HEGEL ON LOGIC, DETERMINACY, AND COGNITION

JAY A. GUPTA*

What does Hegel mean by “logic,” and how does it relate to his ubiquitously employed term “determinacy” (Bestimmtheit)? Some commentators have suggested that the Science of Logic is a theory of determinacy, that is, a theory of how anything is distinct from anything else, and how such distinction is thinkable. If this view is correct, and I believe it is, then it stands to reason that Hegel’s use of the term “logic” in the title of that book must refer to the development of a concept of determinacy. In what follows I hope to clarify the relation between Hegel’s uses of the terms “logic” and “determinacy,” in order to develop the hypothesis that the Science of Logic is a theory of determinacy, and that it is preceded by a treatise, the Phenomenology of Spirit, that is designed to eliminate all our presuppositions concerning what determinacy is, and how it is thinkable. I will also discuss how such a theory is supposed to begin, absent any presuppositions.

The purpose of Hegel’s project thus construed is (1) to overcome metaphysical, foundational appeals to a structure called “consciousness” that is conceived to have sui generis form-giving capacities that stand in principled separation from

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a sort of content-conferring determinacy located in the world. This kind of effort opens up the possibility that (2) determinacy may be thinkable without first presuming a consciousness-world distinction. Hegel believes that if determinacy is genuinely thinkable absent this distinction, a legitimate theoretical backdrop may be established for seeing how distinctively psychological items, for example concepts, are not only at home in the natural world, but in a sense presuppose it. Cognitive items and processes are seen from this vantage to be highly evolved, determinate instances of the same sorts of things and processes that occur in less-developed and determinate ways in the rest of nature. The key thing to see here is that there is no room in this picture for a principled separation between cognitive items and processes and the things and processes that occur in the rest of nature. Yet traditional epistemology proceeds precisely as if this were the case; traditional epistemology presumes, with little more justification than a set of Cartesian intuitions, a rigid distinction between empirical content and logical, linguistic, or mental form, and then proceeds to devise accounts of how the items of these two separate spheres of determinacy connect or interact.

FORM AND CONTENT

To begin with, Hegel’s use of the term “logic” is meant to be radical, in the double sense that it is revolutionary, and also rooted in the Greek concept of “logos.” “Logos” in both Plato’s and Aristotle’s usages means both “Reason” in general (which should be construed not in merely mental terms, but as a metaphysical principle that governs and constitutes all reality), and also “rational account.” This implicit identification of giving a rational account of something with “Reason” (understood as a metaphysical principle), or to put it another way, this identification of the way in which things exist, with the manner in which they become intelligible, indicates for Hegel the special nature of the ancients’ conception of thinking: “this metaphysics believed that thinking (and its determinations) is not anything alien to the object, but rather is its essence, or that things and the thinking of them... are explicitly (an und für sich) in full agreement, thinking in its immanent determinations and the true nature of things forming one and the same content” (SL 45; WL 1: 38). Thinking is, on this conception, identified in principle with reality. There is no fundamental aspect of the world that remains forbidden to concepts, because there is a metaphysical identity between the very way in which things exist in the world, and the way in which things become intelligible to us (which is not to eo ipso make a substance claim; for example, to infer that Plato or Aristotle were metaphysical “idealists” based on the foregoing would be invalid).

The modern conception of logic, understood generally as the science of thinking, rests upon what Hegel in the passage quoted above calls the “reflective
understanding.” The reflective understanding, which in our day shows up as “ordinary common sense,” takes it for granted that “truth rests on sensuous reality, that thoughts are only thoughts, in the sense that it is sense-perception which first gives them filling and reality and that reason, left to its own resources (an und für sich), engenders only mental fantasies” (SL 45; WL 1: 38). This conception of thinking as only thinking, takes on a systematic character when it is conceived as formal logic.

Hegel further says, “it is understood that this thinking constitutes the mere form of a cognition, that logic abstracts from all content (Inhalte) and that the so-called second constituent belonging to cognition, namely its matter, must come from elsewhere; and that since this matter is absolutely independent of logic, logic can provide only the formal conditions of truthful cognition and cannot in its own self contain any real truth . . . because just that which is essential in truth, its content, lies outside logic” (SL 43–44; WL 1: 36). The question of “content” is what is at issue. Hegel says that formal logic, apart from the world that it symbolizes and represents, is generally conceived of as contentless, and in this respect it is indeterminate. However, if logic’s proper subject matter is thinking, then logic cannot be contentless: it is one of Hegel’s basic claims that it is incorrect to conceive of thinking, taken as a distinct subject matter, as essentially indeterminate with regard to its content.

Thinking is only conceived of as contentfully indeterminate when the conception is based on the bi-polar scheme of the “reflective understanding,” or what Hegel in the Phenomenology calls “consciousness” (Bewusstsein). This scheme posits two spheres of determinacy, one formal, and the other contentful. Logic, understood as the science of thinking, rests

on the separation, presupposed once and for all by ordinary consciousness, of the content of cognition, and its form, or of truth and certainty. First, it is presupposed that the material of cognition is present in and for itself as a ready-made world apart from thought, that thinking for itself is empty and comes as an external form to the said material, fills itself with it and only thus acquires a content and so becomes real cognition. (SL 44; WL 1: 36–37)

In the picture Hegel describes, “I” is associated with form, and the objects of the world are associated with the source of content or “matter.” This picture is one that Hegel believes describes the dominant epistemology of the Western tradition since the Stoics. It is a picture that is submitted to an exhaustive critique in his Phenomenology of Spirit, at least on one plausible reading. On that reading, Hegel’s claim is that the association of the ego with form, and the world with the source of content, amounts to an unstudied, habitual assumption or idea (what he calls the “natural idea” or natural representation (natürliche Vorstellung) (PS 46; PG 45). Hegel wishes to challenge the “natural idea,” and therefore the dominant epistemology of Western philosophy, in order to arrive at and develop a new conception of “logic.”
This characterization really only minimally captures Hegel’s intentions. For close attention to these opening comments of the *Logic* reveals that Hegel believes it is a requirement of his proposed “logic” that the presupposed epistemic division between form and content, as well as the concept of consciousness it depends on, be eliminated in order for that logic to properly develop. Is such a requirement even possible? Hegel believes it is: “the contentlessness (Gehaltlose) of logical forms lies solely in the way in which they are considered and dealt with . . . [I]f logic is supposed to be contentless, then the fault does not lie with its object but solely with the way this object is taken” (SL 48; WL 1: 41–42). This implies that logic (and hence thinking), taken as a distinct subject matter, is regarded as contentless solely because of the standpoint from which it is considered. It is at this juncture in his discussion that Hegel reveals the proper standpoint from which the science of logic is to be considered, and he refers to the *Phenomenology* with reference to that standpoint:5

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* I have exhibited consciousness in its movement onwards from the first immediate opposition of itself and the object to absolute knowing. The path of this movement goes through every form of the relation of consciousness to the object and has the Concept of Science for its result. This Concept therefore (apart from the fact that it emerges within logic itself) needs no justification here because it has received it in that work; and it cannot be justified in any other way than by this emergence through consciousness, all the shapes of which are eliminated (auflösen) in this Concept as in their truth. (SL 48; WL 1: 42)

Here we have a fairly clear indication that the standpoint of science must be conceived negatively, that is, as a result of the elimination6 of every shape of consciousness. It may be helpful to conceive a shape of consciousness in terms of a knowledge-object set; that is, it is to be conceived not merely with reference to “knowledge” as it occurs in consciousness, but always also with reference to the object that consciousness thematizes in relation to itself as truth. The standpoint of “science” therefore is negatively conceived as that point where the presupposed oppositional relation of consciousness to an object has been eliminated, which entails the elimination of any mentalist prejudice as to how knowledge must relate to truth, or of how mind must relate to the world. This is in short what it would mean to eliminate, as Hegel says, all the shapes of consciousness. It is to eliminate the form of consciousness as such, which is to say that it is to

5 “This reflection leads up to the statement of the standpoint from which logic is to be considered, how it differs from previous modes of treatment of this science which in the future must always be based on this, the only true standpoint” (SL 48; WL 1: 42).

6 “Suspension” is perhaps better here than “elimination,” since cognition and consciousness are legitimately theorizable subject matters that Hegel in fact examines later in his system. What is being “eliminated” is “consciousness” understood as a starting-point in philosophical reflection.
eliminate a *mode* of thinking, a mode that habitually bifurcates what-is into two spheres, knowledge and truth, or the form of mind and the material of the world.

Thus far we have a description only of the negative requirement; we now need an explanation of why it is required. To answer this, we shall need a more complete characterization of Hegel’s proposed theory. Specifically, we should ask where the content of logic or thinking issues from, if not the world? In a particularly illuminating passage, Hegel distinguishes the content of logic (in his sense) from two other ways of thinking (what may be construed respectively as the approaches of ontology and epistemology):

What we are dealing with in logic is not a thinking *about* something which exists independently (*für sich ausser*) as a base for our thinking and apart from it, nor forms which are supposed to provide mere signs or distinguishing marks of truth; on the contrary, the necessary forms and self-determinations of thought are the content and the highest truth itself. (*SL* 50; *WL* 1: 44)

Logic, if it were to proceed in the manner of traditional ontology, would be a thinking *about* Being; or, if we were to add a critical element, it would be about determining a valid or grounded subjective framework *from which* it would be *possible* to think about Being. Likewise, logic construed as an exercise in epistemology would examine or construct symbols and formal relations that are taken to have the *capacity* to *reflect* or *represent* truth, that is, to represent the relations of actual *things* as they exist in *reality*.

Both approaches should be understood as the approaches of philosophers of the “natural idea,” that is, the approaches of those who theorize from within a presupposed consciousness-world dichotomy. The first approach, that of ontology, straightforwardly regards the content of thought as originating elsewhere; the second, epistemological approach, takes thought itself to be its object, but takes it to be something *contentless* in itself. That leaves Hegel’s third option: the *necessary* forms and *self*-determinations of thought are the content. I will briefly comment on what Hegel might mean by “necessary” in a moment. However, we should first note that thought taken from the standpoint Hegel is urging is no more nor less *real* than anything else. There is no presupposed sense in which thought must receive its content from some source other than itself to be regarded as determinate. It is in some sense “self-determining.” Further, Hegel claims that there is an element of necessity to this kind of self-determination. What sense of “necessity” does Hegel have in mind? It is a sense that is famously peculiar to his System. It is not what is ordinarily understood as “formal necessity”; it is perhaps better understood as “teleological” necessity. But Hegel is not endorsing a method that arbitrarily posits a *telos*, and then observes how the development of categories conforms to what is required by it. The “necessary” development of the categories is an immanent process, which can only be grasped by
undertaking it, absent of any presuppositions whatsoever. If one were to come to
a conclusion about whether Hegelian logic works or is rather an extravagant
philosophical fantasy, close attention would have to be paid to this concept of
necessity. Of course, however, all I am attempting here is to clarify Hegel’s use
of the term “logic,” not to assess whether that logic succeeds.

We now have a couple of clues as to why Hegel’s “science of logic” should be
conceived as a theory of determinacy. First, it is a theory that is to proceed as a
pure categorial development with no prior ontological or epistemological com-
mitments or determinations as to what counts as “real,” or conversely, what counts
as “mental.” It is these sorts of determinations that Hegel believes will be sys-
tematically established by the theory. Second, it is the very manner in which
thought determines itself that is to be regarded as the content of the subject matter.
It is this self-determining process that will therefore reveal the nature of deter-
imacy, because determinacy is, as it were, built into the very nature of thought.
However, the legitimation of this claim can only come at the end of the self-
determining logical development.

Hegel is highly cognizant of the strong tendency to regard thought as some-
thing essentially subjective, which includes the tendency to regard whatever logic
might reveal about the determinacy of thought as revealing a merely subjective
determinacy. However, a review of the ordinary common sense that undergirds
even the most sophisticated of scientific enterprises reveals that “inasmuch as it
is said that understanding, reason, is in the objective world, that mind and nature
have universal laws to which their life and changes conform, then it is conceded
that the determinations of thought equally have objective value and existence”
(SL 51; WL 1: 45). Hegel wishes to make this bit of common sense, which again,
is presupposed by even the most arcane and counterintuitive of scientific theo-
ries, philosophically plausible. But this presupposes having overcome a great
obstacle, namely, the regarding of thought as essentially subjective, and as having
in itself no objective significance. It presupposes having overcome what Hegel
calls the “opposition of consciousness”: “the liberation from the opposition of
consciousness which the science of logic must be able to presuppose lifts the
determinations of thought above this . . . incomplete standpoint and demands that
they be considered . . . in their own proper character, as logic, as pure reason” (SL
51; WL 1: 45). To regard thought as something primarily subjective, as something
essentially (in itself) indeterminate with regard to truth content, generates insol-
uble contradictions on those occasions when it is asked how thought is able to
represent, reflect, or grasp reality. That is in effect what, on an important and
plausible reading, the Phenomenology seeks to demonstrate. And insofar as this
demonstration succeeds, and insofar as “liberation from the standpoint of con-
sciousness” must be presupposed for the science of logic to proceed, logic itself
begins with a presupposition: that all presuppositions have been eliminated, that
is, that any determinations made from the presupposed standpoint of consciousness concerning what is subjective, what is objective, what is real and what is not, have been eliminated. That is why the initial requirement for Hegel’s logic must be construed negatively, that is, if we are to understand how an inquiry into logic is an inquiry into the nature of determinacy.

To hammer home the point, let us consider the following:

The Concept of pure science and its deduction are therefore presupposed in the present work in so far as the Phenomenology of Spirit is nothing other than the deduction of it. Absolute knowing is the truth of every mode of consciousness because, as the course of the Phenomenology brought out, it is only in absolute knowing that the separation of the object from the certainty of its self is completely eliminated (aufgelöst): truth is now equated with certainty and this certainty with truth. (SL 49; WL 1: 43)

The Phenomenology is the “deduction” of pure science. This deduction primarily consists of one thing: the elimination of the separation between the object and the certainty of its self. What precisely does this mean? I believe that this formulation is a telling inversion of the usual manner of speaking of a concept in relation to its object, that is, of speaking and proceeding resolutely from the standpoint of the “I.” The above passage is rhetorically urging the reader to not comprehend the result (of the Phenomenology) as a new configuration of subjectivity or consciousness, that is, one where certainty from the standpoint of consciousness has been achieved. Here, the attitude of “certainty,” considered as the peculiar result of the Phenomenology, is not an essentially subjective attitude that must be justified with reference to some object; it rather now indicates a mode of pure immediacy where no kind of distinction, inner or outer, applies.

Clearly, this is a very different employment of the term certainly. Generally, we see that from particular cases where some epistemic conviction or certainty must be justified, there is in the history of philosophy a general epistemological inference repeatedly made concerning the principled separation of “consciousness” from “objects of truth,” which in turn reinforces the epistemological decree that “knowledge” must be understood as certainty or belief which has received some kind of outer (or “otherly”) justification, presumably via a connection to truth. The Phenomenology can be viewed as an attempt to show that “certainty” and “truth,” determined from the presupposed standpoint of consciousness, have become abstract concepts in the service of a certain epistemological scheme. This is of course not to imply that wherever there is “certainty” there is “truth”; these terms have a perfectly natural employment in ordinary language with reference to, again, particular cases where someone may be asked to justify why they “feel so certain” about something. We are rather talking about the inference from such particular cases to the existence of a general epistemological scheme that divides reality into two essential, opposed determinations, and that understands things
accordingly. There is no epistemic situation in which the scheme is taken to be nonapplicable by those who implicitly or explicitly adhere to it. It is a presupposed framework with universal epistemic application. But Hegel’s claim is that its universal applicability is spurious. In a sense, Hegel can be viewed as trying in the Logic to establish what the appropriate universal framework of intelligibility is, from the ground up, with no epistemic presuppositions.

By the end of the Phenomenology, no epistemological priority is to be given to either “certainty” or “truth.” The result of the Phenomenology renders such prioritization epistemically moot; that is what we are to understand by these determinations, taken as representing distinct domains, as having been “eliminated” into a mode of pure immediacy. Consider:

Thus pure science presupposes liberation from the opposition of consciousness. It contains thought in so far as this is just as much the subject matter in its own self, or the subject matter in its own self in so far as it is equally pure thought. As science, truth is pure self-consciousness in its self-development and has the shape of the self, so that being in and for itself is the known Concept and the Concept as such is being in and for itself. (SL 49; WL 1: 43)

“Thought” here is not to be regarded in terms of a presupposed form-giving structure of subjectivity—what is referred to by Hegel’s technical term “consciousness.” And that is to say, thought is not to be distinguished from the subject matter, in its own self. “Self” is here no longer a term that refers to a consciousness that takes itself to stand in opposition to some object or some subject matter. As we discussed with reference to the prior passage, this formulation (under consideration) also suggests that the subject matter is not to be distinguished or conceived apart from its self, suggesting a radical departure from the usual epistemic procedure of beginning from the standpoint of an “I” that makes a connection with its object.

Nonetheless, does the formulation above with its reference to “self” not suggest the subjectivity of consciousness? What does “self” mean here? I suggest that it does not refer to the structure of consciousness, but rather to what Hegel calls the “immediate unity” of Spirit, another way of conceiving the “pure knowing” or “certainty” that is the result of the Phenomenology. As an immediate unity, Spirit is not simply the structure of consciousness writ large. It is a potential structure that, as of yet, thoroughly lacks any determination whatsoever. But what does “self” mean with regard to such a structure? Rather than being a determination of consciousness, which refers to its self in opposition to some object, I believe it rather signifies a mode of pure relation7 that we see formally completed as “self-

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7 Terms of relation: “up,” “left,” “before,” and so on; also relations expressed by logical connectives: $ightarrow$, &, ‘. I believe “self” for Hegel has a similar logical status in that it is primarily used to express a kind of relation.
consciousness” at the end of chapter 3 and at the beginning of chapter 4 in the *Phenomenology*. As a term of relation, it does not refer primarily to consciousness and its specific determinations of “I” versus “object.” If it must be taken in any preliminary way (and Hegel says that all of these characterizations are *merely* preliminary to the science, and have their proper exposition in the science itself), “self” is a logical designation for a kind of relation, epitomized by the relation of “identity within difference,” which we first see clearly emerge from the contradictions of the Understanding to describe “self-consciousness.”

Pure “self-relation” is therefore another way of characterizing the terminus of the *Phenomenology*, as long as “self” is understood not in terms of the subjective structure of consciousness, but rather as a logical prefix that characterizes a mode of relation. This relation is one that incorporates and internalizes “otherness” or difference as dynamic, integrated elements within a single concept. For example, “self”-consciousness incorporates what, until that stage in the *Phenomenology*, had been standing in a relation of otherness to the Understanding, namely, the object. In this new conception (“self-consciousness”), “self” stands as a logical designator that indicates that “I” and “object” stand in a dynamic sort of relation that incorporates the dimensions of otherness and difference. I relate to myself, for example, introspectively, and in this sense, I am my own object. But even this mode of “self-relation,” with its incorporated dimension of otherness, occurs within the *reflective structure of difference* that is the overall subject matter under critical scrutiny in the *Phenomenology*, that is, the structure of consciousness. Hegel believes that this fixed structure of difference has a self-eliminating character that terminates in what he terms an immediate unity. Hence, if the term “self” is a term of relation that refers to that immediate unity (the same sense Hegel gives “certainty” discussed above), then there can be no question of whether it is a subjective structure that grounds or absorbs objectivity. No determinations remain, subjective, objective, or otherwise. “Self” rather serves as the most general (and hence noncommittal) way of characterizing the implicit dimensions of a certain kind of self-grounding logical development, which Hegel pursues in the *Logic*.

This reading⁸ is substantiated by the last line of the above quoted passage (“As science, truth is pure self-consciousness in its self-development and has the shape

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⁸ This reading stands in marked contrast to the reading that is currently standard, which takes “self-consciousness” to refer to a structure of subjectivity that performs a grounding function in the *Logic*. On this sort of reading, “self-consciousness” is a socially constituted subjective structure that has a foundational capacity in developing an idealist account of the determinacy of the content of concepts (*Science of Logic*). Robert Pippin gives a very thorough expression to this view in *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). It is a view that is now enjoying influence in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. See, for example,
of the self, so that being in and for itself is the known Concept and the Concept as such is being in and for itself.”), which takes care not to prioritize either “Concept” or “being” in relation to one another. Here “objectivity” has not been absorbed into a subjective realm, nor has subjectivity become “objective”; no epistemic priority is granted to either concept in this relation. They have rather collapsed into an identity of “self-relation” that is thoroughly immediate and indeterminate; I think that this can be read as implicitly the indeterminate starting point of the self-determining subject-matter of the logical treatise that follows, the Science of Logic. This is a subject matter that must be grasped absent any structural presuppositions pertaining to, on the one side, the formal capacities of cognition that stand in a relation to, on the other side, the contentful determinacy-conferring powers of the world. Hegel wishes to inquire into whether determinacy is thinkable absent any presuppositions about an essentially subjective structure as it stands in a relation of otherness to the determinacy of the objective world.

Let us now inquire more closely into the manner in which Hegel’s proposed theory of determinacy begins.

HOW DOES THE THEORY BEGIN?

Two Senses of “Beginning”

We may best understand this negative requirement by remembering that a logic whose central question is “What is determinacy?” may not begin with any determinate idea. This question is to be progressively answered, not by bringing to bear arbitrarily posited criteria, determinations, or principles—be they construed as a given, generated via some external method, or imported from some other sphere (for example, mathematics); rather, the question is answered from the self-determining nature of the subject matter itself. This movement which, “in its simplicity, gives itself its own determinacy and in its determinacy its equality with itself, [i.e.] . . . the immanent development of the Concept, this movement is the absolute method of cognition and at the same time is the immanent soul of the content itself” (SL 28; WL 1: 17). Hegel’s logic is a theory of determinacy, because it is the very idea of determinacy itself that undergoes development, a development that occurs (as we have seen above) in the absence of a distinction between cognitive form imposed from without (qua method), and some content, taken as, for example, originating from a brute given. This distinction must have been suspended for the theory to proceed.

In this respect, though logic must begin without any presupposition, without any determinate idea, there nonetheless does appear to be a presupposition, namely that the distinction, arising as it does from the “opposition of consciousness,” has been suspended. How can Hegel have it both ways? The answer provides the most lucid indication of the negative requirement.

Hegel says that there is a sense in which the beginning of logic, the “indeterminate immediate,” the starting point from which every determinate concept is generated, is also mediated. That is because the “element” in which the logic develops is “pure knowing,” the result of the Phenomenology. Pure knowing, Hegel says, is the final, absolute truth of consciousness. Is pure knowing then not the final form of consciousness, and therefore to be conceived as an absolutely validated subjective structure? Not according to Hegel:

Pure knowing is simple immediacy, and as such, is really a misnomer. It is, as Hegel says, not really anything recognizable as “knowing”: there is no reference to any object, no distinctions employed, in short, no mediation of any kind. This is the standpoint, completely purified of all determination, out of which logic develops. As thus purified, logic begins without any presupposition. But insofar as this process of purification has taken place in order for logic to proceed, “logic, then, has for its presupposition the science of manifested spirit [phenomenology]” (SL 69; WL 1: 68). However, it will be evident that this presupposition must be entirely negative in nature: it lacks any determinacy whatsoever. Insofar as logic must begin without any determination whatsoever, and insofar as the Phenomenology is presupposed by it, the Phenomenology must be read as having a purely negative result, namely, that all conceptions of determinacy have been eliminated.

Consciousness is the mediating structure that determines some object; consciousness, minimally considered, is a structure of mediation that makes determinations. It reflectively determines an object in relation to itself as truth, and further thematizes this object as its knowledge, as for it (although it may take its knowledge to immediately reflect how the object is in itself). This sort of epistemic activity marks consciousness as being, by Hegel’s lights, an extremely developed form of determinacy: a determinacy that more completely manifests a
logic of self-relation in relation to otherness (see p. 89). This structure, and its mediating activity, must therefore be suspended if no determination whatsoever is to be admitted at the beginning of logic. The “presupposition” of logic is therefore entirely negative, entirely empty. It is the result of a long process of mediation, but is itself entirely immediate:

Here the beginning is to be made with being which is exhibited as having come to be through mediation, a mediation which is also an eliminating of its self; and there is presupposed pure knowing as the outcome of finite knowing, of consciousness . . . [On the other hand] the beginning must be an absolute, or what is synonymous here, an abstract beginning; and so it may not presuppose anything, must not be mediated by anything nor have a ground; rather it is to be itself the ground of the entire science. Consequently, it must be purely and simply an immediacy, or rather only immediacy itself. Just as it cannot have any determination against an other [as in the opposition of consciousness], so too it cannot contain within itself any determination, any content; for any such would be a distinguishing and an interrelationship of distinct moments, and consequently a mediation. (SL 69–70; WL 1: 68–69)

I read Hegel as employing the word “presuppose” with reference to two distinct senses of “beginning.” In one sense Hegel is speaking about actually beginning the logic, in the sense of doing it; it is in this sense that it “begins” without any determinate principles, ideas, or posits, that is, without any presuppositions. In another sense, Hegel speaks of beginning in terms of preparation, so one “begins” by eliciting and adopting the purified stance Hegel calls pure knowing, which includes a long process of negatively purifying any mediating factors or determinations that might be posited as epistemic principles. The beginning includes, in short, the process by which the structure of mediation and determination—the concept of consciousness—is suspended; it is this negative, preparatory process taken as a “beginning,” that is presupposed.

Hegel confirms this dual sense of “beginning” in the following passage. The content of pure knowing, the result of the Phenomenology, is an

absolute immediacy [that] has the character of something absolutely mediated. But it is equally essential that it be taken only in the one-sided character in which it is pure immediacy, precisely because here it is the beginning. If it were not this pure indeterminacy, if it were determinate, it would have been taken as something mediated, something already carried a stage further: what is determinate contains an other to a first. (SL 72; WL 1: 72)

The beginning, taken as the actual starting-point of doing logic, must be grasped in the “one-sided” character of pure immediacy. This is simply a requirement

10 A reasonable reservation one might have concerning my negative or “eliminationist” reading is that it is too “one-sided.” But here Hegel is saying that there is indeed an all-important sense in which the beginning is one-sided, insofar as it must be genuinely immediate. There must be a sense in which mediation has been eliminated from the beginning in principle. But here as elsewhere, “immediacy” is only a kind of marker, which gives way to progressively more mediated concepts.
of a logic that must begin without any determinate idea. Further, Hegel characterizes this immediate beginning as lacking the fundamental characteristic of mediation: an implicit or explicit relational structure of otherness—some $x$ conceived as other to some $y$, where this relation is conceived as essential to the determinacy of $x$. This form of logical contrast is the mark of a rudimentary determinacy, and even it cannot be admitted at the beginning. But that is all the more reason to forbid a concept of consciousness, again, that which Hegel thinks of as the structure of mediation: a thoroughly developed concept of self-relation in relation to what is other. I will say more about this in my concluding remarks.

If logic must begin without any determinate idea, then it stands to reason that one must “begin” logic by ridding oneself of all determinate ideas whatsoever. This is the only sense in which it can be said that there is a presupposition involved in the beginning of logic. I want to point out briefly that, despite all the evidence that I have presented here, the prevalent reading of Hegel sees him as establishing some form of consciousness as playing a foundational role at the beginning of the Logic. These readings in one way or another hold that “consciousness” in the Phenomenology is transformed from one shape to the next until it reaches its final form, in Absolute Knowing, that is, a standpoint that by the end of the Phenomenology is a validated, grounded subjective structure from which it is possible to perform metaphysics.¹¹ I want to demonstrate in the concluding phase of my discussion that the only way in which this view is tenable is if certain of Hegel’s relatively straightforward comments are ignored, comments that essentially contradict the “received” opinion.

**Why Shouldn’t the Beginning Be Made from the Standpoint of Consciousness?**

Above, we briefly indicated that the “self”-determining development of the subject matter of logic must be conceived such that “self” is not taken to refer to the structure of consciousness. It is crucial to think of the self-determining development of logic without specific reference to the determinations of consciousness. The determinacy of the “I” will emerge in due time, but as a determinate concept that has developed within the logic, that is, as something that can be theorized, and not as a habitually posited epistemic framework. To posit it as a

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¹¹ For excellent lists and summaries of what William Maker calls the “received view,” that is, the end of the Phenomenology interpreted as resulting in an absolute, grounded, valid subjective standpoint from which metaphysics is possible, see both his Philosophy without Foundations (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994) 255 n6, and “Understanding Hegel Today,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 19 (1981): 343–75; 344 n4.
foundational presupposition poses insuperable obstacles, of which the *Phenomenology* is a demonstration. In the present discussion, Hegel offers a number of reasons why the “I,” that is the standpoint of consciousness, should not have any foundational significance for philosophy.

**It Is Both Unnecessary and Misleading**

Hegel implicitly advances the thesis that philosophical theorizing from the presupposed standpoint of consciousness is nothing more than a *habit*:

> When pure knowing is characterized as “I,” it acts as a perpetual reminder of the subjective “I” whose limitations should be forgotten, and it fosters the representation that the propositions and relations resulting from the further development of the “I” are present and can already be found in the ordinary consciousness—for in fact it is this of which they are asserted. This confusion, far from clarifying the problem of a beginning, only adds to the difficulties involved and tends completely to mislead. ([SL 76–77; WL 1: 77](#))

To characterize the standpoint of pure knowing as “I” is to willy nilly stress a subjective aspect that is to have been abandoned. The motivation for such a characterization is that there is something putatively clearer about proceeding from the familiar, ordinary region of the “self.” Far from this being the case, it encourages the “crudest misunderstandings,” all rooted in the presupposed, but suppressed, subjective aspect. Therefore, since this standpoint is neither necessary nor helpful, it should be abandoned.

**It Is Superfluous and Self-defeating**

The whole point of the “deduction” of “pure knowing” in the *Phenomenology* is to free “the ‘I’ from the restricted significance imposed on it by the insuperable opposition of its object; but for this reason it would be *superfluous* at least to retain this subjective attitude and the determination of pure knowing as ‘I’” ([SL 77; WL 1: 77](#)). Retaining the subjective attitude only adds an unnecessary ambiguity into pure knowing, which should be conceived as wholly indeterminate, neither with reference to what is “subjective,” nor with reference to what is “objective.” But this superfluous conception (of subjectivity) does more than simply create ambiguity, it ultimately comes to characterize the standpoint of pure knowing; and to do so is entirely self-defeating:

> This determination [of pure knowing as “I”], however, not only introduces the disturbing ambiguity just mentioned, but closely examined it remains a subjective “I.” The actual development of the science which starts from the “I” shows that in that development the object has and retains the perennial determination of an *other* for the “I,” and that the ‘I’ which formed the starting-point...
is, therefore, still entangled in the world of appearance and is not the pure knowing which has in truth overcome the opposition of consciousness. (SL 77; WL 1: 77–78)

On Hegel’s analysis, a philosophy that begins with the “I” as a presupposition will never attain a truly objective content, because the “object” will always remain in principle something other to the presupposed subjective standpoint. Or, we might say here on Hegel’s behalf in the methodological terms of his Phenomenology, insofar as the object is something thematized by the “I” as knowledge, the object is something merely for consciousness, and hence something irreducibly subjective. In either instance, to regard pure knowing from the standpoint of the “I” defeats the entire purpose of “pure knowing’s” phenomenological deduction.

I would like to conclude with a few words as to how these careful methodological precautions that Hegel is evidently taking are to foster the development of a conception of thinking and cognition that do not operate as unaccounted for subjective structures that stand in a mysterious relation to the rest of the world. Specifically, Hegel is careful on the issue of beginning his theory in the absence of any kind of mediation, definable as the various relations that “x” assumes as constitutive of its logical identity. Cognition is viewed as the mediated structure par excellence, and it turns out to be a high level instance of the “self-determining” subject matter of the Logic. Hence, “cognition” must be conceived as a result rather than a starting-point. The subject matter, a series of logical concepts (in Hegel’s sense where the formal dimension of concepts does not have a presupposed separation from a contentful dimension), becomes more and more self-determining until a kind of apex of self-determination is reached; this turns out to be a concept of cognition, which is embodied by actual instances of cognition (most notably by the thinker who performs the Logic). Concepts that express lower levels of self-determination also are embodied in the world. For example, there are the “logics” of quantity and quality respectively, extremely primitive forms of determinacy when considered by themselves, which are embodied in nature in very primitive contrastive relations: quantity in terms of items that are intelligible solely in their capacity to stand in numerical relationships; quality as for example, something like “area x” in relation to “area y.” At this contrastive level, the level of “self-determination” or self-relation is very poor; a concept is what it is by virtue of a contrast to another (the category of “life,” penultimate to “cognition,” is, for example, a category with a much higher level of self-determination and self-relation: the concept “life” is a concept of “self-maintenance,” “self-preservation,” and so on).

If it is possible to conceive of an uninterrupted logical ascent of concepts that are more and more self-determining, an ascent that finally results in the self-relating concept “cognition,” then we would have an important way of
conceiving how actual instances of cognition are higher-level embodiments of the same sort of logic shared by more primitive natural things. We would then have a framework of intelligibility that is in accord with modern scientific intuitions that cognition is not something that has appeared *ex nihilo*—something self-standing with mysterious self-determining, form-giving capacities; it is rather something that has emerged naturally, presumably in a way that is compatible with the laws of the universe. Cognition on this picture is seen as a highly determinate, internally mediated, self-relating process in a world of other more or less determinate and mediated items and processes, that is, a world of things and processes that are *more* or *less* self-determining and self-relating. If this sort of picture can be established in the way Hegel wants, then some of the more peculiar puzzles to which traditional epistemology gives rise might appear less problematic, because the fundamental problem of how concepts relate to reality will have been dissolved. Whether or not Hegel’s actual logical argument works, the claims concerning the possibility of one remain of significant philosophical interest.

*American University of Beirut*