The Shadow of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*

by Cynthia Willett

While Hegel chooses to begin his *Science of Logic* with the category of being, his analysis of the transition from being to nothing, i.e. the second category of the greater Logic, suggests that the direction between being and nothing is reversible. In fact, the third remark appended to the first chapter explicitly states that the Logic could have begun with the category of nothing. (*Logik* I, 87; 99-100) Moreover, the completeness of Hegel’s system requires that the difference between the two beginnings be at once mediated and cancelled in the third category of becoming. I argue, however, that there is a difference in directionality which operates between the two beginnings and that this difference cannot be cancelled. The choice to begin the logic with being and then to proceed to nothing affects the connotation and directionality of the third category. The alternative direction would give priority to nothing and accordingly change the positive connotation of becoming to the negative connotation of what I will call ‘transitoriness’. The undecidability between the move privileging being and the neglected but equally legitimate move favoring nothing would paralyze Hegel’s system. The dialectic advances to becoming only because Hegel implicitly chooses to privilege one of the opposed categories, in this case being, over the other category. Consequently, if the movement of the dialectic is not to be paralyzed between being and nothing, then the dialectic must dissociate its claim to progress from any reference—however tentative—to a total knowledge. In other words, dialectical advance occurs only as an incomplete and asymmetric—as a partial—movement.

The Problem of Beginnings

Hegel’s *Science of Logic* appears to begin neither simply nor univocally. Daniel Guerrière counts three beginnings: indeterminate being and nothing, concrete becoming, and the absolute.¹ Joseph Flay adds that “With What Must The Science Begin?”, the section immediately preceding the analysis of the first three

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The preliminary section, "With What Must The Science be opened?" considers the alternative of opening the Logic with a category of beginning. Hegel notes that this category should be more simple and pure and thus to presuppose less the category of being. (Logik I, 59-60; 73) Hegel points however, that the notion of beginning already contains the related unity of being and nothing. (Logik I, 59-60; 73) What is not yet anything but is on its way to becoming thing. The notion of beginning, then, is a result of the being together of being and nothing. If the logic were to begin with what is already mediated and complex, we would not admit contingency and external reflection into the beginning. This is because an analysis of a general, or already sized, idea depends upon what each person just finds in an immediate, contingent idea. (Logik I, 61; 74-75)

While analyses in general tend to produce varying or local interpretations of complex ideas, Hegel's own analysis to a category of beginning turns up the same mediation of being and nothing as contained in the category of becoming. But mentions, however, one interesting difference between the categories: "Beginning is itself a case of Becoming, only the term is employed with an eye to the further advance." (1830, § 88, Anm. 3; 130-131) Becoming and beginning or denote, the same mediated unity but the categories exist in connotation. This variance in connotation reflects a difference with respect to position in the sequence of the categories of the Logic.

It is doubly ironic that while the Phenomenology of Spirit forms the negations of skeptical understanding into the mediation required by speculative philosophy, the supplementary beginnings of the Logic protect the sphere of pure knowing from the arbitrary mediations of the understanding. The first irony is that the text of the Logic begins by external reflections against the process of external reflection itself. But secondly, the first category of the system of the logic collapses the mediation which comprises the speculative concept, the discovery of the Phenomenology, into the abstract form of immediacy. From the absolute standpoint achieved in the Phenomenology, "all that is needed to effect that the beginning remains immanent in its scientific development is to consider, or rather, ridding oneself of all other reflections and opinions whatever, simply to take up, what is there before us." (Logik I, 55; 69) Abstracting from all that is mediated, "what is present is only simple immediacy...and this simple immediacy...in its true expression is pure being." (Logik I, 55; 69) "That which constitutes the beginning, the beginning itself, is to be taken as something unanalyzable, taken in its simple, unfilled immediacy, and there as being, the completely empty being." (Logik I, 62; 72) Thus, the mere utility of drawing on preanalytical remarks as well as the prior education of consciousness in the Phenomenology casts some suspicion on the possibility of a simple beginning. How could the system profit so much from what is sheerly accidental or extrinsic to that system? For purposes of this paper, however, we respect Hegel's distinction between the external, or subjective, beginning and the simple, or objective, beginning. Thus, the system of the Logic begins with pure, simple being—and nothing else.

If the notion of being is simple, however, being is not distinguishable from nothing, which is also pure, indeterminate, and empty. Inasmuch as a category is immediate, nothing can distinguish it from any other category which is equally immediate. We can distinguish being and nothing only by giving these categories a determinate content and thereby destroying their simplicity. It is the interchangeability of being and nothing which assures that they are the most simple and abstract categories. If we could not exchange one category for the other, being and nothing would no longer function as the presuppositionless origin of the Logic. As Gadamer points out, the category of nothing immediately "bursts forth" from that of being without dialectical negation.  

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Joseph Flay offered this remark in a seminar on Hegel's Logic given in the 1982 at the Pennsylvania State University. This paper, initially written seminar, owes much to Professor Flay's comments.

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originally appear as immediate categories.

Because initially no mediation can occur between these categories, there is no justification for a hierarchy or priority of one notion over the other. Thus, we are not surprised to learn that nothing, with equal immediacy, returns to being. (Logik I, 69; 82) Hegel explains that this return to being occurs immediately upon seeing that nothing is a notion. Being and nothing both have being as notions, and in both cases their notions contain nothing. Daniel Guerrière concludes that the "indeterminate may indifferently be called Being or Nothing. Hence the beginning of science is—in an awkward but accurate term—Being/Nothing or, even, Being=Nothing." (466) Of pure being Hegel writes, "it is equal only to itself," and of pure nothing he writes, "it is simply equality with itself." (Logik I, 69; 82)

Once we can state the equality between the two notions, we can comprehend the infinite and purely circular movement to and fro as becoming. The category of becoming requires that being and nothing not simply be collapsed but also be retained and distinguished as ideal points or abstractions of becoming. Hegel writes that

**Becoming** is the unseparatedness of being and nothing, not the unity which abstracts from being and nothing; but as the unity of being and nothing it is this **determinate** unity in which there is both being and nothing...They are...sublated moments. (Logik I, 92; 105)

Becoming, like the concept of beginning, contains both being and nothing as moments.

Nonetheless, as immediate categories, being and nothing remain indiscernible and immediately reversible. Since there is no basis for privileging one notion over the other, the Logic can begin either with being or nothing, though not with their equality. Hegel himself recognizes the double origin of the logic. He writes that if we abstract all that is external from the beginning of pure science, then "that nothing would be the result[,]...and that now the beginning should be made with nothing (as in Chinese philosophy) need not cause us to lift a finger, for before we could do so this nothing would no less have converted itself into being." (Logik I, 87; 99-100) Without the lifting of an **Aufhebung**, nothing turns back into being.

Exactly two categories satisfy Hegel's criterion of a simple, indeterminate beginning. The logic may begin with either being or nothing. For, as Heraclitus already understood, the path up and the path down are one and the same; they trace a circle.  

Or so Hegel insists, as he points out that while the Eleatics' asserted pure being as the absolute, oriental thought was equally justified in beginning with nothing—which is not a non-position, but the positing of the notion of nothing. (Logik I, 70; 83) Hegel proceeds by denying the doctrine that nothing comes from nothing. It is true that from the point of view of abstract understanding the category of nothing resists thought. But the notion of being, Hegel argues, is equally vacuous. Neither notion has any content in its abstract self-identity. To start the logic with nothing is not to begin with no thing, and to think such is to misconceive the speculative notion of nothing in terms of a determinate and finite thought of the understanding. (Logik I, 72-73; 86)

Nor is nothing negation, if the latter is interpreted as a relation.  

Relation is a more complex and determinate notion than simple nothing. Hegel does claim that we may understand nothing as "the abstract, immediate negation: nothing, purely on its own account, negation devoid of any relations—what could also be expressed if one so wished merely by 'not' [Nicht]." (Logik I, 87; 99-100) Logic begins with what is simple. Being and Nothing are equally simple and nothing else can be said of them. Therefore, nothing can distinguish them.

Hegel cites Heraclitus as the first to comprehend that neither being nor nothing can be thought apart from their unity in becoming: "Against the one-sided abstraction the deep-thinking Heraclitus brought forward the higher, total concept of becoming and said: being as little is, as nothing is, or, all flows, which means all is becoming." (Logik I, 70; 83). Hegel translates the **polemos** of Heraclitus into the German word **Fließen**. Hegel then interprets **Fließen** in terms of the category of **Werten**, or becoming. **Werten**, **polemos**, or **Fließen** may denote the same idea of change, but their connotations differ significantly. Heraclitus' **polemos** emphasizes the destructive

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5 This comment is added to the original paper in response to an objection raised from the floor by Théodore Geraets.
character of a transition. Thus, it is common to translate polemos which Heraclitus uses to name the father of all things, as war. (Kirk and Raven, 195, fr. 53)

Hegel's explication of Werden in terms of the verb fließen, however, may more directly allude to the river-image used by Heraclitus to depict the ceaselessness of change. (Kirk and Raven, 196, frs. 12, 91) Fließen suggests the notion named by Flüchtigkeit, or transitoriness, both German words stemming from the Greek root, pleu, which signifies to flow, to rain, or to swim. Werden, however, means not only becoming but also growing, arising, and progressing. Werden, then, suggests a closer allegiance to Aristotle's phusis than to Heraclitus' river or war imagery. The positive connotations of the word Werden, in contrast to the negative connotations of Fließen or polemos, would grant a priority to the category of being over that of nothing.

Interestingly, the first remark, which begins by acknowledging equally both the Eleanic being and the oriental nothing ends by forgetting this equality: "What is first in the science had of necessity to show itself historically as the first. And we must regard the Elean one or being as the first step in the knowledge of thought." (Logik I, 76; 88) Hegel is not unaware of the problem of privileging one of two opposed categories. The second remark describes "a union which can only be stated as an unrest of incompatibles" and warns that "the commonest injustice done to a speculative content is to make it one-sided, that is, to give prominence only to one of the propositions into which it can be resolved." (Logik I, 78; 91)

If not in name, then, at least in function, Werden will attempt to comprehend equally both being and nothing.

Becoming is in this way a double determination. In one of them, nothing is immediate, that is, the determination starts from nothing which relates itself to being, or in other words, changes into it; in the other, being is immediate, that is, the determination starts from being which changes into nothing; the former is coming-to-be and the latter is ceasing-to-be. (Logik I, 93; 105-6)

Because each moment is determined in relation to the other, there are two unités within becoming.

That is, inasmuch as Werden contains both coming-to-be, or Entstehen, and ceasing-to-be, or Vergehen, the category serves as a neutral, or impartial, totality. Coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be each trace a circle of movement between being and nothing. The two circles reflect, or mirror, one another, differing only in direction of movement:

Both are the same, becoming, and although they differ so in direction they interpenetrate and paralyse each other. The one is ceasing-to-be: being passes over into nothing, but nothing is equally the opposite of itself, transition into being, coming-to-be. This coming-to-be is the other direction. (Logik I, 93; 106)

Werden, as the equilibrium which results from coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, likewise completes a circle which is the unity between its two moments.

The circle of becoming, however, also takes on a directionality. A neutral circle orients itself in both of its two possible directions at once. If the circle, however, is the concrete beginning of a dialectical spiral, then the category of becoming must give emphasis to exactly one of its two directions. For, as Aristotle justly claims, an ambiguous starting point renders motion impossible and yields only paralysis. (Metaphysics, IV, 3:1006a15-20)

Thus Hegel must make a choice between the Aristotelian notion of becoming, or Werden as genesis and development, and the Heraclitian notion of transitoriness. While his preference for Aristotle over Heraclitus—for being over nothing—fails to receive any justification or elaboration, it is clear that in the German language Werden may function as a synonym for Entstehen. This partiality effects the vanishing of Vergehen in the stabilizing of becoming as Dasein, i.e. existence or determinate being, and the further determination of Dasein, i.e. existence or determinate being, and the further determination of Dasein as presence. Gadamer's reading of the Logic repeats the Hegelian bias towards being over nothing and likewise refuses to recognize this privileging as anything other than natural. Gadamer writes,

it is very easy to see...that one must progress from the thought of becoming to the thought of Existence. All becoming is a becoming of something which
exists as a result of having become. That is an ancient truth, one already formulated by Plato in the Philebus as the gegennemene ousia or genesis eis ousian, respectively. (87)

That is, Hegel resolves Werden, signifying also growing, into Dasein, which signifies existence but also life. Aristotle's study of phusis defines substance in terms of what moves itself towards the actualization of its form; as a consequence of this definition, Aristotelian metaphysics cannot account for natural death, or destruction, except by rendering it an accident. Similarly, Hegel's dialectic, by initially giving priority to being over nothing, orients itself towards a return to being. This spiral upwards must forget its double pointed downwards. And because the spiralling dialectic cannot claim the neutrality of the circle, the second spiral is lost in the shadow of the Logic.