich selbst gegenständlich*]. This is the  $\nu\acute{o}\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma\ \nu\acute{o}\eta\sigma\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ ; what Aristotle already designated as the highest form of the idea” (*EL* 299/388 [§236 Add.]).

<sup>22</sup> “In this advance the beginning thus loses the one-sidedness that it has when determined simply as something immediate and abstract; it becomes mediated, and the line of scientific forward movement consequently turns *into a circle*” (*SL* 49/1: 71).

<sup>23</sup> Here, Hegel makes explicit the link between the concepts of immediacy, beginning, and presupposition on which my analysis depends.

<sup>24</sup> “Nor is the said beginning an arbitrary and only temporary assumption, or something which seems to be an arbitrary and tentative presupposition but of which it is subsequently shown that to make it the starting point was indeed the right thing to do” (*SL* 50/1: 71-2).

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle (2001) articulates the problem in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* with his characteristic clarity: “For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything (there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration)” (737).

<sup>26</sup> Koch (2014: 133) also acknowledges that the Logic achieves its presuppositionless status only in sublating the formal demand that philosophy must begin without presuppositions.

<sup>27</sup> Scholars typically relegate Hegel’s interest in skepticism to his early work. I maintain, however, that skepticism remains crucial to Hegel throughout his career.

<sup>28</sup> For Winfield (1988), “that self-determination not just enjoys, but is identical to presuppositionlessness is evident to the extent that what is neither given nor determined, but self-determined, rests on nothing antecedent to itself” (123).

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