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Responses to Critics of *Hegel on Being*

Stephen Houlgate

I must first express my heartfelt thanks to Susanne Herrmann-Sinai and Christoph Schuringa for convening this debate. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to the four commentators for generously taking the time to read and think about my book, and for their thought-provoking and challenging comments. I have responded to as many of the latter as I could, and I look forward to hearing or reading, on other occasions, further comments on my responses.¹

Response to Michela Bordignon

Michela Bordignon is sympathetic to my view that Hegel's logic is 'free from any kind of presupposition'—that is, any *systematic* presupposition—and so is 'completely critical and thoroughly non-dogmatic'.² Yet she highlights two issues in my interpretation of that logic that for her are 'still problematic'. Both—directly or indirectly—concern *negativity*, which she describes as the 'moving principle' of thought's self-determination in Hegel's logic.

Being and nothing

Bordignon maintains that we first see 'the rise of this negativity' in the opening dialectic of being and nothing, in which '*each immediately vanishes in its opposite*' (*SL*: 60 / *GW* 21: 69).³ As she explains, this vanishing 'feeds on' both the identity of and difference between being and nothing. Being itself immediately proves to be nothing and so vanishes *into* the latter; yet it thereby vanishes into its utter *opposite*. It thus proves to be identical to, and different from, nothing at the same time. Bordignon focuses principally on the *difference* between being and nothing because, she claims, it is harder to shed light on than their identity.

Bordignon notes that, for Hegel, this difference is immediate and 'unsayable'. Yet she points out that, on my interpretation, the difference does not subsist 'only for us' but 'pertains to being and nothing in themselves, since it depends on their conceptual content (even if this content is absolutely indeterminate)'. I would add



that Hegel's logic does not begin with this difference, but the latter *emerges* as being vanishes into *nothing* (and nothing vanishes into *being*).⁴ Hegel's logic begins with pure indeterminate being. Such being vanishes, however, due to its sheer indeterminacy, and 'nothing' is the name Hegel gives to the 'pure absence of being'. It is only *through* the vanishing of being, therefore, that 'nothing' arises—'nothing' that differs utterly from being and cannot coexist with the latter (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 139, 145).

Bordignon shares this understanding of the first difference in Hegel's logic. In her words, we can account for the immediate difference between being and nothing 'only if we grasp the sense in which each of the two determinations undermines and sublates itself': for 'it is precisely on the basis of this negativity that the difference between being and nothing arises'. For both of us, therefore, this difference does not precede and ground the vanishing of being and nothing into one another, but it emerges in and with such vanishing—as each 'sublates' itself and thereby proves to be its *opposite*.⁵

Our interpretations, however, do not coincide completely. In particular, Bordignon wonders—indeed, doubts—whether one can legitimately claim, as I do, that even though 'being may not be defined explicitly as "not-nothing", and nothing may not be defined as "non-being", [...] each in being itself *in fact* shuts out the other' (Houlgate 2022, 1: 144). She accepts that in itself neither being nor nothing is the explicit *negation* of the other, but each is purely itself without relation to the other. She agrees, therefore, that the difference between being and nothing arises only as one vanishes *into the other*. Yet she concludes from this that neither being nor nothing *itself* can be said to exclude or 'shut out' the other: 'there is no opposition through which one excludes the other'.

In my view, however, Bordignon overlooks the significant distinction Hegel makes in the passage she cites from the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (*EL*). Hegel writes that 'being and nothing are the antithesis [*Gegensatz*] in all its *immediacy*, i.e., without any determination already being *posited* in the one that would contain its relation to the other' (*EL* §88 Remark [1]). In so doing, he confirms that neither being nor nothing within itself relates to the other, so neither explicitly negates the other. (As he puts it in the *Science of Logic* (*SL*), therefore, being is 'indeterminate immediacy' that 'has no difference within it, nor any outwardly' (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 68–69).) Yet equally, he affirms that being and nothing are—or rather, in their vanishing, prove to be—immediately *opposed*; that is to say, *pace* Bordignon, they utterly exclude one another. They do so, however, not because each explicitly includes the other *as* excluded—a logical relation we encounter in the doctrine of essence—but because each is purely itself with *no trace of the other*.

So, although neither being nor nothing itself can be *defined* as the 'opposite' of, or as 'excluding', the other, each can be *described* in this way since it lacks anything of the other (see, e.g., Houlgate 2022, 1: 137)—and Hegel describes them in this way

whenever he states that each vanishes *'in its opposite'* (SL: 60 / GW 21: 69). Similarly, neither being nor nothing can be defined as an 'other', since neither is explicitly a 'something'; yet each can be *described*, and *is* described by Hegel, as the *other* of its counterpart (see, e.g., SL: 80 / GW 21: 92–93).

In his account of 'determinate being' (*Dasein*), Hegel distinguishes between what a category is *'for us, in our reflection'* and what is *'posited'* in it, what it is explicitly (SL: 84 / GW 21: 97). Not everything that is 'for us', however, is merely for *us* and external to the categories concerned (such as the thought that 'being' for Hegel is subtly different from 'being' for Parmenides). Some ways in which we describe categories employ other categories, that arise only later in logic, to characterize those first categories *themselves*. This is the case when we describe being and nothing as the *'opposite'* (*Gegenteil*) of one another (SL: 60 / GW 21: 69). Neither is explicitly 'opposed' to the other (in the way the 'positive' and 'negative' are in the doctrine of essence), since each is purely itself; yet each is *in fact* the *opposite* of the other, since it lacks any trace of the other within itself. We do not, therefore, impose the idea of 'opposition' onto being and nothing, but they are—or rather, as their difference emerges, they prove to be—opposites themselves. Their opposition (or 'absolute' distinction), however, is not inscribed explicitly in each of them, but it is thought *as* an 'opposition' by us.

Pace Bordignon, therefore, when Hegel claims that 'being and nothing are the antithesis in all its *immediacy*', he is referring to the opposition *between* being and nothing, not to an 'opposition'—or 'antithetic nature'—'through which each one excludes itself'. Being and nothing certainly sublimate themselves—being through its utter indeterminacy, and nothing through its immediacy as *pure* nothing—and each thereby proves to be the 'opposite of itself' (SL: 81 / GW 21: 93). Yet neither is initially opposed to itself—neither has an 'antithetic nature'—since each is indeterminate. Furthermore, in proving to be the 'opposite of itself', each gives rise to the opposition (or immediate difference) between itself and its *other*. This latter opposition is what Hegel has in mind in the quotation above.

Despite this disagreement between us, however, I endorse (with a qualification below) Bordignon's claim that in the self-sublation, or 'self-negation', of being and nothing we see the 'paradigmatic example' of the 'negativity on which the entire doctrine of being is built'. As Bordignon writes, 'the same dynamic'—of self-negation—'occurs with all the other categories of the first part of the *Logic*'.

It should be noted, however, that the 'negativity' exhibited by being and nothing is not the explicit negativity that we first encounter with 'something' (*Etwas*). Something, for Hegel, is a further form of *determinate being*, and the latter in turn consists in 'reality' and 'negation', both of which are forms of quality or *'affirmative [seiend] determinacy'*, affirmative *non-being* (SL: 84–85 / GW 21: 97–99).⁶ Something is thus a further form of non-being and negation (and so is itself *other* than something else).

Yet something is also characterized by ‘self-relation’, and so is *not mere negation*. It is thus ‘the *first negation of negation*, as simple, affirmative relation to itself’ (*SL*: 89 / *GW* 21: 103). As such, something is self-relating being constituted by ‘*absolute negativity*’. Pure being and pure nothing clearly do not exhibit negativity in this explicit sense, since neither is determinate and neither consists in explicit negation or non-being. Yet being and nothing, in their self-sublation and vanishing into one another, can be *described* as exhibiting ‘negativity’—using this later category, as it were, anachronistically—just as they can also be described as ‘excluding’ one another.

One further point before we turn to the end of Hegel’s doctrine of being. Bordignon maintains that ‘in quantity, intensive magnitude, in its immediacy, is distinct and separate from extensive magnitude’, but Hegel shows the former to be mediated by the same ‘externality’ that characterizes the latter. In this sense, she claims, the ‘self-subsistent immediacy’ of intensive magnitude is ‘negated’. In support of this claim, she then cites the following statement from *Hegel on Being*: ‘it [intensive magnitude] must have the amount to which it owes its determinacy *outside itself*’ (Houlgate 2022, 2: 146). This statement, however, does not support the (otherwise correct) claim Bordignon makes: for having its determinacy outside itself (in the other degrees that make it, say, the nineteenth or the twentieth) is constitutive of intensive magnitude, or degree, itself and does not belong to the ‘self-negation’ of the latter. The self-*negation* of intensive magnitude consists in its turning into its opposite, extensive magnitude, through containing an ‘amount’ (with a cardinal number) *within itself*. For Hegel, a degree, such as the twentieth, has an ordinal number; yet ‘the twentieth degree contains the twenty’—a cardinal number—‘within itself’ (*an ihm selbst*). An intensive magnitude is thus ‘just as essentially extensive magnitude’—as we see in nature when a ‘higher degree of temperature finds expression in a longer mercury column’ (*SL*: 185, 188 / *GW* 21: 213, 215–16).

Being and essence

Bordignon concludes her comments by raising questions about my understanding of the relation between being and *essence* (which is a further form of negativity). These include the following: ‘when we look at the relation of being and essence, what does illusion mean?’. Since I claim that quality, quantity and measure are ‘reduced to illusion, and then posited, by the negativity that is essence’, ‘what does this claim imply with respect to the *status* of the whole doctrine of being?’ (emphasis added). ‘Should the word “illusion” not be contextualized, in order to shed light on what the negation of being’s immediacy actually means?’ ‘Can we claim that the immediacy of being, even if not false, is in some way untruth? And in which sense can we do that in the context of the whole development of the logical system, which ends up unfolding the absolute truth of the absolute idea?’

These are important questions that I cannot address fully here, but I hope that the following summary of my understanding of being and essence will suffice. I should note first that my understanding has changed slightly in recent years. My previous view was that, at the end of the doctrine of being, *all* being and immediacy proves to be thoroughly mediated and so *not* to be immediate after all. On this interpretation, the ‘truth of being’, which Hegel names ‘essence’, is thus ‘the non-immediacy at the heart of all immediate being’; and in relation to this its essence, all of being’s immediacy proves to be merely an ‘illusion’ (*Schein*).⁷ By contrast, I now think that being is thoroughly mediated, and so longer immediate, *only* in the last forms of being, namely the nodal line and indifference. ‘Essence’ is then a further form of being that renders fully explicit the non-immediacy, or negativity, *in those last forms of being*. Essence is the ‘truth’ of being, therefore, not because it discloses what all being has ‘really’ been all along, but because it is ‘what being eventually, *finally*, proves to be’: being in its most developed form. It is the *final* form of being because it is ‘being itself in a form *that is no longer that of being itself*’ (which has thereby come to an end)—being as sheer negativity, rather than immediate being (Houlgate 2022, 2: 366–67). (In this respect, there is a parallel between essence and quantity, which is ‘quality that is precisely *no longer qualitative*’ (Houlgate 2022, 1: 291).)

Note the fundamental ambiguity of essence, as Hegel conceives it. It is a further form of *being*—alongside quality, quantity and measure—but it is ‘being in a new, wholly negative, form that is no longer that of being’ (Houlgate 2022, 2: 367). Essence, in other words, is being in the form of its own *negation*. Within the sphere of essence, however, the immediacy of being is not simply eliminated, but is reduced to *illusion*. Such illusion in turn—to answer’s Bordignon’s first question—is being or immediacy that has been *deprived* of its immediacy (by the negativity of essence) and so merely *seems* to be immediate. It is being that ‘consists solely in the sublatedness of being, in being’s nothingness [*Nichtigkeit*]’ (*SL*: 342 / *GW* 11: 246). Note that it is only *within* the sphere of essence—of non-immediacy—that being, or immediacy, proves to be illusory. The ‘context’ that Bordignon rightly demands for ‘the word “illusion”’ is thus *essence*, conceived as a further form of being that consists in sheer negativity. Accordingly, the ‘status’ of the doctrine of being *outside* the sphere of essence—to address another of Bordignon’s questions—remains unaffected by the reduction of being to illusion within the sphere of essence: being is not shown to be illusory ‘in itself’. The emergence of essence does not, therefore, alter what it is *to be* quality, quantity and measure, though the latter become ‘merely relative, non-immediate moments’ *within essence* by being first reduced to illusion, then ‘posited’, and then reconstituted in their immediacy, by essence (Houlgate 2022, 2: 365–66).

Note that—to answer the last of Bordignon’s questions—the sphere of being is not reduced to mere illusion within the ‘context’ of the ‘absolute Idea’, but it

forms an irreducible moment, with essence and the ‘concept’, of the latter. The sphere of essence does not, therefore, have the last word on being, and so does not prevent being in its (more or less mediated) *immediacy* from belonging fully to the ‘logical system’.

To conclude my response to Bordinon, let me make a brief remark about ‘truth’ in speculative logic. To say that one category is the ‘truth’ of another, as I understand it, is to say that it renders *explicit* what is *implicit* in its predecessor. Such ‘truth’ is thus not what something ‘really’ is (and has been all along) in contrast to what it merely *seems* to be. So, when Hegel states that teleology or ‘*purposive connection*’ is the ‘truth of *mechanism*’ (*SL*: 652 / *GW* 12: 155), he does not mean that mechanism is ‘really’ teleological, but only seems to be mechanistic. He means that teleology makes explicit what is implicit, but only implicit, in mechanism (which remains, with chemism, a fundamental feature of the world).⁸

Response to John Burbidge

Logic and ‘actual thinking’

John Burbidge and I agree that Hegel’s logic studies ‘the basic concepts underlying all thought’ (Burbidge 2006: 38). We differ, however, in our understanding of how that logic proceeds. For Burbidge, it considers ‘the process of thinking’, that is, certain *acts* of thought.⁹ It examines ‘the actual dynamics involved when we humans think concepts and categories’. Yet it does not just consider a series of contingent mental acts. It shows how one act of thought leads *logically* to another, and it thereby reveals ‘the inherent necessity that emerges from simply thinking through what is involved in each term as it arises’.

This focus on the *activity* of thinking is evident in Burbidge’s account, in his two important books on Hegel’s logic, of its first three categories. Hegel’s logic begins, Burbidge explains, with ‘the most primitive category’: *being*. Yet, when thought considers this category, it ‘finds nothing there to think’ (Burbidge 1981: 38–39). ‘Nothing’, however, is different from ‘being’. Accordingly, ‘*our thinking has moved* from the simple concept “being” to what one would consider its opposite: “nothing”’ (Burbidge 2006: 38, emphasis added).

Nothing, however, is ‘present in our thoughts’, and in that sense it ‘is’: it is a ‘function’ of pure empty thinking. So, in thinking nothing, thought ‘moves once again to thinking *being*’ (Burbidge 1981: 39). ‘The inevitable movement of thought’ has thus brought being and nothing ‘into relation’ and shown that they cannot be held apart. If we then bring to attention this ‘intellectual process’ and ‘signify it with a word’, ‘we will have a new category of thought’: *becoming*. The category of ‘becoming’ is thus simply the ‘act of relating’, or process of thought, that is made necessary by thinking of being and nothing (Burbidge 1981: 40).

Burbidge focuses, therefore, on the subjective activity of thinking a category and what this activity involves, rather than on what follows from the ‘non-subjective’ logical structure of the category itself.¹⁰ In this respect his interpretation of Hegel’s logic is somewhat reminiscent of Schelling’s view that it is the thinking subject, rather than any concept, that ‘moves’ in that logic (see Schelling 1994: 138–39, 143). Burbidge’s concern with the ‘process of thinking’ also turns Hegel’s logic into what Dieter Henrich calls a ‘*phenomenological* dialectic’—an account (in Burbidge’s words) of the way in which ‘logical necessity’ is ‘experienced in thought’. By contrast, I agree with Henrich that ‘if the Logic wants to develop the determinations of thought for themselves and from one another’—and so to be a pure *logic* rather than a phenomenology—‘then reflection on their being thought [*ibr Gedachtsein*] cannot be the moving principle of their progression’ (Henrich 1971: 82).

In my view—as Burbidge himself notes—Hegel does not just reflect on *our* activity of conceiving pure categories, on the functions of *our* thinking and where they lead us, but he explains how the categories *themselves* make further categories necessary—‘the necessary links that bind concepts to concepts’. The movement from being to nothing, therefore, is a purely logical one: the vanishing of being *itself* into nothing.

As Hegel points out, being proves to be nothing through its own indeterminacy: ‘being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing*’ (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 69), and ‘only in this pure indeterminacy, and because of it, is being *nothing*’ (*EL* §87 Remark). Note that being does not prove to be nothing because it lacks the determinacy *we* require for there to be ‘being’ at all. Pure being vanishes because it is utterly indeterminate in itself—so indeterminate that nothing distinguishes it *as* pure being and it is thus *not even the pure being it is*. In Hegel’s words, ‘since being is devoid of determination [*das Bestimmungslose*], it is not the (affirmative) determinateness that it is; it is not being but nothing’ (*SL*: 74 / *GW* 21: 86).¹¹ *Pace* Burbidge, therefore, it is not just ‘our thinking’ that moves from being to nothing, but pure being itself disappears, through its own indeterminacy, before our very eyes: it proves not to be being after all, but to be nothing.

Conversely, nothing vanishes back into being through its own *immediacy*. At first sight, the paragraph on ‘nothing’ in *SL* appears to confirm Burbidge’s ‘phenomenological’ interpretation of the opening dialectic: for it appears to make the passage of nothing into being dependent on the fact that ‘nothing *is* (exists) *in our intuiting or thinking*’ (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 69, emphasis added). In the concluding sentence of this paragraph, however—which follows a dash—Hegel makes no mention of ‘thinking’ or ‘intuiting’ and states simply that ‘nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is’. Moreover, he makes it clear elsewhere that nothing proves to be being, not just because it is ‘present in our thoughts’, but because of its own *immediacy* as *pure* nothing. Later in *SL* he states that ‘when taken in its

immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*], nothing shows itself as *being* [*als seiend*]’ (*SL*: 76 / *GW* 21: 88); and in *EL* he writes that ‘nothing, as this immediate [*dieses unmittelbare*] that is equal to itself, is *the same* as *being*’ (*EL* §88).

Nothing is thus not ‘being’ merely *because* it is thought, *through* being thought—as if, without being thought, it would remain nothing. Nothing is ‘being’ through its own immediacy as *pure* nothing, just as being proves to be nothing through its own indeterminacy. Dialectic, or the ‘passing’ (*Übergeben*) of a category into its opposite (*EL* §88), is thus not just—as Burbidge contends—one of the ‘ways in which intelligence acts’, or a ‘transition of thought’, and so does not just belong to our thinking.¹² It belongs to the objective *content* of thought—to being and nothing themselves (and the other categories)—and is the ‘*dialectic which it possesses within itself*’ (*SL*: 33 / *GW* 21: 38).

Yet, on my reading, in speculative logic it is precisely in *our thinking* that nothing *itself* proves to be being, and being itself proves to be nothing.¹³ Burbidge is therefore wrong to maintain—without further qualification—that, for me, ‘pure logic lies in a realm of necessity, *independent of any actual thinking*’ (emphasis added). This is not to deny that, in my view, logic, or reason, was at work in nature before there were conscious beings; but in the science of logic categories lead logically to further categories *in our thinking of them*.

Being and nothing thus vanish into one another of their own accord: ‘each sublates itself in itself and is in its own self [*an ihm selbst*] the opposite of itself’ (*SL*: 81 / *GW* 21: 93). In this sense, the topic of Hegel’s logic, as I understand it, is the ‘non-subjective realm of pure thought’. Yet it is precisely our ‘actual thinking’, when it proceeds in the right way, that discovers the immanent logic that leads from one category to another. It does so by rendering explicit what is implicit in a category and thereby disclosing the new category that the latter makes necessary. This *activity* on our part is an essential moment of speculative method as Hegel conceives it: ‘quite generally’, he writes, ‘the whole course of philosophising, being methodical, i.e., *necessary*, is nothing else but the mere *positing* [*Setzen*] of what is already contained in a concept’ (*EL* §88 Remark). In speculative logic, therefore, each category mutates logically into another as *we* render explicit what is implicit in it.

Our thinking, however, is wholly determined *by* what is implicit in a category, *by* what the category itself makes necessary. In this sense, our activity of rendering-explicit is one through which we follow *passively* the immanent development of the categories: ‘philosophical thinking’, Hegel says, ‘simply takes up its object, the Idea, and lets it go its own way [*dieselbe gewähren läßt*]’, and ‘to this extent philosophising is wholly passive [*passiv*]’ (*EL* §238 Addition). To my mind, Burbidge’s interpretation of Hegel’s method downplays this moment of passivity; but he also overlooks the specific *activity* of thinking that, on my reading, such passivity involves.

Burbidge is right that in Hegel's logic, as I understand it, one cannot 'appeal to the way we fallible humans actually think'—to the ways in which the 'meanings of terms shift as *we* avoid ambiguities' (emphasis added). We can 'appeal' only to what is made necessary logically by each category itself, and we have to be guided by that. This does not mean, however, that I cannot explain how we, as 'fallible humans', can *think* (or, as Burbidge puts it, 'experience') such logical necessity and that I can thus 'only appeal to the authority of Hegel's text'. Burbidge assumes that I take actual human thinking to be so 'unreliable' that 'it can never reliably establish the necessity required by the logic'. This assumption, however, is mistaken. In my view, the procedure of suspending our presuppositions, and then rendering explicit what is implicit in categories, is meant specifically to enable our 'fallible' thinking to establish—or, more precisely, *discover*—what is logically necessary. Hegel's text is invaluable in helping us understand such necessity, and I want to help readers understand that text; but the ultimate 'authority' in speculative logic has to be the logical necessity disclosed by thought—by our 'actual thinking'—not simply words on a page.

Burbidge thus misrepresents my position when he maintains that I 'isolate' the 'pure necessity of logical thought' from 'the actual dynamics involved when we humans think concepts and categories'. My view is, rather, that our 'actual thinking' itself *becomes* 'logical thought' and discloses logical necessity. To do so, it has, indeed, to abstract from the everyday 'dynamics' of thinking and follow the 'immanent development' of the categories (*SL*: 10 / *GW* 21: 8). The movement from one category to another is thus not 'implemented' by our 'intellectual functions' but is made necessary by the categories themselves. That movement, however, is articulated *by our thinking* and is not 'isolated' from the latter in some 'Platonic heaven'.¹⁴

Furthermore, there is nothing 'dogmatic' about my account of logical necessity, since the latter, as I understand it, begins from a category—pure being—in which *nothing determinate is presupposed* (and, in my view, it is the reliance on systematic presuppositions that is dogmatic). Nor is understanding this necessity 'irrelevant to human life', since it is the necessity inherent in both thought *and being*, and thus in *life itself*. The doctrine of being, for example, discloses what it is to *be* something, to *be* finite and to *be* a measure—all categories, or ways of being, that are exhibited by things in nature and human beings in history—so understanding such categories cannot be 'irrelevant' to us. Whether Hegel's logic alone can help us cope with the 'dramatic unforeseen changes that are engulfing our civilized world' is a matter for debate; one might argue that his philosophies of right, history and religion are more important in that regard. Yet there is surely something to be learned from Hegel's logic—for example, about the dangers of reducing life to mere mechanism or of ignoring the measures of things. It is somewhat strange, therefore, for

Burbidge to maintain that Hegel's logic, when interpreted as disclosing what is logically necessary, is simply 'irrelevant to human life'.

Thought and being

According to Burbidge, Hegel's logic studies the way understanding, when it tries to clarify a concept, 'initiates a movement in the mind' to another concept (Burbidge 1981: 42). This logic starts with 'the simple verb "to be"', which can be 'predicated of anything whatever' but 'adds no determination to the subject of which it is predicated'. It then shows how thinking moves on to other concepts, all of which 'signify intellectual acts of relating' or, indeed, *are* acts or 'movements' of thought themselves (Burbidge 1981: 43).¹⁵

Burbidge also maintains that such concepts and categories 'characterize what is' (Burbidge 1981: 4)—that the 'universal products' of thought 'are the inherent way things are'. Yet he insists that, in order to justify the claim that thinking can understand the world, 'Hegel does not need to appeal to some kind of direct contact with a logical necessity that is inherent in being itself'. Rather, as we read in Burbidge's *The Logic of Hegel's Logic* (2006), Hegel's *Phenomenology* shows that 'human reason has been educated over the ages by its experience of the world and society so that it has come to embody the patterns and structures of reality'. This then means that 'what pure thought discovers as it works through its own thoughts are not only the logical principles underlying all our thinking about the world, but also the metaphysical principles which make up whatever is' (Burbidge 2006: 35).

Burbidge thus draws a sharp contrast between the 'inherent necessity' he takes to emerge 'from simply thinking through' what is involved in each category—a necessity that can change as 'words change their sense over time'—and the necessity he thinks is presupposed in my reading of Hegel's logic, namely one 'that is enshrined in metaphysical being'. Furthermore, he contends that my 'ontological' reading is flawed, since 'there seems to be little justification for the claim that this "being" that can be predicated of anything whatever, including nothing, is identical with the "being" of traditional metaphysics'.

Yet Burbidge's equation of Hegel's 'being' with the verb 'to be' itself *presupposes* precisely what Hegel insists we should avoid: namely, the idea that thought involves attributing predicates to subjects and that, accordingly, 'the form of the judgment' is the 'form of truth' (*EL* § 28 and Remark). On my reading, by contrast, 'being' at the start of Hegel's logic is neither a verb nor a predicate, but the indeterminate *being* to which thought reduces itself when it *suspends* all its presuppositions. For Descartes in the *Meditations*, if we strip away all we have taken for granted about thought, we are left with '*I am, I exist!*'—the existence of the 'I' that is irreducible 'so long as I think that I am something' (Descartes 1984–91, 2: 17). Hegel

takes the reduction of thought one stage further than Descartes and removes the thought of the 'I' itself. This leaves us simply with '*being, pure being*—without any further determination', being that is the starting point of a new metaphysical logic (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 68).¹⁶

Burbidge is right, therefore, that, for me, 'Hegel has reintroduced a form of the metaphysics that preceded Kant'. In my view, Hegel is serious when he states that 'the logical science [...] constitutes metaphysics proper or pure speculative philosophy' (*SL*: 9 / *GW* 21: 7). Yet Burbidge misrepresents significant aspects of that metaphysics as I understand it. I do not conceive of pure being as 'the metaphysical substratum of the cosmos', or as 'stable', or as 'actual' rather than 'possible' being—nor do I move 'back and forth from "being" as an empty predicate that can be applied to any subject whatsoever to a "being" that has some staying power'. On my reading, 'being' at the start of Hegel's logic is not 'a simple placeholding predicate' but it has 'ontological significance': it is the 'metaphysical being' we find in Parmenides. Yet it is such being in its utter *indeterminacy*, or 'lack of determination', through which it vanishes immediately into nothing and so is far from 'stable'—far from having 'staying power'.

Burbidge maintains that 'when Hegel refers to the lack of determination in thought he is referring to that imprecision in actual human thinking that Houlgate has found to be problematic', and not to any 'being'. This, however, is incorrect: for Hegel, thinking begins in *logic* with 'thought in its pure lack of determination [*Bestimmungslosigkeit*]', and the latter 'in all its immediacy' is precisely 'what we call "being"' (*EL* § 86 Addition). *Pace* Burbidge, therefore, being *is* 'established' at the start of Hegel's logic by 'appealing' to thought's initial 'lack of determination'—the 'lack' that, on my view, results not from 'imprecision', but from actively suspending all presuppositions about thought.

Note that the 'being' with which Hegel's logic begins is the being to which *thought* reduces itself when (going beyond Descartes) it strips away all its assumed characteristics: it is thought *as* pure being. Yet such being, though it belongs to thought, '*is no less being as such*'—sheer indeterminate *being* (Houlgate 2022, 1: 109). For this reason, Hegel's presuppositionless logic is at the same time a metaphysics—an account of being itself.

Hegel and the 'mind of God'

Near the end of his comments, Burbidge asserts that 'Hegel is for Houlgate, as Muhammad is for Muslims, the sole human who has ever had direct access to the mind of God. After all, Houlgate's first principles do talk about a being than which none greater can be conceived'. It is quite unclear, however, why Burbidge should include the second sentence, since at no point have I (or has Hegel) ever understood being (or God) to be that 'than which none greater can

be conceived'. Burbidge's first sentence also misrepresents my understanding of Hegel. Hegel is certainly *not* 'the sole human who has ever had direct access to the mind of God', nor have I ever said he is. Yet Hegel is, I think, the first to understand clearly how, in philosophy, *being* is to be conceived—being which eventually proves to be the Idea, which in turn is represented in religion as 'God'. He is thus the first philosopher to show clearly how 'fallible' human thought can think 'the divine', and to explain in detail what 'the divine' is in truth.

It is important to note, however, that Hegel does not *own* the 'speculative' way of thinking and does not claim to. The latter is just what it is to think freely and without presuppositions, and it can be understood by anyone. As Hegel insists in the *Phenomenology*, philosophy is not 'the esoteric possession of a few individuals'—let alone one—but it is 'exoteric, comprehensible, and capable of being learned and possessed by everybody' (*PS*: 10 / *GW* 9: 15). Moreover, Hegel sees speculative moments in other philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle and Spinoza;¹⁷ and, of course, he argues that the core insights of speculative philosophy lie at the heart of religion (especially Christianity) and thus have been, and still are, shared by millions.¹⁸ Hegel thus never claims to be the only person to have fathomed the 'mind of God', and I have never suggested that he does.

Response to Angelica Nuzzo

Interpreting Hegel's Logic

Angelica Nuzzo is generous in her appreciation of my work in *Hegel on Being*—as, indeed, are the other commentators—but she raises significant questions about my 'interpretive approach' to Hegel's *SL*. She explains carefully how I read and understand Hegel's text—the 'interpretive "method"' I adopt in my book. Yet she contrasts this method with the method that, in her view, *should* be adopted by contemporary interpreters of *SL*. 'What', she asks, 'is the interpreter to do, today, with Hegel's book?', and her answer is: *not* merely what I have done in *Hegel on Being*. For Nuzzo, the interpretation of *SL* today requires something more.

Nuzzo is 'interested in the relationship between the method of Hegel's *Logic* and the interpreter's method in reading and presenting its text'. More specifically, she argues that the limitations of my 'interpretive "method"' are due—despite my examining the doctrine of being 'in painstaking detail'—to my limited conception of *Hegel's* method in *SL*.

As Nuzzo explains, the method of Hegel's logic, on my interpretation, requires us to adopt a "passive" stance' and so to be guided by 'the movement of the categories' themselves. Philosophical thinking thus 'proceeds analytically by simply (and passively) taking up its own object and letting its immanent dialectic display itself of its own accord'. Yet this method also requires us to be *active*: for we

explain how one category leads to another by *rendering explicit* what is implicit in that category. For Nuzzo, however, if logical method required no more than rendering explicit ‘what is already “implicit”’, then the entire logical movement would be ‘already entailed’ or ‘performed’ in the initial category of pure being. The logical development would thus ‘amount to the merely analytical unfolding of a sustained tautology; and there would be no synthetic moment to the method’. This, however, would contradict what Hegel says about ‘absolute method’ at the end of *SL*. My account of Hegel’s logical method is thus, in Nuzzo’s view, inadequate.

Yet Nuzzo suggests that the procedure of ‘making explicit’ what is implicit is ‘an accurate description of the *interpreter’s method*’, as I conceive it. My ‘interpretive approach’ to *SL*, on this view, is thus—at least in intention—merely to ‘explain, clarify, paraphrase’ what is ‘implicit but not clear enough (to us?) in Hegel’s text’. For Nuzzo, however, my reading of *SL* is *in fact* ‘not properly “immanent” in the Hegelian sense’ (as I understand such ‘immanence’): for it reconstructs Hegel’s arguments for ‘today’s reader’—a reader who is ‘located in a different historical present’ from that of Hegel and is ‘animated’ by different presuppositions.

Nuzzo herself advocates a quite different interpretive approach to *SL*, based on a different conception of Hegel’s logical method. In her view, ‘the *Logic’s* movement does not unfold in the self-contained linearity of an implicit-explicit trajectory’, but such linearity is ‘interrupted and complicated’ by the fact that speculative logic proceeds ‘in a fundamentally *synthetic* way’. In other words, categories point logically *beyond* themselves to new categories that do not simply render explicit what is already ‘implicit’ in their predecessors.

This feature of Hegel’s logical method, Nuzzo argues, requires the interpreter of *SL* in turn ‘to always point beyond the text’s explanation’ and ‘to always add a synthetically new element to the reading’. More specifically, the interpreter must bring to the fore ‘the critical value of Hegel’s dialectic-speculative logic for the philosophical comprehension of our own present’. To do so, he or she should look to contemporary philosophical and non-philosophical perspectives for ‘a fruitful hint that helps us disclose new dimensions of Hegel’s logical argument’—dimensions that then in turn shed critical light on the present. Indeed, Nuzzo contends, it is *only* by embracing ‘broader assumptions’ from beyond Hegel’s logic that ‘we become capable of understanding Hegel’s logical argument by linking it to its fruitfulness in the explanation of the world around us’. By comparison, she argues, the two volumes of *Hegel on Being*, which seek principally to explain the immanent ‘unfolding of Hegel’s logical argument’, ‘are not ambitious enough in their critical breadth’—and they are insufficiently critical ‘not so much with regard to Hegel but with regard to our own intellectual and historical *milieu*’.¹⁹

Immanence and true criticism

At one point in her comments Nuzzo expresses a certain ‘perplexity’ concerning the ‘scholarly aim’ of my book, even though she identifies in the latter a clear ‘interpretive approach’ to *SL*. So what precisely is my aim in *Hegel on Being*? My principal aim is to explain what it is to *think* without systematic presuppositions, without starting from ungrounded assumptions about the rules of thought or the nature of the world. In other words, my aim is to explain how presuppositionless, speculative *logic* must unfold. Second, I wish to show that such logic is made necessary by the modern demand that thought—especially, but not only, in philosophy—be free and radically self-critical and thus take nothing for granted, nothing on simple authority. Third, I wish to help readers understand Hegel’s sentences and follow his arguments in *SL*, in which he sets out the development of speculative logic in his distinctive language. My explanation of such logic as a way of thinking is thus interwoven with a ‘close reading of Hegel’s text’. My principal aim, however, is not a hermeneutical one: it is not to interpret, or comment on, a *text*. It is to explain how to *think* without systematic presuppositions—how to become a speculative *logician*—and my study of Hegel’s text serves this purpose. Accordingly, although my account of speculative logic is clearly guided by Hegel’s arguments in *SL* (and *EL*), it also corrects those arguments where (in my view) *logical necessity* demands such correction (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 175–76; 2: 153–54).

As Nuzzo rightly points out, I understand the method of Hegel’s logic—or, more precisely, of speculative logic as such (since, as noted above, Hegel does not *own* this logic)—to require the thinker to follow passively ‘the movement of the categories’, but also actively to render explicit what is implicit in each category. This activity, however, is not, as Nuzzo contends, ‘the merely analytical unfolding of a sustained tautology’. First, what is rendered explicit is only *implicit* in a category and so in that sense is not ‘already’ contained, or ‘performed’, in it (Houlgate 2022, 1: 76). Second, rendering explicit what is implicit in a category brings forth a new category that is *other* than its predecessor: ‘something’ rather than mere ‘determinate being’, or ‘being finite’ rather than merely ‘being limited’ (Houlgate 2022, 1: 89). Hegel’s method, as I conceive it, is thus both analytic and *synthetic* at the same time, because each category ‘determines itself from within itself as the *other of itself*’ (*SL*: 741 / *GW* 12: 242).

Note that, on my reading, the synthetic moment in Hegel’s method belongs to, and does not ‘interrupt’ or ‘complicate’, the linear, immanent development of the categories. Nor is such immanence interrupted by the ‘absolute method’ that Hegel outlines at the end of *SL*. As I explain in *Hegel on Being*, there is a subtle difference between (a) the immanence that leads from pure being to the absolute Idea and (b) the absolute method that becomes conceivable only at the end of speculative logic (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 89–99). For Nuzzo, however, this absolute

method makes necessary a non-linear, *synchronic* reading of such logic that reveals the transformations that occur in the conception of ‘beginning’, ‘advancement’ and ‘result’ as we move from being to essence to the concept (see Nuzzo 2018: 166). Such logical transformations in turn enable us to make sense of the transformations that are occurring in ‘our present time of crisis’ (Nuzzo 2018: xiii).

In my view, by contrast, absolute method is principally the way in which the initial, *purely immanent*—and thus non-teleological—development of the categories is rethought, at the end of speculative logic, as the linear development *towards* the absolute Idea, indeed as the self-determination *of* the latter (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 89–91). Such absolute method certainly allows thought to compare different beginnings and advancements ‘synchronically’ in logic, but it does not *require* such comparison. Furthermore, a synchronic comparison can be undertaken by ‘external reflection’ (and is carried out by Hegel) at various points during the first purely immanent development of logic and does not have to wait until the end of logic (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 93).

Pace Nuzzo, therefore, *neither* the initial logical method of pure analytic-synthetic immanence, *nor* the ‘absolute method’ (which begins with the result already in view), requires the interpreter ‘to always point *beyond* the text’s explanation’ and ‘add a synthetically new element to the reading’ by highlighting ‘the critical value of Hegel’s dialectic-speculative logic for the philosophical comprehension of our own present’. Such a critical application of speculative logic to the historical present is, of course, always possible, but, in my view, nothing in Hegel’s method makes such application necessary, despite Nuzzo’s insistence to the contrary.

Note, too, that refraining from sustained, explicit criticism of the historical present, and focusing instead on explaining how speculative logic must develop, does not mean being insufficiently *critical*. On the contrary, Hegel argues—in my view, persuasively—that truly critical and self-critical thought proceeds precisely by suspending all presuppositions about thought and being and deriving the categories *immanently* from pure indeterminate being. There is, for Hegel, no ‘stronger sense’ of the term ‘critical’ than this, which is why the objective logic—indeed, the logic as a whole—is itself the ‘true critique’ (*wahrhafte Kritik*) of the categories (*SL*: 42 / *GW* 21: 49). A critique of the present—that is, of the categories that inform thought and action in the present—is thus contained in the immanent derivation of the categories themselves. The *explicit* critique of the present then requires us simply to relate the insights of speculative logic explicitly to specific modern phenomena, as Hegel does in *SL* and in the *Realphilosophie*. It does not require, as Nuzzo suggests, the ‘wilful critical appropriation’ of Hegel’s logic.

As I have shown in *Hegel on Being*, the critique contained in Hegel’s presuppositionless, immanent derivation of the categories applies not just to pre-Hegelian philosophers, such as Spinoza and Kant, but also to *post*-Hegelian thinkers, such

as Frege, who remain wedded to the standpoint of ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*) and continue to influence philosophy today. As I have also explained, Hegel draws on speculative logic to criticize (what he regards as) misconceptions in mathematics and natural science, some of which are still current. I have not, therefore, altogether neglected the relevance of speculative logic to our ‘intellectual and historical *milieu*’—though I concede that, with more time and space, I could have been more ‘ambitious’ in this regard (as I have been in other work on, for example, Hegel and the problem of poverty).²⁰

Having said this, understanding what is rational has primacy, in my view, over criticism and social or political action: the latter should be guided by the former. My principal interest in *Hegel on Being* is thus to help readers *understand* the twists and turns of speculative logic—the all-too-often neglected details, not only ‘the overarching aim’, of such logic. Furthermore, I believe, we do not need to embrace ‘broader assumptions’ from beyond Hegel’s logic in order to ‘become capable of understanding Hegel’s logical argument’. The logic proceeds immanently and is comprehensible through itself: each category is made necessary purely by what is implicit in its predecessor.

If, as Nuzzo recommends, we do bring in ‘broader assumptions’ and evaluate Hegel’s argument according to ‘more substantial criteria’ than internal coherence, we will evaluate what is meant to be the non-question-begging, presuppositionless development of the categories according to substantial *presuppositions* that have not been properly justified. This is surely a less critical, not more critical, way of proceeding than the immanent assessment of Hegel’s argument that I recommend.

This is not to deny that relating Hegel’s logic to non-philosophical works—as Nuzzo does brilliantly in her book, *Approaching Hegel’s Logic, Obliquely. Melville, Molière, Beckett* (2018)—*can* help us see things in that logic we might otherwise miss, just as taking a walk can enable us to return to it refreshed and able to see what we missed at first. The logical necessity that leads from one category to another is, however, comprehensible through itself and no external aids are needed to explain how it unfolds.

One last point: as noted above, Nuzzo maintains that my ‘reading’ of Hegel’s logic is not ‘properly “immanent” in the Hegelian sense’ (as I understand such ‘immanence’), because I interpret that logic from ‘*our* perspective’—a perspective that has its own presuppositions that are different from those of Hegel’s time. As I explain in *Hegel on Being*, however, being located in history and speaking a particular language do not prevent us—just as they did not prevent Hegel—from suspending, or abstracting from, all assumptions about thought and being, and focusing on pure being and what it makes necessary.²¹ There is nothing about our historical situatedness (or situation), therefore, that prevents our thought from becoming presuppositionless and immanent in the ‘Hegelian sense’.

What is true, however, is that we, like Hegel, have to adopt a ‘double perspective’ on the categories (Houlgate 2022, 1: 102). We have to focus on the logical structure of each category and render explicit what is implicit in the latter; in this respect, our thinking has to be rigorously immanent. Yet we also have to retain our consciousness of ourselves as reflective, historical beings and so be aware of what categories are ‘for us’, what they mean in *our* situation.²² This second perspective will be subtly different in our case and in Hegel’s, even though, as Nuzzo notes in her book, our world still has things in common with Hegel’s own (Nuzzo 2018: 30).

In our case, this second perspective involves clarifying for our contemporaries the ongoing significance of Hegel’s ideas. *Pace* Nuzzo, however, this *interpretive* activity of clarification, as I conceive it, differs from the rendering-explicit that is a moment in *logical* method. The latter involves making explicit what is merely implicit in a category and thereby bringing a new category to the fore; by contrast, the interpreter clarifies for a modern audience what is already *explicit* in Hegel’s text but is expressed in a language that may not be easily intelligible to modern readers. Since I adopt this second perspective at numerous points in my book, the latter clearly presents more than just an ‘internal explanation’ of speculative logic—as, indeed, does Hegel’s *SL*.²³

In my view, however, this second perspective can play no role in explaining the purely immanent development of the categories; nor does the absolute method described at the end of Hegel’s logic play such a role, since it is itself the result of that development. This development must be moved forward solely by what is implicit in each category and by rendering the latter explicit. Nuzzo is right that *Hegel on Being* was written for ‘today’s reader’. My principal aim in that book, however, is to help such a reader understand the dense and difficult details of that purely *immanent* development.

Response to Pirmin Stekeler

Hegel’s ‘derivation’ of the categories

The core of Pirmin Stekeler’s critique of my interpretation of *SL* is contained in these lines: ‘Houlgate’s idea of a presuppositionless logic [...] seems to stand in tension to what Hegel really does, namely explicating implicit pre-conditions in practical knowledge, [and] in formal presuppositions of using categorical schemes’. More specifically, Stekeler indicates (through a question) that, like Nuzzo, he is unconvinced by the ‘linear approach’ I take to Hegel’s logic. This approach, he contends, ‘somehow forbids us to use later texts for understanding earlier passages’ in *SL*. In his view, by contrast, we already ‘presuppose the concepts of Subjective Logic’—the last part of Hegel’s logic—from the ‘very beginning’. Accordingly, it is only ‘in hindsight’, from the perspective of the Subjective Logic, that we can

‘fully understand what it means to begin with what Hegel calls Objective Logic’ (and the doctrine of being).

Stekeler makes a similar point in his impressive recent book on the doctrine of being. We cannot, he states, read Hegel’s text ‘only in a linear way’ (*nur linear*), as though our understanding of later categories arises solely and ‘with necessity’ from discussion of earlier ones, because our understanding of those earlier categories itself requires ‘occasional anticipations of what is to be said later’ (Stekeler 2020: 31). Indeed, Stekeler rejects altogether the idea that Hegel’s ‘deduction’ of the categories involves a progressive ‘*derivation* [*Ableitung*] of sentences from sentences’. For Stekeler, it involves ‘assigning a place’ to categories in relation to one another—a *Platzanweisung*—and ‘they can be exactly placed only in retrospect from the standpoint of the whole’ (Stekeler 2020: 31, 66).

Stekeler also disagrees with my claim that our task in speculative logic is ‘to discover how being is to be understood *without* assuming that we already know’.²⁴ In his view, the task of such logic is to make explicit ‘the preconditions of understanding’—the categories that inform our theoretical and practical engagement with the world. Since these categories are implicit in all understanding, they are assumed from the start of logic to be ‘already familiar’ to us (*schon bekannt*) (Stekeler 2020: 31). By making their structures explicit (and placing them in relation to one another), we thus come to know them ‘differently, more (self-)consciously’, but we do *not* thereby ‘discover by logical analysis anything that we do not already know’. Speculative logic, for Stekeler, is thus not what I take it to be, namely the presuppositionless, linear derivation and *discovery* of the categories of thought (and being).

To my mind, however, Stekeler conflates things that need to be clearly distinguished. I agree with him that, for Hegel, categories are implicit in our understanding and language—that they are at work ‘instinctively’ in all consciousness. I agree, too, that for Hegel the task of speculative logic is to make these categories explicit and understand their logical relation to one another. In Hegel’s words, ‘to purify [*reinigen*] these categories and in them to elevate spirit to truth and freedom, this is therefore the loftier business of logic’ (*SL* 17 / *GW* 21: 16).²⁵

I also agree with Stekeler that, for Hegel, we are, and must be, familiar with such categories throughout speculative logic (see *EL* §1). In *SL* it becomes clear that we must retain our familiarity with the categories in philosophy, partly because the latter selects ‘from the language of ordinary life’ the *names* of the categories it examines (*SL*: 628 / *GW* 12: 130).²⁶

Finally, I accept that in the course of logic we can use later categories to describe, or talk about, earlier ones. As I noted in my response to Bordignon, for example, being and nothing are described by Hegel as ‘other’ than one another, even though being ‘other’ (together with being ‘something’) is derived later, after the categories of becoming and determinate being have been derived.

Yet, in my view, we must distinguish—in a way Stekeler does not—between things *we* know and do in speculative logic and the logical *derivation* of the categories themselves. *Pace* Stekeler, Hegel praises Fichte in *EL* specifically for reminding us ‘that the *thought-determinations* must be exhibited in their *necessity*, and that it is essential for them to be *derived* [*daß sie wesentlich abzuleiten seien*]’ (*EL* §42 Remark). This derivation, Hegel insists, must be systematically presuppositionless. As he writes in *EL*, it must be preceded by ‘total *presuppositionlessness*’ (*die gänzliche Voraussetzungslosigkeit*)—a ‘requirement’ that is ‘fulfilled by the freedom that abstracts from everything, and grasps its own pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking’ (*EL* §78 Remark). In other words, the logical derivation of the categories must begin by setting aside all assumptions about thought (and the world) and conceiving of thought as sheer *indeterminate being*.²⁷

At the start of speculative logic, therefore, we may not assume that such being is, or will turn out to be, substance, nature or spirit; nor can we assume that it will prove to be determinate being, finitude, quantity or measure. We may do no more than start with ‘*being, pure being*—without any further determination’ (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 68), and then render explicit what such being is implicitly (namely, its ‘vanishing’ into nothing, or what Hegel calls ‘becoming’). We may do no more than this, Hegel maintains, since any assumption or anticipation that being is, or will be, more than indeterminate being would be question-begging and *uncritical*: for we would not have *demonstrated* that being must take further determinate forms.²⁸ For Hegel, therefore, on my interpretation, the systematically presuppositionless derivation of the categories must be immanent and ‘linear’, because it may not take for granted later categories that have not yet been derived, but it must be moved forward purely by what is implicit in the explicit structure of each category.

Speculative logic, as noted above, thus requires us to adopt a ‘double perspective’ on the categories. On the one hand, as Stekeler insists, we must recognize that such logic is the process of clarifying categories with which we are already familiar, and that, as reflective beings, we can talk about categories in terms of others that have not yet been derived in logic (as when Hegel says that ‘something’ is the ‘beginning of the subject’ (*SL*: 89 / *GW* 21: 103)). On the other hand, *pace* Stekeler, we must understand that, if our actual ‘clarification’ of the categories is *not to be question-begging*, we must hold our familiar conceptions of them at bay and derive the categories anew in a strictly immanent way, without anticipating possible later categories or invoking the latter to explain the derivation. In speculative logic, therefore, we clarify the categories with which we are already familiar by deriving them *from scratch*, and thereby discovering what, *in that derivation*, we do not yet know about thought (or being).²⁹

We carry out this derivation by focusing purely on the logical structure of each category as it arises—on what is ‘posited’ in each category—and keeping the latter *free*—through abstraction and the careful use of language—from what they are ‘for

us’ (including their connection to categories that have not yet been derived).³⁰ In logic, as Hegel conceives it, we thus retain our familiar, *presupposed* conceptions of the categories, but we hold the latter apart from the *presuppositionless* logical derivation and (re)discovery of those categories.

Stekeler, however, fails to draw this crucial distinction. He understands speculative logic, as I do, to make explicit the conceptual presuppositions in our theoretical and practical activity. Yet he also thinks that the ‘conceptual development of being’ set out in *SL*—which I take to be systematically presuppositionless—proceeds by naming the ‘necessary *presuppositions* and moments for forms of expression of the most general kind’ (Stekeler 2020: 294, emphasis added). He claims, for example, that the ‘failure’ of the attempt to think ‘pure being’ ‘leads us immediately to a presupposed *differentiation* of being and nothing’. He does not recognize, therefore, that the vanishing of indeterminate being leads to the new, *unanticipated* categories of ‘nothing’ and ‘becoming’.

Stekeler also presupposes later categories to *explain* (rather than just describe or talk about) earlier categories. So, for example, he conflates ‘nothing’ (*Nichts*) with ‘non-being’ (*Nichtsein*) in his account of becoming, even though non-being arises only later as a moment of determinate being (*Dasein*).³¹ He also understands determinate being itself to be ‘being-here-and-now’, even though space and time do not emerge until the absolute Idea proves to be nature at the end of *SL* (*SL*: 752–53 / *GW* 12: 253), and Hegel states explicitly that ‘the representation of space does not belong’ to the purely logical category of *Dasein* (*SL*: 83–84 / *GW* 21: 97). In these (and other cases), Stekeler explains earlier categories by invoking later categories; in so doing, however, he fails to explain how the latter are derived from, and *justified* by, the former.

From Stekeler’s perspective, as already noted, Hegel’s logic does not aim to derive one category directly from another, so he cannot be charged with ‘failing’ to explain such derivation. In his view, such logic proceeds by showing the ‘hidden contradictions’ that arise ‘if we neglect the (de)finiteness of all sortal domains’—of all basic concepts or categories—and by arguing that *presupposed distinctions* are needed to resolve such contradictions. For Stekeler, therefore, contradictions in categories do not directly generate further categories, but they are merely ‘indications [*Anzeichen*] of necessary (categorical) distinctions’ (Stekeler 2020: 72).

In my view, however, Hegel aims to provide an immanent *derivation* of the categories—to show the ‘*immanent emergence* [*Entstehung*] of distinctions’ (*SL*: 34 / *GW* 21: 39)—and so, for example, he argues that ‘determinate being proceeds from becoming’ (*aus dem Werden geht das Dasein hervor*) (*SL*: 83 / *GW* 21: 97). In his book, Stekeler takes Hegel’s ‘talk of a proceeding [*Hervorgehen*]’ in this case to be ‘metaphorical’, and he contends that what Hegel really means is that ‘something that is there’ (*etwas, das da ist*) has ‘come to be’ (Stekeler 2020: 380). He does not recognize, therefore, that, for Hegel, determinate being as such—not ‘something

that is there’—is made necessary by ‘becoming’ as such, and he provides no explanation of this derivation.

Indeed, Stekeler misreads the very lines in which Hegel explains the transition from becoming to determinate being. Hegel argues that, through the ‘vanishing of vanishing’, ‘becoming is a ceaseless unrest that collapses into a quiescent result’ (namely, determinate being) (*SL*: 81 / *GW* 21: 93).³² Stekeler, however, takes Hegel to say that if becoming were considered on its own, ‘without the contrast of being and nothing’, it would become, ‘in its diffuse unrest’, a mere ‘rushing’ or ‘roar’ (*Rauschen*) (Stekeler 2020: 370). Stekeler’s rejection of the idea that speculative logic derives one category from another thus leads him in this case—to my eyes, at least—seriously to misinterpret Hegel’s text.

Being and nothing

Stekeler notes correctly that, on my reading of *SL*, ‘pure being is absolutely indeterminate’. Yet he objects that I do not say what reflections have to be ‘set aside’ in order to preserve the indeterminacy of being (and nor does Hegel). This objection is, however, misplaced, since I state explicitly in *Hegel on Being* that, at the start of speculative logic, ‘being is not to be understood as nature, substance or existence’ or as ‘the being of *something*, or the being expressed in the copula of a judgement’, but it is to be understood simply as ‘pure indeterminate being’ (Houlgate 2022, 1: 135). Hegel also emphasizes that being should not be conceived explicitly as the mediated *result* of phenomenology, or of ‘complete abstraction’, but should be thought simply as *being* (*SL*: 50, 75 / *GW* 21: 59, 86). It is quite clear, therefore, what reflections should be set aside when thinking of pure being.

Note, too, that on my interpretation it is not at all ‘impossible to abstract from all determinations’ and think pure being, so speculative logic does not begin with the *failure* to think the latter. On the contrary, at the beginning of logic we *succeed* (through abstraction) in thinking pure being, but in so doing we discover that it immediately vanishes and, indeed, *is* simply its own vanishing (or ‘becoming’). By contrast, Stekeler argues that, for Hegel, we ‘*try to focus* on the category of formal existence’, but ‘the very failure of the attempt’ leads us (as noted above) to the ‘pre-supposed *differentiation* of being and nothing’ or ‘non-being’.

The attempt to think pure being fails, Stekeler argues, because ‘the expression “(pure) being” names nothing’—no feature that would distinguish it from ‘non-being’ (Stekeler 2020: 291). Speculative logic thus begins with a contradiction, captured in Hegel’s statement that ‘being [...] is in fact *nothing*’ (*SL*: 59 / *GW* 21: 69). The expression or concept ‘pure being’ proves to be vacuous and contradictory, Stekeler maintains, because being is assumed to be the ‘universal domain of all beings’—the domain that encompasses ‘everything that somehow is or subsists or exists’, including even *non-being* (Stekeler 2020: 229). ‘Being’ is thus held to

encompass (in Stekeler's expressions) whatever 'is *P*' as well as whatever 'is not *P*'; indeed, the two can be '*symmetrically exchanged*', since *not-being-small* is just *being-big* (Stekeler 2020: 62). The contradictory consequence of conceiving of being as a 'universal domain' is thus that 'pure being is the same as pure not-being', because not-being something is just a way of *being* something else.

This contradiction can, however, be avoided if being is understood to constitute a limited domain *in explicit contrast to* non-being—that is, if we say, not just that everything in some sense 'is', but (with greater discrimination) that 'there is *X*' and 'there is not *Y*', or that "'*N* is not yet there", "*M* is now there", "*K* is now no longer there"'. For Stekeler, therefore, Hegel's analysis demonstrates that the word 'being' does not actually, as it first appears, name a 'universal domain'—since the latter is contradictory—but 'the concept of being refers by itself [*von selbst*] to the further categories of non-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being' from which it is *distinct* (Stekeler 2020: 241). Similarly, the rest of Hegel's logic shows that 'all well-determined domains for the variable "something" [...] are already conceptually limited'. Hegel's logic thus proves to be a critique of expressions and concepts that are insufficiently determinate and differentiated.

This interpretation of the opening of Hegel's logic clearly differs in certain ways from mine, but there is not space here to examine these differences in detail. Suffice it to say that Stekeler's Hegel introduces familiar categorial distinctions in order to resolve the 'hidden contradictions' that arise if we neglect those distinctions. He does not show, however, as I think he must, how one category arises directly from another—how each category 'determines itself from within itself as the *other of itself*' (*SL*: 741 / *GW* 12: 242). Stekeler's Hegel does not, therefore, present 'the realm of thought' in 'its own *immanent activity*' or 'its necessary *development*' (*SL*: 12 / *GW* 21: 10, emphases added). Stekeler is right to emphasize that Hegel's logic demonstrates the importance of conceptual distinctions to our understanding of the world, but he does not show how pure being itself *gives rise* to those distinctions.

Further differences

I will conclude by mentioning briefly some further differences between Stekeler's interpretation of Hegel's logic and mine. First, Stekeler understands Hegel's categories to be (or to name) what he calls 'sortal domains', each of which encompasses a different kind of *entity* or *object*, such as pure numbers, physical objects or animals. Concepts, for Stekeler's Hegel, are thus not 'sortal predicate[s]' that characterize objects (as they are for Kant and Frege), but they define the different kinds of *object* to which predicates are attributed. The task of Hegel's logic is to show how these domains (and their objects) are to be defined and placed in relation to one another.

I agree with Stekeler that Hegel's categories are not simply 'predicates of possible judgments' (as Kant claims) (*CPR* B: 94), since thought, for Hegel, is not minimally and principally judgement.³³ I do not, however, understand categories to be in all cases domains of *objects*. I take them rather to be (in their ontological sense) forms or ways of *being* that in some cases constitute different kinds of object (such as mechanical and chemical objects), but in other cases constitute different aspects or dimensions of things (such as being finite or being one). In particular, numbers and quantities are not for me, as they are for Stekeler, 'abstract objects' in their own right (Stekeler 2020: 28), but they are—ultimately—constitutive features of things.

Needless to say, 'pure being', in my view, is not the contradictory 'universal domain of all beings', since it does not encompass any *beings* at all. Pure being is simply being that has been stripped of all that would make it nature, substance or existence, and that is thereby reduced to sheer indeterminate being—the same indeterminate being to which thought reduces itself by abstracting from all it is usually taken to be (see Houlgate 2022, 1: 107–10).

Second, Stekeler maintains (as we have seen) that Hegel exposes the '*hidden contradictions*' that arise if we forget that categories (or 'sortal domains') must be conceived through definite contrasts and differences. He insists, however, that 'Hegel does not at all "accept" contradictions or even claim that there are contradictions in the world'. In my view, this is mistaken, since Hegel clearly states that 'all things are in themselves contradictory' (*SL*: 381 / *GW* 11: 286). He also identifies explicit contradictions in specific categories—which, we recall, are forms of *being*—including, for example, 'limit' (*SL*: 98 / *GW* 21: 113).

Third, Stekeler rejects the idea that Hegel's logic is a 'base ontology', a direct account of being, and regards it—or at least the Objective Logic—as a 'logical analysis of our discourse [*Rede*] about objects' (Stekeler 2020: 29, 74). Hegel's logic thus provides a 'metalinguistic analysis' of the 'forms of expression' and concepts through which we talk about things (Stekeler 2020: 12).³⁴ For Stekeler, however, concepts are not just subjective ways of thinking and speaking, but they define and delimit the different 'sortal domains', and thus the different kinds of *object*, that we understand there to be. Categories, therefore, determine our 'relation to the world' (*Weltbezug*) and, indeed, what count as objects in that world. In that sense, the categories examined in speculative logic are 'both forms of expression and also expressed modes of being [*Seinsweisen*]', and such logic is thus both a 'logical analysis of concepts' and an 'ontological analysis of forms' (Stekeler 2020: 26, 66). It is an ontology only *indirectly*, however, via the metalinguistic study of *our* language and thought.³⁵

In my view, too, Hegel's logic examines the categories through which *we* understand what there is—categories that are 'set out and stored in human *language*' (*SL*: 12 / *GW* 21: 10).³⁶ Through such categories, however, we bring the *immediacy of being* to mind: we understand directly what it *is* to be 'something', what it *is* to be

‘finite’, and so on.³⁷ The categories derived in speculative logic are thus inherent in both thought *and being*, and such logic is, accordingly, ‘a metaphysics in the strong (rather than “transcendental”) sense’ (Houlgate 2022, 1: 119; see also 129–32). In Stekeler’s terms, Hegel’s logic, on my reading, is a logical analysis of concepts (and forms of expression) *and* a ‘base ontology’ at the same time. This is a subtle but significant difference between our interpretations of that logic.

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Notes

¹ Note that published translations cited in the following responses have sometimes been altered. Translations from texts published only in German are my own.

² On the historical, hermeneutic and linguistic presuppositions of Hegel’s presuppositionless logic, see Houlgate 2022, 1: 101–7.

³ Abbreviations used:

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

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

GW = Hegel, G. W. F., *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 31 vols. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968ff.).

PS = Hegel, G. W. F., *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. and ed. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

SL = Hegel, G. W. F., *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ Being and nothing are thus distinguished in *becoming*, which just *is* ‘the immediate vanishing of the one into the other’ (*SL*: 60 / *GW* 21: 69–70).

⁵ At one point Bordignon writes that ‘this difference [between being and nothing] is at the basis of the immediate vanishing of the two determinations into one another’. Her later remarks indicate, however, that she understands this difference to emerge with, rather than to precede, such vanishing.

⁶ Di Giovanni has ‘*existent* determinateness’.

⁷ See *SL*: 337, 342 / *GW* 11: 241, 246, and Houlgate 1999: 32.

⁸ The ‘truth’ of a category in this sense is expressed in a new category. The final category in Hegel’s logic—the absolute Idea—is, however, not just a new category but the one in which *all* the categories are reconceived as forming a single ‘*systematic totality*’ (*EL* §243). The absolute Idea is, therefore, the whole logical development, reconceived as one ‘*self-knowing truth*’ and as ‘*all truth*’ (*SL*: 735 / *GW* 12: 236). Yet it renders explicit the single ‘self-movement’ (*Selbstbevegung*) that is implicitly constituted by the previous categories, and so it remains a form of ‘truth’ in the sense I have highlighted in the text (*SL*: 736 / *GW* 12: 237). (On ‘truth’ in a further sense, namely as the ‘agreement of a content with itself’ or with its ‘concept’, see *EL* §24 Addition 2.)

⁹ See Burbidge 1981: 4: ‘intellectual operations’, 21: ‘intellectual acts’.

¹⁰ Similarly, in his comments on the one and the many, Burbidge argues, not that the one itself—through its own logic—makes other ones necessary, but that ‘starting from the thought of a unit, or one [...], *we* realize that that term can be applied to a number of equally isolated units’ (emphasis added).

¹¹ See also Houlgate 2022, 1: 141–42.

¹² Burbidge 1981: 45 and Burbidge 2006: 41.

¹³ This is why, directly after saying that nothing ‘taken in its immediacy’ shows itself as *being*, Hegel states that ‘nothing has its being in thinking, representing, speaking, etc.’ (*SL*: 76 / *GW* 21: 88).

¹⁴ As Burbidge notes, however, in *Hegel on Being* I do not discuss in detail Hegel’s account of thinking (and other forms of ‘intelligence’) in the subsection on ‘Psychology’ in his *Philosophy of Spirit*. This is because, in my interpretation of Hegel’s logic, his psychology does not have the foundational status that Burbidge gives it. I have, though, discussed Hegel’s psychology in other publications (see, e.g., Houlgate 2016).

¹⁵ See also Burbidge 1981: 37: ‘in rendering a concept precise, thought moves to a related category; this movement in turn is named, and *itself becomes a new concept*’ (emphasis added).

¹⁶ See also Houlgate 2022, 1: 110.

¹⁷ See, e.g., *SL*: 164–65 / *GW* 21: 188 and Houlgate 2022, 1: 11–12.

¹⁸ See *SL*: 735 / *GW* 12: 236, and Houlgate 2005: 244–45.

¹⁹ Nuzzo acknowledges that what she calls ‘the internal reconstruction of the text’ of *SL* is ‘certainly necessary’. Indeed, in writing her latest book on Hegel’s *SL* (Nuzzo 2018), she initially ‘contemplated an option not too distant from the one actually embraced by Houlgate’ in *Hegel on Being*. Yet, for the reasons she sets out in her comments, she ended up following ‘a path that may rightly be considered the exact opposite’ of the one taken in my book.

²⁰ See Houlgate 2023.

²¹ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 102–4.

²² See *SL*: 84 / *GW* 21: 97 on the difference between what is ‘*posited* in a concept’ and what is ‘*for us, in our reflection*’.

²³ Nuzzo partly acknowledges this when she writes in her comments on *Hegel on Being*: ‘One may argue that to be a commentary or a step-by-step explanation of the text is not all there is to Houlgate’s volumes’.

²⁴ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 135.

²⁵ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 6–7.

²⁶ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 101–2.

²⁷ See *SL* 48 / *GW* 21: 56 and Houlgate 2022, 1: 51–52.

²⁸ It is thus uncritical for Stekeler to suggest that we do not need to *prove* that ‘something’ (*Etwas*) is the topic of logic.

²⁹ As Stekeler notes, at the end of logic we ‘have to start again to read the first two books in view of the results at the end’. This second reading, however, presupposes the initial, purely *immanent* derivation of the categories. See Houlgate 2022, 1: 89–99 on ‘absolute method’.

³⁰ See *SL*: 84 / *GW* 21: 97 and Houlgate 2022, 1: 136–37.

³¹ See Stekeler 2020: 294 (ll. 20–22) and *SL*: 60, 84 / *GW* 21: 70, 97.

³² On this difficult transition, see Houlgate 2022, 1: 149–52.

³³ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 8, 36–39. *Pace* Stekeler, Frege’s thought is problematic, not only because he understands concepts to be predicates, but also because he assumes as foundational the sharp distinction between concepts and objects (see Houlgate [2022], 2: 68–87).

³⁴ In this sense, Hegel’s logic, for Stekeler, is an analysis and critique of ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ (*Sinn*) (Stekeler 2020: 29, 68).

³⁵ See Stekeler 2020: 81 (ll. 1–3).

³⁶ See Houlgate 2022, 1: 4–6.

³⁷ See Houlgate 2022: 395 (n. 95): ‘conceptual thought, which ‘mediates’ our understanding of the world, is precisely what gives us direct, *immediate* consciousness of being. Mediation thus does not exclude immediacy, but makes it possible—as genuine *immediacy*’.

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