

Robb Dunphy, *Hegel and the Problem of Beginning*

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“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” (WL 45/5:65). In these words, Hegel articulates what has come to be known as the “problem of beginning,” a problem that would seem to challenge the very possibility of legitimate philosophical inquiry. If we begin with something mediated, for example, with the conclusion of a prior line of argumentation, then one might reasonably object that such a starting point is unjustified and, hence, arbitrary. If, on the other hand, we begin with something immediate, for instance, with an assumption for which no accompanying argument has been given, then this would seem to invite the same complaint.

In his recent book, *Hegel and the Problem of Beginning*, Robb Dunphy makes a compelling case that Hegel not only sought to resolve this notorious difficulty, but that he did so in an effort to secure the beginning of his *Logic* against sceptical objection. As such, it powerfully demonstrates the relevance of Pyrrhonian scepticism to Hegel’s philosophical project. Other scholars, including notably Kenneth Westphal (1988), Michael Forster (1989), Klaus Vieweg (1999), and Ioannis Trisokkas (2012), have made valuable contributions to this topic. Dunphy’s study, however, is the first book-length treatment of the topic to focus specifically on the way that Pyrrhonism influences Hegel’s approach to the problem of beginning in his *Logic* and the first to argue that Hegel’s engagement with Pyrrhonism is crucial for understanding the scientific status of that work.

Dunphy lays the groundwork for his analysis of Hegel's approach to the problem of beginning in the book's first half, offering an illuminating treatment of Pyrrhonian scepticism and the array of arguments (or "modes") that the sceptic can call upon to suspend their judgment on any given claim. Though each of these sceptical modes can be used on their own to induce the suspension of judgment by identifying an equally persuasive counter-claim, Dunphy shows how they can be combined to construct even more troublesome difficulties (referred to as "Agrippan problems") that, if taken seriously, would seem to undercut even our contemporary efforts of philosophical justification. According to Dunphy, such problems target efforts at philosophical justification by insisting that they amount to nothing more than the arbitrary choice between "a claim that is made without support and... a claim whose support can be shown to be fundamentally inadequate" (46). Sextus Empiricus' dilemma of the Two Modes forms the basis for the specific "Agrippan problem" – otherwise known as the problem of beginning – that is at the heart of Dunphy's book. "Since everything apprehended is thought to be apprehended either by means of itself or by means of something else," Sextus (1994) writes, "they [the sceptics] 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). Accordingly, philosophy must begin with something immediate or something mediated. If it begins with something immediate, then it will appear arbitrary to the extent that it fails to offer any argument in its favor. If it begins with something mediated, then it will also appear arbitrary – not because it has no argument in its favor, but because any argument put forward in its favor will face the same problem.

In the book's second half, Dunphy draws upon his analysis of Pyrrhonian scepticism to reconstruct the specific formulation of the problem of beginning that Hegel takes up in his essay "With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?" Here, Dunphy makes a convincing case

that Hegel understands the problem of beginning in this text in terms of the sceptical problem of the Two Modes outlined above and lays out two alternative proposals for how Hegel approaches its solution. Both of these proposals suggest that Hegel's solution involves "rejecting the dogmatic assumption of an exclusive opposition between the elements of mediation and immediacy" (197) and identifying a starting point in which these determinations can be shown to coincide without conflict. It is, accordingly, because the category of pure being with which the *Logic* begins is neither merely immediate nor merely mediated but can be shown to be both at once that Dunphy suggests it arguably eludes the two horns of Sextus' dilemma. The two proposals that Dunphy examines in the final chapters of his book offer competing explanations of how pure being's claim to immediacy can be reconciled with its claim to mediation without relinquishing its presuppositionless status.

According to the first explanation that Dunphy offers, though pure being is immediate in its emptiness and sheer indeterminacy, it is also mediated insofar as it "presupposes the liberation from the opposition of consciousness" (*WL* 29/5: 43) worked out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On Dunphy's interpretation, however, because the *Phenomenology* concludes not with the complete elimination of presuppositions but rather with the establishment of the standpoint of philosophical science, he finds that it is "unsuited to play the role of the element of mediation in [the *Logic*'s] presuppositionless beginning" (173). Dunphy draws from Hegel's suggestion in §78A of the *Encyclopedia* that scepticism might serve as an introduction to the *Logic*'s presuppositionless science to form the basis of his second explanation. Though Hegel's remark here has often been taken as a veiled reference to the "self-completing scepticism" of the *Phenomenology*, Dunphy argues that it should be read rather as an allusion to Pyrrhonism, seeing as that the latter also "proceeds primarily by negation" and results in "a

complete suspension of judgment about the contents of ordinary thought” (184) that could credibly satisfy the logical demand for total presuppositionlessness. Accordingly, Dunphy’s second proposal is that pure being can be considered the mediated result of a negative science of completed scepticism which he identifies with Pyrrhonism. Because Pyrrhonism can plausibly claim to yield “no positive content which would count [as] a problematically substantive presupposition from the perspective of logical science” (193), Dunphy finds that it is better suited to account for the mediating element present in the category of pure being than the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Dunphy concludes that this alternative explanation, though left undeveloped by Hegel, provides a workable solution to the problem of beginning by accounting for the way that immediacy and mediation coincide without conflict in the *Logic*’s first category.

Readers looking for a detailed account of how Hegel meets the charge of arbitrariness at the beginning of his *Logic* and in doing so plausibly attains a presuppositionless beginning in philosophy are well advised to study this important book. I do not believe that there is a more detailed attempt to show how Hegel’s *Logic* can withstand this now infamous objection. To my mind, however, the most interesting thing about Hegel’s engagement with scepticism is the fact that he seems content neither simply to refute the sceptic (as he consistently identifies scepticism with reason’s “dialectical” or “negatively rational” side) nor simply to accede uncritically to their justificatory demands (as they reflect the understanding’s own conceptual limitations). Hegel’s concern is rather with its *sublation* in speculative philosophy (Hentrup 2023). Dunphy acknowledges that, for Hegel, scepticism “remains restricted to the thinking of the understanding, even in its project of the thoroughgoing negation of claims and conceptions defended by others” (58). But if Hegel sees scepticism as restricted to the understanding, reflecting its inherently oppositional structure, it is not clear to me why – in the *Logic* – he would

consider meeting the sceptical problem of beginning a necessary condition for securing the work's scientific status. This strikes me as investing scepticism with greater scientific significance than Hegel's philosophy is prepared to accommodate.

There is no doubt that Hegel is concerned to address the problem of beginning and to show that the sceptical difficulties which it occasions neither immobilize philosophical reason nor invalidate his own system of speculative science. In this sense, Hegel is indeed concerned to refute the sceptic's claims. However, I think it is important to consider how seriously Hegel can take the problem of beginning in the *Logic* in view of the work's explicit goals and exacting methodological constraints. Given that Hegel conceives of the *Logic* as the clarification and immanent deduction of the categories of pure thought and dismisses, for this reason, any objections to his project predicated on an unclarified analysis of the latter (*WL* 20/1: 31-2), I am not sure that Hegel's work can address the problem of beginning without undermining its very claim to validity. My own suggestion (Hentrup 2019) is that Hegel confines his treatment of the problem of beginning to the introductory discussion that precedes the examination of pure being with which the *Logic* commences precisely to remind his reader that such sceptical worries, though endemic to natural consciousness, are out of place in the logical sphere and therefore to be regarded as argumentative contraband to be "surrendered at the entry to science" (*EL* 125/167 [§78]).

Another way to think about my worry here is to consider the relationship of the beginning of the *Logic* to the more general justificatory procedure operating within that work. Dunphy displays awareness throughout the book that the problem of beginning is distinct from this larger question of Hegel's approach to justification in his logical science, even explicitly acknowledging that his study can only offer an account of how Hegel secures the *beginning* of

his *Logic* against the sceptical charge of arbitrariness. But I am not sure that Hegel's approach to the problem of beginning can be understood quite independently of his approach to justification in the *Logic* more generally. Certainly, the two questions can be posed separately, but can we identify a solution to the problem of beginning in Hegel's *Logic* without pursuing the more basic question of how Hegel thinks about the *Logic*'s proof procedure? Given Hegel's comments to the effect that "what constitutes the beginning, because it is something still undeveloped and empty of content, is not yet truly known at that beginning" and that "only science, and science fully developed, is the completed cognition of it, replete with content and finally truly grounded" (*WL* 49/1: 71), I remain unconvinced that his approach to justifying the beginning of his *Logic* can be understood in abstraction from its larger proof procedure which Dunphy correctly acknowledges to involve the "retrogressive grounding of the beginning" (*WL* 750/2: 570) in the Concept.

Secondly, I have some reservations about Dunphy's interpretation of Hegel's solution to the problem of beginning in the *Logic*. Dunphy argues that Hegel's solution to this problem involves rejecting the mutual exclusivity of immediacy and mediation on which the problem is posed. One cannot say that pure being is simply mediated, since it is also immediate in its emptiness and indeterminacy, relying on no "content from the argument which it presupposes" (132). On the other hand, one cannot say that pure being is simply immediate, as it is also mediated in presupposing an argument (either that of the *Phenomenology* or of some other thoroughgoing sceptical endeavor) which results in the elimination of all dogmatic presuppositions. I wonder here, however, whether in distinguishing the immediacy of pure being from its ostensibly mediating elements in this way Dunphy is rejecting or rather reinforcing their mutual exclusivity. If Hegel is attempting to show in the *Logic* not simply that the determinations of thought contradict one another but that they are in fact *contradictory in themselves*, then it

would seem strange to insist that immediacy and mediation must retain some distinct, independent identity over against each other in the category of pure being. But this is exactly what Dunphy's interpretation seems to require. My concern, therefore, is that in insisting that the determinations of immediacy and mediation coincide in the category of pure being without any incompatibility, Dunphy has inadvertently saddled the opening of Hegel's *Logic* with a presupposition that from the standpoint of speculative science is impermissible.

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