

# Being and MacGuffin<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The title of this paper takes its cue from Blumenberg's quip from which *being* can be taken as the MacGuffin of western philosophy. The connection between the meaningless empty word and the dramatic consequences following from it (that is, the characteristics of MacGuffin) is nowhere more obvious than in the famous opening paragraphs of Hegel's *Logic*. This paper considers the paradoxical structure of the first proposition, 'Being, pure being' – which, incidentally, is not a proper proposition at all – as insisting on the repetition that sneaks into the sentence and introduces a gap into *being*, one that conditions all further differences and dialectical moves. This is similar for the analysis of 'Nothing, pure nothing'. This paper maintains that this first move is not to be read according to the usual paradigm of Hegelian dialectics as it hinges on what Hegel calls 'relationless negation' (as opposed to the 'determinate negation') and remains unanalyzable, underlying all subsequent progress of dialectics.

**Keywords:** being, nothing, difference, repetition, Hegel's Logic

The best comment regarding the question of *being* has been perhaps asked by Hans Blumenberg off-handedly when he said: "Sein – ein MacGuffin?" [Being – a MacGuffin?] This question served as the title of Blumenberg's review of Heidegger in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in May 1987, the aphorism of irresistible humor in its very brevity. MacGuffin is the word made popular by Alfred Hitchcock as meaning 'nothing at all' which has stood as the core of many of his plots;<sup>2</sup> it is a nothing that everybody is after although it is empty in itself and one never comes to learn its content. Rather, it only means that it means and it means so much to so many people – it is placed in the eye of the storm as its empty center, yet we never learn what it might mean, and yet, for the plot it's ultimately irrelevant. So *being* was/is such a MacGuffin of the history of western philosophy, the most spectacular MacGuffin ever, the mover of

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1 The paper is based on the lecture given at Duke University on 6 November 2015, dedicated to Hegel's *Logic*. The other speakers were Fredric Jameson, Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda. It is in the hope of retaining a bit of the spirit of that most remarkable day, that I keep the form of this paper closer to a lecture.

2 This comes from a story about two men on a train in Scotland. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' The other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one then asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man replies, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man then says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So from this story it is apparent that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all. (Truffaut 1985, p. 193) Another version of this joke has an even better final rejoinder: 'See, it works', implying that it's nothing at all that produces effects.

a plot with infinite ramifications, endless new intrigues and episodes, with cliffhangers and all. It is Hegel who boldly states that perhaps it is 'a nothing at all', empty in itself, that its mystery pertains not to some hidden enigmatic deep meaning that would need to be unearthed and spelled out, but rather to its absolute emptiness and meaninglessness, which is far more difficult to come to terms with than any deep hidden sense. One of the hardest things to understand is that there is nothing to understand. Nevertheless this insight holds many consequences. Yet the remark, as funny as it is, perhaps doesn't quite do justice to Hegel's use of *being*, for the remark turns *being* into a mana-like signifier, empty in itself but one that enables meaning, ironically meaning potentially everything and an opening up of meaning. However, Hegel wanted to strip *being* even of these qualities. Its meaninglessness is perhaps cut of another stuff and thus gets stuck in the throat of meaning as opposed to making meaning proliferate.

The first part of *Logic* was published in 1812, at Easter, just as the *Phenomenology* five years earlier in 1807 (Easter being the proper time for the rise of spirit, its resurrection, perhaps?). Anecdotically, Hegel got married in September 1811, seven months earlier, so in a letter to his friend Niethammer, announcing the publication, he wrote: "It's not a small thing if in the first semester of one's marriage one writes a thick book of 30 Bogen (450 pages) and of abstruse content. But *iniuria temporum!* [the injustice of times]. I am not an academic; to reach a proper form I would need another year, but I need money for living." (5 February 1812). His remark is, well, remarkable: Hegel, as if embodying the caricature of an arch-Professor, the vintage professor if there ever was one, measures his marriage by semesters, then as if embodying the caricature of the arch-academic saying 'I am not an academic' (at the time he was indeed the director of a gymnasium) while complaining about money. When he was writing the *Phenomenology* he had an affair with the wife of his landlord (resulting in the birth of his illegitimate son, Ludwig Fischer), so it could be said that the *Phenomenology* was the child of a love affair, adultery, indeed the 'child of love', as the saying goes, while the *Logic* was very much the legitimate child, born in proper wedlock. Marriages tend to appear so much less exciting than love affairs, although this is a very non-Hegelian view (and maybe this is what secretly subtends the frequent view that tends to see the *Phenomenology* as an exciting love-affair and the *Logic* as a dull marriage, or as dull as a marriage).<sup>3</sup> Actually the *Logic*

3 In a historic counterpoint to this, *Phenomenology* was written against the backdrop of Napoleon's victory in the battle of Jena, in the midst of the canon-fire. *Logic* on the other hand was written against the backdrop of his defeat (1812-1816). No Napoleon on the white horse in the *Logic* aroused Kojève's imagination.

was the child of a protracted honey-moon, and while one is a bit hard-put to see the connection between the abstruse and abstract content of *Logic* and the romantic infatuation of a honey-moon, Hegel was writing *Logic* while engaged in honeymoon activities. There is something in this immediate juxtaposition and equation of two incommensurates that evokes the infinite judgment, 'spirit is a bone': 'love is logic' (or 'marriage is logic'? Perhaps the infinite judgment behind this is 'love is marriage' – could this serve as a clue to figuring out the relation of *Phenomenology* to *Logic*?).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there is the complaint by Hegel about the lack of time (again, very academic, the impossibility to meet deadlines, as if Hegel was accumulating all the clichés in a couple of sentences).<sup>5</sup> There is the haste, the time-pressure, *Zeitnot*, indicating in an oblique way the strange connection between logic and time, a precipitation of something that Lacan would formulate as the problem of logical time and the assertion of anticipated certainty. Logic might appear as the domain of the timeless, but this is not the case for Hegel's logic because the time loop is essential, it is the time of precipitation and retroaction, and Hegel having to precipitate himself into publication is perhaps but reminded of the external circumstances crudely mirroring the internal temporality. And there is the relation between time-pressure and repetition: he would have to rewrite the *Logic* seventy-seven times, as opposed to Plato who supposedly rewrote the *Republic* only seven times,<sup>6</sup> there is a compulsion to repeat inscribed already in its framework. There is another most remarkable repetition, namely Hegel publishing the second edition of the first part of *Logic* on the brink of his death, the "Preface" being the last text he wrote before dying, his dying words, *Logic* had to be repeated twice, marking the rite of passage of marriage and death. Between the first occurrence and its repetition, the first edition and the second, between 1812 and 1831, most of the text was largely rewritten, revised and amply expanded, except for one bit: the notorious beginning with *being, nothing and becoming*. There was nothing to change there, nothing to add or subtract, it was not rewritten seventy-seven times, just stated twice. The beginning which hinges so much on internal repetition – 'being, pure being' – had to be also externally repeated and restated.<sup>7</sup>

There is something mind-boggling in the beginning of *Logic*. It is

4 Should one, in a wild shot, bring together Hegel's *Logic* and Lacan's formulas of sexuation, which embody quite literally the relation of logic to sexuality?

5 I am not an academic, there is the lack of funding, and all these deadlines to meet. Sounds familiar.

6 Hegel 2010, p. 21. All the page references in the text without other qualification refer to this edition.

7 The three editions of the 'Encyclopedia logic', 1817, 1827 and 1830, were perhaps but a rehearsal for this ultimate repetition.

supposed to be a pure plunge into the indeterminate immediacy which doesn't need or bear any preliminaries, but in order to arrive there, there is the most spectacular roundabout, the long and winding road leading up to it. For someone who harshly criticized Kant for eternal procrastination, Hegel really took his time. *Phenomenology* is supposed to be but the introductory way to logic, leading through all the possible figures of experience, individual and historical, only to undo them and cast them away – there is so much to unlearn, as Rebecca Comay aptly put it, this is an anti-Bildungsroman<sup>8</sup> and not about the accumulation of experience to arrive at wisdom (the absolute knowledge), rather about getting rid of it. Already the *Phenomenology* was excruciating with its beginning which has the structure of deferral, with the “Introduction” (written chronologically is first) and the “Preface”, written at the end but placed at the beginning as the opening. The point of both is that philosophy bears no introduction, one has to start with the thing itself, one is always already immersed in the thing itself even if one pretends not to be, there is no ante-chamber of philosophy, any beginning with external circumstances and conditions is merely an excuse. One cannot learn to swim without jumping into the water, as the pop version would have it. *Logic* again starts with a deferral, with the first “Preface”, written after its completion (with proofs in March 1812), then the second “Preface” (written in 1831 on the brink of Hegel's death), followed by the “Introduction” (which is chronologically first) Then, just to add insult to injury, a piece with no proper status called “With what must the beginning of science be made?” is followed. This is the beginning before the beginning if there ever was one where one must justify the beginning, but which at the same time supposed to be a beginning without any presuppositions, in no need of justification, a pure immersion into the indeterminate immediacy, which is for Hegel another name for *being*. We have four pieces of text before we get to the first page of *Logic*, that is, to get to the immediacy without further ado, to say nothing about the 600 pages of *Phenomenology*, reputedly his most difficult and tortuous book in the history of philosophy – leading up to what? The answer is: To the simplest possible things there are. His endless procrastination lingers before we can eventually really begin on p. 59, or do we?

All the preliminaries testify materially to the difficulty, the paradox, the impossibility of beginning, for Hegel, against all his proclamations, nevertheless keeps justifying his beginning, trying to justify something that bears no justification, for if one justifies it beforehand, then this is not the beginning, it has to be ‘unjustifiable’, nothing must precede it –

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8 Cf. Comay 2015.

no assumptions, no defined field or object, as it is usual with all other sciences. This was the argument of his “Introduction”: thought produces its object, it has no object given beforehand; and also no method to precede it, insofar as the method must be invented and further justified as we go along. We cannot presuppose the long tradition of *Logic*, and in particular not the Aristotelian laws of thought, not non-contradiction nor the excluded middle, nothing *that Logic* has produced over the more than 2000 thousand years of its development. Something that was for Kant so perfected that it was unsurpassable was for Hegel something to be cast away. When Hegel was defending his doctoral thesis in August 1801, he had to propose some theses for disputation (in Latin), and in the first thesis he proposed the following: “*Contradictio ist regula veri, non-contradictio falsi*,”<sup>9</sup> ‘Contradiction is the rule of the true, non-contradiction of the false,’ thus standing up virtually singlehandedly, as a young man, against the grain of all logical tradition.

This insight is itself so simple that this beginning is as beginning in no need of any preparation or further introduction, and the only possible purpose of this preliminary disquisition regarding it was not to lead up to it but to dispense rather with all preliminaries. (p. 55)

There is a pragmatic paradox (in the technical sense) to what Hegel is saying: if what he is saying is true, he shouldn't be saying it at all. If there can be no introduction, no beginning before the beginning, if one is always already ‘in’, why bother to write all these introductions and deliberation before p. 59? Why dispense with the preliminaries if preliminaries are impossible anyway? Why prohibit the impossible and dwell on it? Every *pre-liminary* has always already crossed the limen, the threshold, if unwittingly. But at the same time, can one ever be ‘in’, even if plunging into the indeterminate immediacy without further ado? One seems to be either before the threshold (*Phenomenology*, introductions and so on.) or after the threshold of p. 59. But maybe this is also an illusion, another illusion to be rid of, namely that there is an ‘in’ without the false start of deceptively external introductions, so that doing away with the preliminaries in a preliminary way is both an impossible self-contradictory enterprise and an absolutely necessary false start which is the only way to make it possible to properly begin. There is no start without a false start. But this doesn't quite entail the idea that we have always already started – there is a start and a break. No preliminary is necessary, yet we have spent many hundreds of pages with his preliminaries – and some of it the most brilliant pages in the whole history of philosophy which, if we took Hegel's word at its face

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9 Hegel 1986a, p. 533.

value, shouldn't have been written at all. Here, the absolutely necessary and the absolutely superfluous coincide. There is no way to be outside of the absolute, but there is no way to be in it either, for the beginning, if this is indeed the proper beginning, is but an empty spot that should lead up to the absolute, which cannot be but a result, the result which is again nothing without the way leading up to it.

One could say that the absolute knowledge is a crossroad, a partition. There are two ways that follow from it: having reached this point, having climbed to the top of this ladder, one can only revert to the experience, which was there all along – the way to truth is truth itself, the absolute knowledge is nothing but the realization that the truth was produced on the way, unwittingly, and that there is nothing more to learn there, no wisdom to possess (this is, by the way, why Kojève's talk about 'the Hegelian sage' is nonsense), except for what has been learned on the way. The absolute knowledge thus rejoins the sense certainty, the most naïve beginning of the *Phenomenology*, experience is caught in a circle, one is thrown back on one's own experience, on its beginning – yet with a cut, after the break produced by the absolute knowledge. Is there life after the absolute knowledge? The parallel has been already suggested a number of times: it is like continuing to live one's life after analysis, after the break produced by analysis, and the absolute knowledge is in structural analogy with the end of analysis. Lacan's version of the absolute knowledge is *la passe*, the end, the cut of something that once seemed interminable ("Analysis terminable and interminable", as Freud put it). And one always does this, one remains consciousness, one is always stuck with experience, and having produced a cut in it is perhaps not such a small thing. Experience of consciousness becomes the repetition of the experience of consciousness, but with a break.

At the same time, and this is the other way opened up by the absolute knowledge, the way is already paved for *Logic*, to the pure development of concepts in their own terrain, in and for themselves – from a point of view which is no longer that of consciousness and its experience, but that of a subject. What Hegel means by subject – 'substance is subject' etc. – doesn't at all coincide with consciousness, and the trajectory of the *Phenomenology* could be described as 'from consciousness to subject'. It is the very principle of disparity inhabiting both *being* and *concept*, the cut that subtended all experience of consciousness, but which, at the point of the absolute knowledge, emerges as a pure cut. *Logic* is the consequence of this cut. It starts its elaboration from there. It is in this cut that a shift occurs that Hegel names 'the pure decision to think' – and ultimately nothing else is needed as a prerequisite of the beginning of *Logic*, a long and winding way which

was necessary to lead up to it is as if erased and made superfluous by it. This is what makes the big difference of tenor between the two books: there was no decision to think in the *Phenomenology*, the consciousness was rather forced to think against its will and took all possible evasions to counteract this demand. As Rebecca Comay brilliantly put it:

What [*Phenomenology*] depicts is a thicket of evasions that seem designed to halt any such progress: every stopping point is on the verge of becoming permanent, every "station" ... a place of interminable stasis and stagnation, every stage a stumbling block to further progress. ... the incessant stalling and backsliding, the meandering and repetition, the stubborn obliviousness, the self-censorship, and the constant blackouts. Consciousness proves to be a virtuoso at forgetting what it learns – disparaging its significance, disarming its impact, or drawing inferences that can be counter-intuitive and even perverse.<sup>10</sup>

So against this backdrop the pure decision to think inaugurates another path, another dimension, another trajectory, another life within this life, which is the life of the concept. Significantly, at the point of his death Hegel succeeded in the repetition of *Logic*, having prepared the second revised edition (of the first part at least) just before he died, but he failed to produce a repetition of *Phenomenology* – he was actually, at the point of dying, preparing a revision for the new edition, he got through some 30 pages, but then rather died than to repeat this utterly brilliant but superfluous work.

Among all the preliminary texts, I will make just a brief comment on 'With what must the beginning of science be made?' 'Womit muss der Anfang der Wissenschaft gemacht werden?', a short interpolated text of ten pages, after the prefaces and introductions and before the beginning proper. The text itself has an uncertain status, it is like an intruder, an interloper. The curious thing is that the title of the piece possesses the form of a question. This departs from Hegel's general strategy, which one could formulate like this: ask no questions, but start with the answers. Philosophy is a matter of construction, not of posing questions and then looking for answers. If I venture a very makeshift division, for a bit for fun, there are philosophies of questions – most notably Socrates, Descartes, Kant, and endlessly Heidegger;<sup>11</sup> and there are philosophies of answers – most notably Spinoza and Hegel.<sup>12</sup> Hegel always starts with assertions,

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<sup>10</sup> Comay 2015, p. 262-3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. lucid comments by Derrida, in Derrida 1991.

<sup>12</sup> There is much to be gained from reading the book by Aron Bodenheimer *Why? On the Obscurity of Questioning* (Bodenheimer 1984, new edition 2011). It thoroughly addresses the question of the question, undermining the quasi-radicality of questioning.

statements, this is already inscribed in his criticism of Kant: if we start by asking ‘under what conditions is knowledge possible?’, then we will never get there, we will endlessly ruminate over the conditions of possibility without realizing that the cognition of the means and the conditions of cognition are already cognition. Hence, question is questionable, the radical stance of questioning everything, without any bias and without mercy, actually itself presupposes something, it cannot quite account for the position from which the question is posed. Questioning obfuscates its own enunciation, it barricades itself into a seemingly unassailable place. It questions everything except itself, even if it takes the seemingly radical form of self-questioning. This process is analogous to Hegel’s critique of skepticism as the seemingly radical doubt about everything, except about its own position of enunciation. But here Hegel makes a strange exception, he asks a question, or he takes up, or quotes, a question that one might suppose might be naturally asked. He asks a question in order to dispose of it, to dispose of the form of the question as such. Here, one could say: *being* is not an answer to a question, and specifically it is not an answer to the question ‘with what must the beginning of science be made?’

In what follows I will not attempt to give a proper reading of Hegel’s beginning, an impossible task for a short intervention. I will concentrate just on certain peculiarities of this Hegelian beginning, peculiarities pertaining to its grammar, its syntax, as it were, which cannot be held apart from its logic and, ‘ontological implication’.

First of all, *being*, as the protagonist of the beginning, is an anti-hero. “This simple determination which has no further meaning besides, this empty something, is as such, therefore, the beginning of philosophy.” (p. 55) It is “an empty word”. Nothing is more disappointing and unpromising than the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic*. It is not the wealth of origin, some deep insight from which everything follows, or some incontrovertible axiom on which to build, but the poorest and the emptiest entity possible. As it has no meaning and no determination, therefore nothing can be said about it. Strictly speaking any determination, any predicate is already too much. Once we arrive at page 58, after yet another interpolated piece on the general division of logic, once we arrive at the heading “Section 1. Determinateness (Quality)”, and further, once we would finally expect the proper beginning, Hegel makes yet another false start by stating “Being is the indeterminate immediate.” This looks like a definition of *being*: *being* is the subject to which two predicates are ascribed. He starts with a proposition, with the two negative qualifications that will keep recurring through the next pages. Indeterminate and immediate, they are both negative words and given

that we don’t possess a positive word for the most immediately given, we have to recur to removing mediation and determination. One could say that the *Phenomenology* was but a long way of doing this. We start with a positive entity, *being* is only via negation and removal, and however positive the beginning is, it is always already premised on a subtraction. It is an ‘experience of thought’ which requires subtraction of all experience. Of course Hegel is perfectly aware that negative determination is still a determination, and that absence of mediation is itself mediated, a negative mode of mediation. But this is a most curious dismissal of dialectics, or suspending its power and sway for a moment, the moment of being – one has to think non-dialectically if one is to start thinking. Hegel will, for example, say, in the second sentence of section ‘being’: “In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another” (p. 59), thus cutting the dialectical tie of equal-unequal – how can it be equal only to itself without being unequal to another? It is an act of severance and an act of willful isolation of terms.

The two negative words are nevertheless telling. They don’t form some double negation, quite the contrary, indeterminacy is rather there to counteract the negation implied in immediacy. This is directed against Kant, for whom the immediacy of *Anschauung*, intuition, was precisely the most determinate, the wholly and entirely determinate, before we come to distill its features into concept, sieve and select them, that is, before we submit it to understanding (this is at least the *vulgata*). Immediacy ‘spontaneously’ implies something most determinate by being immediately given and fully there in its thereness and singularity before selecting some of its traits as more relevant than others. So indeterminacy suspends the spontaneous hang of immediacy. One can only get there by removing its mediation by negation of mediation and undermining its immediacy by another negation which makes it lose its footing. Yet, there is a sort of recourse to a Kantian move, to what Kant names infinite judgment: the (positive) ascription of a negative predicate. Indeterminate and immediate, *unbestimmt* and *unmittelbar*, are perhaps to be read on the model of the ‘undead’. It is a third realm between an affirmative judgment (*being* is determinate) and a negative judgment (*being* is not determinate), opening a strange mode of negativity in the very positivity of affirmation.

So if this is another false start, not by its inaccuracy, but by its form, which is the form of a proposition, one has to remove this form as well. Thus we finally arrive to the notorious *Sein, reines Sein* – note that there is no definite article. Hegel, who very consciously doesn’t start with a proposition, nevertheless makes a move, a further move. He doesn’t rest his case by merely stating ‘Being’, but makes a further qualification,

which is a repetition. 'Being, pure being.' (If we disregard the continuation of the sentence: '– without any further determination', *ohne alle weitere Bestimmung*. There is a hyphen, the sentence gets curiously split and qualified by stating the absence of qualification, but there is no verb. Taking just the first part of the sentence as a sentence on its own, Hegel introduces a cut, he repeats 'being' twice in this first sentence, one cannot say merely 'being', but the minimal utterance would thus have to be 'being, being'. It is as if repetition comes into the place of predication, instead of ascribing a predicate to being one merely repeats the subject. Hegel interpolates 'pure' to insist that there is no determination, we are supposed to have something pure in this first step, the first step of the dialectics which is nothing but the 'logic of impurity', as it were, everything passing into something else, everything being tainted by its otherness, unwittingly, against one's better intentions. There is no pure entity in dialectics, this is what dialectics means, everything is mediated by its other, everything carries the ineradicable mark of otherness in its bosom. Yet, at this first step, we are trying to hold on to precisely the purity of being in its immediate indeterminacy. Still, we don't quite manage, there is like the surreptitious move of repetition, something pushing to repeat, a *Wiederholungszwang*, compulsion to repeat *being*, to turn the first sentence into the insistence of being rather than the assertion of being. But one cannot step into the same being twice. Is the second being the same as the first one? Does the non-sentence make more than it caters for? Is the assertion of purity in the second being something that purifies the first being, as its minimal qualification, or rather renders it 'impure'? The second being is like both an addition and a subtraction from the first *being*, subtraction by qualifying it as pure, against the possible representations that one might have by stating merely 'being'. It restricts the first *being* by adding something to it, it wants to reduce it to its purity – 'being and nothing more' – but saying 'nothing more' is actually saying something more. One could say: in the beginning there is *being* posited twice, or in the beginning there is a gap in *being*, a gap between the first and the second *being*, splitting the *being* from itself, by the sheer cunningness of its grammatical structure. Does Hegel surreptitiously introduce something that he didn't want to introduce at all, by the mere use of a rhetorical device? But where does rhetoric start, in particular with this most sensitive point of the beginning, where everything would have to be measured, all rhetoric kept in check? The minimal rhetorical device is precisely repetition, introducing redundancy, the surplus of rhetoric over 'information'. Saying something twice is redundant, it doesn't bring new information, it's like an ornamental addition to adorn the poverty and the nakedness of a single

occurrence. But the rhetoric at this point has immediate ontological value, it is the rhetoric of *being* itself, which makes that *being* insist before ever properly 'existing', it insists as a repetition and a cut. The minimal, for being pure, is a redoubled minimal.

There is no other of *being*. There is no other against which *being* would be determined in opposition with or differentially, the only otherness is introduced by repetition which separates *being* from itself. *Being* is an assertion, but the assertion of an emptiness, the assertion of the void of any determination or distinction. When in the next step we get to nothing, it is essential that nothing is not the other of *being*. This is not a determination by opposition, even more, strictly speaking, not by negation. Nothing is actually not a negation of being, strange as it may seem, nor is it the truth of *being*, let alone its suppression or sublation. It is rather that *being*, because of its emptiness and indeterminate nature, cannot even be being that it purports to be.<sup>13</sup>

There was an English TV series '*allo 'allo*', very popular in the nineties, which featured a woman who appears at some point in every episode and gives exactly the same line: 'Listen very carefully, I shall say this only once!', a line which has inevitably turned into proverb. Of course the line is funnier since its repetition, which occurs with clockwork precision, immediately contradicts its content, namely the affirmation that it will not be repeated but told only once. We know of course that the thing will happen in the next episode, we know, when the woman appears, exactly what she will say, and she says it – yet we cannot be but surprised, we are always caught unawares. For Hegel one could coin the adage: 'Listen very carefully, I shall say this only twice.' Indeed he states being twice, on top of that he writes the comma twice – 'being, pure being, –'. The fact that there is only one dash can refer us to a larger thrust of repetition, namely that the dash in the first proper sentence of *Logic* repeats the dash in the last sentence of the *Phenomenology*, thus linking the two together by the sheer cunning of punctuation. The dialectical punctuation device cuts and disconnects while at the same time, in the same place, establishing a connection.<sup>14</sup> The same goes for the repetition of nothing, "Nothing, pure nothing", and nothing in its turn has to acquire

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13 Stephen Houlgate puts it well: "Being vanishes into nothing, according to Hegel, because it is so indeterminate in itself that logically it is not even the pure being that it is and so is in fact the absence of being. Pure being vanishes, in other words, not because it fails to meet our standard of intelligibility or because it is experienced by us as nothing but because its own utter indeterminacy prevents it logically from even being pure and simple being." (2006, pp. 277-8) The sheer indeterminacy of pure being entails its vanishing, it is too indeterminate to even be *being*. *Being* is not pure being because precisely insofar as it is pure and simple *being* it undermines itself.

14 I can only refer to the brilliant work accomplished by Frank Ruda and Rebecca Comay in their 'dash' project.

the qualification of purity. This follows in the same vein for the repetitious structure of *being* and nothing which are both repeated when introduced, with the repetition of an entity repeated twice. There is a repetition not merely within the first two statements about *being* and nothing, but also within the repetition of statements themselves, which mirror each other. The same move has to be repeated twice, once for *being* and once for nothing. This turns into a curious machine of repetition, the inner and the outer repetition. *Being* and nothing are repeated, and nothing repeats *being*. As I already mentioned, the verbatim repetition of the beginning in the first and the second edition of *Logic* is twenty years apart. However, it's a repetition which stops at two, not quite a repetition, but a redoubling, a replication, there is no third term to relieve the tension introduced by two. Two is enough for a minimal difference, a difference of the same, a pure split which is the object of this repetition.

In the first edition of *Logic*, in 1812, Hegel in a remark he omitted in the second edition, makes a thought experiment of possible alternatives to the first statement by way of other attempts that might do the job and maintain *being* in its purity. The remark would require an attentive reflection, but all I can venture here is a brief remark on the remark itself. The first candidate is 'being is the absolute'.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, a predicate is ascribed to *being* that says far more than it is vouched for by its indeterminacy. Here one makes in the very first step an unwarranted assumption about what is the absolute, something that can only be produced by a long process. So the second attempt tries with mere tautology, 'being is being'. But even this is too much, for tautology, modest as it seems by its very form, implies a movement only to then arrest it by not moving anywhere. It seems to say something, but it doesn't say anything: "it says nothing". It's not that it ascribes some content foreign to the indeterminacy of *being*, what is foreign is the very form of ascription of predicates. The third attempt is 'being is', which also fails, for it contains a difference between *being* itself, as a category, and its *being* implied by 'is'. It's not the same being that figures as the subject and the *being* of 'is', in what is called 'judgment of existence' – existence is too much for *being*. Hence pure *being* can only be without a predicate. So the fourth possibility that Hegel considers is 'Being!', that is, an exclamation, but which by its form can only pertain to the subjective stance, to opinion and affection. The outcome of this experiment is the final form, which is not a proposition and which doesn't content itself with a mere exclamation – of being stated twice, 'being, being', and twice only. *Being* is the pure two, the figure of twoness, which is just

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<sup>15</sup> For this and the following Hegel 1999, p. 57 f.

enough to circumscribe the cut, the break between the two, which is not the differentiation of being, but its pure stuckness. *Being* is there just to display the break and instigate pure difference, while being meaningless in itself, a pure *flatus vocis*.

I have already said that 'nothing' repeats the repetition of *being*, however it is curiously endowed with the definite article: "*Nichts, das reine Nichts*". *Being* didn't need a definite article (*reines Sein*), but *nothing* seems to 'spontaneously' require it.<sup>16</sup> Linguistically, 'nothing' is determined by the definite article, as opposed to indefinite being. Here, a slight move has been made, surreptitiously, by the inclusion of an article, but can this be possibly seen already as an incipient move towards determination – What has been introduced by this 'rhetoric' of repetition is a difference, although not a difference of content – *being* has the same content as *nothing*. This difference doesn't concern intuiting or thinking, they are both empty in both cases, and there is no difference between the two. Yet by making this move, the move of 'renaming' as it were, using a different word for the same content (for the same absence of content – but maybe the crucial question is: can absence be the same?), it seems apparent that something has moved, changed, a distinction has been made. 'It makes a difference', although it's hard to see on what this difference is based. One could extend Hegel's two propositions by a third one, 'Difference, pure difference', stated twice, pure difference between *being and being*, between *nothing and nothing*, and between *being and nothing*. One hasn't moved, as far as the object of thought is concerned, yet one has moved by restating the same emptiness twice with two opposite qualifications, although their difference is null. It would be too much to say that the content is the same but the form has changed – too much, for there should be no difference between form and content at this level because the form (and content) is the mere redoubling. Content and form are reflexive determinations, pertaining to the logic of essence, so while this language is inappropriate it is inevitably used. Hence many critics of Hegel were pointing their fingers at the illegitimate use of reflexive determinations when there should be none, not quite appreciating that Hegel is up to an impossible task.

'Nothing' is the same determination, the same absence of determination as *being*, the same yet not quite the same. A difference has been introduced in this pure indeterminacy, and then immediately erased, for this is no real difference at all, yet the split has emerged a differing in the bosom of *being*, a pulsation of *being* (a rhythm of *being*?).

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<sup>16</sup> Is there a language requirement? Can one say *reines Nichts* just as easily as *reines Sein* without forcing some propensity of language? My German friends more or less agree that it would be equally or even more natural to use *reines Nichts*.

One shouldn't venture into some cosmic poetry or fantasy because what this amounts to is that the split, the break, the cut, is what sustains *being*, the empty space between *being and being* in the midst of the very indeterminacy. The first difference is the difference of 'nothing at all', insubstantial and unsubstantiated. It is a difference to precede all differences, a non-dialectical difference (Hegel will later say that much) that conditions all the dialectical differences.

"Pure being and pure nothing are therefore the same." Here we have the first proper proposition that takes the form of  $S=P$  – if we only consider the opening assertions. Pure *being* and pure *nothing* are the same – but punctuated by 'therefore', *also*. What legitimizes this 'therefore'? This looks like the conclusion of a syllogism. 1. Being, pure being. 2. Nothing, pure nothing. 3. Therefore, pure being and pure nothing are the same. This doesn't look like a kosher Aristotelian syllogism, for both premises are not propositions, and nothing can be deduced from statements without predicates. The fact that they are without predicates is essential, it is not that we could supplement and spell out the implicit predicates. The premise is inherently non-propositions, but predicateless assertions. In the first proper proposition, which is the conclusion, we get a predicate that can finally be ascribed, not to the one or the other, but to both at the same time, both occupying the place of the subject, and the predicate is sameness, the radical equation of the two entities of the first two paragraphs. But equation doesn't take the form of 'Being is nothing', but rather that 'Being and nothing are the same' – the essential point is that nothing is not the predicate of *being* (nor its other). One should be attentive to the German wording, for the translation is inaccurate by being helpful and correct: *Das reine Sein und das reine Nichts ist also dasselbe*.<sup>17</sup> Hegel uses the singular, the sentence is grammatically not correct, the pure *being* and pure nothing *is* the same. He conflates the two subjects into one, he merges them grammatically and more so, he refuses to use plural. He takes them as one entity and disregards the rules, he makes them into a unit. Do the two thus merge into one? Is this what he means? Not at all. The split is indistinguishable, yet asserted. Two grammatical subjects get a verb in singular but their distinction is stated and erased in the same move.

The truth of this strange syllogism is neither in *being* nor in *nothing*, the truth of no syllogism rests solely with the premises, there is something implied in the premises that the conclusion spells out. The conclusion posits the equality of what was repeated, of what is insisted through repetitions. However, this equality is not an equation, it's a

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 17 Hegel 1986b, p. 83.

passage, the truth is in passing, it's a 'passing truth'. *Nicht übergeht, sondern übergegangen ist* (ibid.) – *being* has passed over into nothing and nothing has passed over into *being*. Again the grammar is essential, it's all in the telling and the particular grammatical forms. The tense is precisely the present perfect (the same in German). There is an 'always already', it's a passage that we cannot catch while it happens, the moment we posit it, it has already happened; the result, *being or nothing*, is always already the result of the passage on which it is premised. The present perfect – the present is already based on a passage which has been 'perfected', that is, accomplished (from Latin *perficio*), the present of being (cf. metaphysics premised on conceiving 'being as presence', metaphysics of presence etc.) is always passed (passed and not past) not the passing presence, which is commonsense, but the passed presence. (Might this be present passed, instead of present perfect?)

But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that *they are not the same*, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that *each* immediately *vanishes in its opposite*.

In this passage asserting their sameness, there is the essential rub of distinction, which is put in a very precise way – they are 'not without distinction', *nicht ihre Ununterschiedenheit*, with the crucial form of double negation which is not at all to be conflated with the negation of negation. Hegel will say this much himself. They are not said to be different, but 'not non-different', *nicht ununterschieden*, and 'not non-different' is not the same as different. There is like a sub-difference, a distinction not based on difference that one can base anything on. They are the same, but they are 'absolutely distinct' (*absolut unterschieden*, Hegel uses the same word, different not distinct, although 'distinction' is perhaps in place here, this is 'gained in translation'), they are unseparated and inseparable in their very distinction, immediately vanishing into each other, with the same immediacy that qualified *being* (and nothing) from the outset. We start with the immediate, but the immediate vanished into its 'opposite', which is not at all its opposite but the same, so finally the immediate is this passage itself, but which, by producing a distinction, becomes mediated. It becomes movement, it becomes 'becoming', the immediacy is its own becoming, 'becoming immediate'. There is only 'becoming immediate', not immediacy, as a state that one can relish or immerse oneself in. The movement of thought that one has accomplished by considering being-nothing, is the movement of being itself, for one can distinguish *being-nothing* only in the bosom of non-distinction between *being* and thought. One doesn't think *being*, one constructs it, for nothing is given in this beginning to be thought about

or reflected upon, except for the indeterminate and immediate givenness of thought and being in one. The distinction that one has made, between *being* and nothing (premised on the distinction between *being* and *being* and nothing and nothing), is a non-distinction, it just as immediately dissolves itself, or rather 'has dissolved itself', *aufgelöst hat*, always already.

Hegel makes a number of remarks to explain this first move, although he insists at the same time that there is nothing to be explained. One only makes things worse by explaining, one adds too much and rather thereby obfuscates the simplicity of what is at stake.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless – *but nevertheless, I know very well but nevertheless* – what he says is interesting and useful, although he needn't (and shouldn't) have said it. (This raises the intricate question: when does Hegel speak, properly speak? Is it in the prefaces and the introductions, in all the preliminary texts, in his remarks? Is the proper statement only 'being, pure being' etc.? Is everything to be taken on the same level? If we distinguish layers, where do we draw the line?) First there is the question of opposing nothing to something, and to be clear, this is not at all what is at stake here, for we are not dealing with any determinate existence of a something. The moment we have a determinate something we also have a determinate nothing, and this is what he meant by *bestimmte Negation*, the determinate negation, the very motor of dialectics. Negation, to be worthy of its task, cannot be just a negation (abstract negation), but a determinate negation of a particular something, and hence it contains a positive content. Here we don't have something to negate, just indeterminate *being* and therefore indeterminate *nothing*. Second, he considers the notion of non-being as equivalent to *nothing*. However, saying non-being instead of nothing is again saying too much. One uses the negation and the opposition, but this is not any usual negation or opposition, it is abstract and immediate, just the passage of one into the other. There is precisely a non-opposition between the two, that is, they are indiscernible from each other. They are 'non-identical indiscernibles', as one commentator usefully put it.

But the issue first of all is not the form of opposition, which is at the same time the form of *reference* [*Beziehung*], but the abstract, immediate negation, the nothing purely for itself, negation devoid of reference [*beziehungslose Verneinung*] – and this can also be expressed, if one so wishes, simply by saying '*nothing*' [*das blosse Nicht*]." (p. 60)

The translation misleadingly uses the word 'reference' where Hegel

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18 Somewhere in the correspondence with his wife Hegel, when he would need to apologize for something and explain, states: 'When one comes to the point of having to explain, it is already too late'.

says *Beziehung* as referring to relation. Opposition is a relation and here we are after something that is without a relation. *Being and nothing* are not *in relation*. What we need to establish is not 'negation devoid of reference', but rather '*die beziehungslose Verneinung*', the negation without relation, a relationless negation, a negation that doesn't establish a relation, but merely a (non)distinction. There is no relation, maybe this is the minimal Hegelian theorem, ('not unlike' Lacan's, to extend the double negation). However, if this is a relationless negation, then all the negations which follow will precisely establish a relation in this non-relation.<sup>19</sup> Because this is a relationless negation, using 'nothing', *Nichts*, is better than using non-being, for it avoids the etymological relation, in both senses of the word; the dependence of the negative 'non-being' on *being*, which could mislead to the supposition of non-being *being* derivative and secondary, a negative addition to being. Because they are the same and the etymological non-relation *Sein-Nichts*, having 'nothing' in common, is better for the purpose. They are co-originary, there is no derivation of nothing from *being*, they are just immediately the same in their split.

Because it has this strange structure of a relationless negation on which negation is based, the beginning ultimately cannot be superseded:

Thus the beginning of philosophy is the ever present and self-preserving foundation of all subsequent developments, remaining everywhere immanent in its further determinations. (p. 49) Consequently, that which constitutes the beginning, the beginning itself, is to be taken as something unanalyzable, taken in its simple, unfilled immediacy; and therefore *as being*, as complete emptiness. (p. 52)

The beginning doesn't vanish in what follows, it is the underlying ground for its development, and one could say that the one thing that all the progression has at its core without being able to be rid of it is the beginning. It is never quite sublated and remains in a way, inscrutable. Beginning must be abandoned if there is to be a progression, but it remains inherent in whatever follows. It is the kernel one can never be rid of, not a remainder of anything, but rather something produced by the first step, something imperceptibly small, indistinguishable, yet insuppressible, *unaufhebbar*. It is perhaps the object of philosophy reduced to its minimum. It is the blind spot of all further dialectical steps, as if pushing them forward, yet being recalcitrant to the conceptual grasp it instigates and conditions at every point. *Unanalysierbar* is a strong word and there is something at the core of dialectics that conditions the dialectical movement, all its differences, contradictions, oppositions,

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19 One can remark that Hegel rarely uses the Freudian word *Verneinung*, as he does here, he usually sticks to the Latin *Negation*.

turns. It stands at its core as a non-dialectical kernel. It cannot be grasped separately in itself, the only way to point to it is by this minimal 'statement', 'being, pure being', the stammering of *being*, something that is not a difference nor negation nor passage into the other.

On a famous spot at the end of the "Introduction" Hegel says that logic is "an unconscious power" (p. 37) because it deals with the unconscious of thought itself, and this tension between the reflexivity and the unconscious, as something that cannot be quite reflexively appropriated, this conceptual blind spot is the driving force of logic. The blind spot is the non-dialectical condition of dialectics. Everything is dissolvable into concept, this is the vulgate of Hegel, with the exception of this one element, the beginning, that has been brought forth by the decision to think. The paradox is this: the decision to think circumscribes the unconscious of thought, something that subtends thought, and the further development of logic is the deployment of thought that it rests on and carries with it the persistence of this blind spot.

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Volume 4 /  
Issue 1

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Volume 4 /  
Issue 1