

The Method of Autonomous Reason

The most vexing problem facing any reader of Hegel's *Science of Logic* is penetrating the method of its advance. Although Hegel continually intones the necessity of the passage from one category to the next, it is tempting to throw up one's hands and decry the arbitrariness of every move.

Hegel invites much of this frustration by failing to supply in advance a unitary doctrine of method. Instead he offers fragmentary accounts at different points along the way, accounts whose compatibility, let alone justification, is far from obvious.¹ Perhaps the most familiar of these is the introductory description of six general features of method, according to which (1) the form of logical development is in unity with its content; (2) the subject matter unfolds immanently, as a self-development; (3) the science proceeds by means of determinate negation; (4) the movement of categories is circular, such that the advance from the starting point is equally a regress towards the true ground on which the development rests; (5) the determination of categories is neither merely analytic nor synthetic, but both at once; and (6) the development has its own method as its final result.

Although these characterizations are first listed without much ado, Hegel does outline a dual strategy for confirming whether they are the fundamental features of valid method. This lies in the twin discussions that introduce the systematic argument of the *Science of Logic*. In the first, entitled "Notion of Logic in General," Hegel considers the nature of logic and examines what method must be adopted to permit logical science to achieve its aims. In the second, entitled "With What Must the Science Begin?" he analyzes how philosophy can be undertaken without being burdened by foundations. As Hegel shows, these problems have one and the same solution, whereby the discourse satisfying the demands of logic equally allows philosophy to overcome foundationalism. This convergence not only makes intelligible why Hegel calls that with which philosophy begins a "Science of Logic," but also provides the key arguments for judging the legitimacy of his descriptions of method.

Let us consider each converging path in turn.

i) The Determination of Method out of the Demands of Logic

Logic consists in the thinking of thinking. Although logic may be called a formal science, in that it is not a thinking about particular objects of thought, Hegel aptly points out that logic has a subject matter all its own: the determination of thought.² For just this reason, the form of logic has a special relation to its content, setting logical science apart from other disciplines.

Since all other sciences conceive something other than thinking, the form in which their content is presented, namely, scientific thought, is different from their subject matter. Insofar as this leaves their method something that cannot be established within their own investigations, nonlogical sciences are compelled to take their method for granted, as something that must already be at hand in order for their investigations to proceed. However, because the method of nonlogical sciences must be determined independently of the investigation of their particular subject matters, having the method in hand does not bring with it any content. Hence, the subject matter other sciences address must equally be given by an acceptance of some concepts or other, since otherwise there would be no determinate content for their given method to address.³

In logic this distinction between form and content is overcome to the degree that logic consists in the thinking of thinking, or self-thinking thought. Whereas in other inquiries form and content fall asunder, the form and content of logical science appear to be one and the same: thinking that thinks itself.

In this respect, logic proceeds upon the overcoming of the distinction of consciousness that Hegel claims is the prerequisite for systematic philosophy.⁴ This distinction, whose overcoming is purportedly achieved by the *Phenomenology of Spirit's* immanent critique of consciousness's foundational knowing,⁵ consists in the differentiation of knowing from its object, where the standard of truth resides in the independent given comprising knowing's referent. If in logic the object of inquiry, pure thought (that is, thought that thinks itself), is indistinguishable from the thinking cognition in which logic engages, then logical science will lack the appeal to independent givens constitutive of the representational framework of consciousness. Given how the thoughts of logic refer to nothing but themselves, there can be no question of logic seeking their truth in some distinct criteria. For just this reason there is nothing logical at hand to refer to until logical thinking has gotten under way. Since this eliminates any possibility of drawing a distinction between reference and referent, logical thought is nonrepresentational, lacking the constitutive distinction defining representational cognition.

Hence, if the method of logic is the ordering of the content of logic, then the logical method will be at one with what it presents, in expression of the unity of form and content in logic. Because of this underlying unity, the methodological form of the thinking of thinking is only established in the

determination of what thinking is by and within logical science. Consequently, the method of logic will not be conceivable apart from the content it orders. If anything like a doctrine of logical method were to be sought, it could only be obtained from the completed development of logic's subject matter. Since the logical unfolding of thought presents what is at one with its mode of presentation, only with completion of logic is the form in which thinking is thought fully at hand. Instead of being given at the start, as something distinct and independent of its topic, the method of logic can only be determinable as a result of the full exposition of the content logic presents.

This allows logical science to make an absolute beginning, avoiding the dependence upon a given method and content characterizing other sciences. Because the unity of form and content in logic prevents logical method from having its proper determination prior to the completed exposition of the content of logical thought, logic begins without any antecedently determined method. Similarly, since what logic is about has no independent being apart from logical thought, logic begins without any antecedently determined subject matter. By contrast, other sciences cannot make an absolute beginning. Because what they address is different from their theorizing, the form of their theorizing can no more provide the content it addresses than the subject matter examined can provide the form of its own theoretical presentation. As a result, the subject matter of other sciences must be independently given at the outset in order to be available, just as their method must be independently determined apart from thinking the subject matter of their particular science.⁶ Logic, by contrast, begins absolutely in the sense that neither its content nor its method has any given character at the outset of logical investigation. Not before and outside but only in and through its thinking of thinking do logic's unitary topic and procedure get determined.

As a consequence, logic must proceed immanently, as a self-development. Since it has no given form or content, logic must generate its own subject matter and ordering, unless external interventions supply it with either along the way. The latter option, however, is ruled out by the unity of form and content defining logic's thinking of thinking. If any terms were externally introduced or externally ordered, the thought under examination would no longer be undertaking its own investigation. Instead, the train of logical thought would be broken and destroyed by a thinking that determines the content and/or order of the science yet stands outside its purview. To escape this outcome, logic must have an immanent development, where both what is thought and how it is thought are determined by nothing but the course of logical thinking itself. Insofar as logic develops a thinking that thinks itself, its development cannot fail to be immanent, for it is nothing but a self-development, where what is presented provides its own exposition.

It follows that logic is circular in the sense that each advance represents a regress towards the ground on which the whole development rests. As a self-development uniting form and content, logical thinking only arrives at the completed determination of both what is under way developing itself and the order of its exposition at the conclusion of its working. Only then is the subject matter of the development determined, just as only then is the ordering principle or method of the advance at hand. As we have seen, both are what they are only as results of the development leading to and constituting them. Since the preceding development is nothing more than the succession of stages by which logical thought both constitutes and orders itself, each advance is a move towards the ground that determines and contains the prior stages as what they are: elements in the self-constitution of logical thought. This ground is, of course, the totality of logic, which only arises as a result of the completed development.

Hence, logic is not caught in a holism of coherence, where the truth of each category is defined in terms of the given totality within which it resides. Nor is logical thought involved in rebuilding the ship in which it is already afloat. In either case, the content of logic would be determined by a framework encompassing and lying beyond it, leaving categories always determined by something falling outside them all. This would once again disrupt the unity of form and content because the determining of logic would not reside in its own exposition but in an external context that could never become subject to logical investigation, since it would always be presupposed by any logical thought.

Logical thought escapes the dilemmas of holism because the whole to which the categories belong is not something given at the outset of the development, providing an omnipresent determining context, but rather a result that only contains and orders them at the end of its self-development. On the one hand, the totality that proves itself to be the ground of the preceding development can be completely transparent to logical thought, for it is precisely what that development has consisted of thinking through. On the other hand, this totality is not some irreducible given that thought must accept as its unquestionable foundation. Because logical thought arrives at the conception of this totality without submitting its labors to any external guide, this resultant whole is not an ungrounded assumption. On the contrary, it owes every aspect of itself to the development leading to it. However, because this development is the self-constitution of self-thinking thought in its entirety, neither resting on anything else nor following any foreign principle, the totality of logical thought is self-grounding, mediated by nothing but its own unfolding.

Hence, the pure thought of logic is just as much unmediated as mediated. It is unmediated to the extent that, as a whole, nothing else determines it. On the other hand, it is equally mediated, since, instead of being given, in the

manner of a static form that requires an independent thinker to posit it and relate it to others, self-thinking thought is what it is only through the mediation of the categorial development of logic.

Similarly, logical thought is at once analytic and synthetic. The self-thinking of thought is analytic insofar as every logical category is contained in the resultant totality comprising both the ordering principle and subject of logical science. At the same time, self-thinking thought is synthetic in that each new category is not contained in those that precede it. If it were, the order and content of the ensuing development would already be given in the first category, rendering the method and topic of logic matters that logical science must take for granted rather than establish. Self-thinking thought is able to avoid presupposing both, and thereby retain a synthetic dimension, precisely because its pure thinking arrives at a complete determination of its method and subject matter only as the result of its labors. This equally allows self-thinking thought to retain an analytic dimension because, in arriving at its method and content, it incorporates the entire preceding development.

Finally, in following an advance no less analytic than synthetic, self-thinking thought can be said to proceed by means of determinate negation. Insofar as each successive category supplants its predecessor with a nonderivative content, it negates what precedes it. Yet, to the degree that it equally incorporates its predecessors as constitutive elements of its nonderivative determination, its negation of its predecessor is determinate, in that the otherness it opposes to the former is equally determined in reference to it. Since each successive category leading to the final totality of self-thinking thought undergoes this dual negation and incorporation by what follows it, logical development can thus be described as being ordered by determinate negation.

This might suggest that logic is subject to a formal ordering principle distinct from its content of self-thinking thought. However, the prior analysis of how determinate negation rests on the equally analytic and synthetic character of the advance should indicate that this unity of form and content is the very precondition for determinate negation playing any role. In effect, because determinate negation ties how categories succeed one another to what they are, it is an ordering principle that cannot be detached from a development where form and content are thoroughly intertwined.⁷

ii) Pure Thought and Prescriptive Logic

All these ramifications of the demands of logic very neatly correspond to the six features cited in Hegel's first account of the method of his *Science of Logic*. But do they really follow from the concept of logic itself? After all,

many different types of logic have been pursued. Some are merely descriptive, restricted to describing how thought in general has factually operated, whereas others are prescriptive, seeking to prescribe how valid thought should proceed. And within this broad division, logics have been developed that are formal, transcendental, or dialectical. Although in every case logic involves a thinking about thinking, it is far from true that the thinking each logic engages in is identical to the thinking it is describing or prescribing.

In fact, formal logic and transcendental logic, to take the most widely practiced types, cannot possibly achieve a unity of form and content. The rules of inference that formal logic provides as the canon of thought cannot be described or prescribed by their own laws of entailment. Formal logic cannot practice what it preaches, both because all entailment ultimately proceeds from some indemonstrable given premise, which accordingly can only be known by some nondemonstrative knowing, and because establishing rules of inference by means of themselves would beg the question. Similarly, transcendental logic cannot transcendently constitute its own transcendental arguments. Because transcendental logic seeks to determine some privileged structure comprising the prior conditions by which objectivity is known, transcendental logic must always define those structures directly rather than conceive them as determined by themselves like all other objects of knowledge. If it tried the latter route, it would either have to take what they are for granted or transform them into self-determined structures, eliminating the distinction between knowing and its object that first allows for the conditions of knowledge to be examined prior to an examination of particular objects of knowledge.⁸

However, if an identity of form and content is not and cannot be achieved by formal and transcendental logics, this does not mean that it is not entailed by the concept of logic, understood as a prescriptive science of valid thought. For if logic is taken to be a science concerned, not with describing how individuals think, but with prescribing how they should think, then logic will itself be valid only if what it establishes as the logic of valid thought is equally the logic ordering its own investigation. If, on the contrary, the thinking logic employs is not one with the logic of valid thought it presents, the exposition of thought by logic will not be valid. In other words, logical science cannot be valid unless it achieves a unity of form and content. Since such a unity escapes every effort of formal and transcendental logics, it follows that they can never successfully prescribe how we should think.

A true science of logic, however, must exhibit all the ramifications of this unity that have so far been discussed. First, since a properly prescriptive logic aims at establishing what valid thinking is, its own method cannot be taken for granted at the start. Instead, it falls within the science of logical investigation, comprising none other than its ultimate subject matter. Since

the method of logic is therefore at once the form and content of its investigation, logical science must begin with no antecedently given method or subject matter. If either just its method or just its content were given, the offered candidate of valid thought would differ from its exposition, undermining the legitimacy of each. If, on the other hand, both its method and subject matter were antecedently determined, the science of logic would accomplish nothing in its own right, leaving the putative form and content of valid thinking arbitrary assumptions, postulated outside of scientific investigation. To be worthy of the name, logical science must rather arrive at both its method and subject matter as a result of its own labors. Hence, the very concept of prescriptive logic does indeed entail that it begin absolutely, without any preconception of its form or content, establishing its own method and subject matter at the very end of its investigation, at which point it completes what could best be called its self-exposition of valid thinking.

It might well seem paradoxical that the idea of prescriptive logic could entail a development of thought whose theme and ordering are yet totally free of determination by any antecedent, independently given principle. How can a logic whose form and content must have no prior determination be entailed by anything at all? The paradox disappears once it is recognized that the concept of prescriptive logic has no further positive filling apart from the preconception-free conceptual development that alone can bring it to realization, or, more properly speaking, to self-realization. This recognition need not be at hand in order to legitimate the science of logic. Rather, it is something the science itself establishes at its end by fully determining the idea of prescriptive logic and demonstrating that it is an idea that determines itself.

These considerations of the demands inherent in logic thus give support to Hegel's claims that the form of logical development is in unity with its content, that the science of logic consists in an immanent self-development, that it exhibits determinate negation and is equally analytic and synthetic, and that its movement of categories takes the form of a circle, where every advance is a retreat to the ultimate ground having the determination of method as its final result.

Let us grant that these strictures of method are all necessary fulfillments of the demands of logical science. Are they, however, methodological features, not just of logic, but of philosophical thought in general? As Hegel makes clear in his other introductory discussion, "With What Must the Science Begin?" the *Science of Logic* is concerned not just with bringing logic to completion but with allowing philosophy per se to achieve its constitutive aims. Do philosophy's requirements entail the very same methodological prescriptions inherent in logical science?

iii) The Method of Philosophy as the Method of Logic

In asking, with what must the science of philosophy begin?, Hegel ponders how philosophy can overcome foundationalism, that is, begin without presuppositions and achieve the complete theoretical self-responsibility that philosophical thought needs to rise above doxology. The challenge is twofold. Negatively speaking, philosophy must liberate itself from reliance upon dogmatic givens, be they contents or procedures that have not already been established within and by philosophical investigation. Positively speaking, philosophy must ground itself, legitimating its subject matter and method by its own means alone. These demands are two sides of the same coin, for in order to proceed without foundations, philosophy must independently establish all its own terms and method, just as to be self-grounding and self-justifying, philosophy must be thoroughly free of foundations.

If we examine these dual requirements in light of Hegel's analysis of the starting point of philosophical discourse, we find two coordinate features. On the one hand, to proceed without foundations, philosophy must start with no givens, since to start with any determinate content or method involves presuppositions whose legitimacy has not been established within philosophy. Hence, philosophy can only begin with indeterminacy or being, signifying the exclusion of any assumptions concerning either the subject matter or procedure of philosophy.

On the other hand, if philosophy is to proceed from indeterminacy and ground itself, its conceptual development must be self-determining. Since the content philosophy presents cannot derive from any source other than what philosophical thinking sanctions and since the method by which its content is ordered must equally be established by philosophy, both what and how philosophy thinks must be determined in and through philosophical thought. Hence, philosophical reason must be genuinely autonomous, achieving not just the negative freedom of liberty from external ordering but also the positive freedom of self-determination.

Taking these coordinate features together, whereby philosophy starts with indeterminacy and then exhibits self-determination, it follows that philosophy will commence by presenting nothing but self-determination per se, which, it should already be clear, amounts to the logic of self-grounding. Because philosophy must begin with indeterminacy, its ensuing self-determination cannot be the self-determination of some further substrate, such as any independently given notions of reality or thought. If it were, philosophy would rest upon prephilosophical assumptions and fail to achieve either its negative freedom of presuppositionlessness or its positive freedom of self-grounding. Hence, the very autonomy of reason requires that it proceed from indeterminacy rather than from any determinate foundation. Little else could be expected, given

how what is genuinely self-determined has no determination prior to what it determines itself to be.

Granted that the answer to how philosophy must begin is that philosophical reason starts with indeterminacy and presents self-determination per se, it remains to be shown how this dual prescription entails the six features of Hegel's introductory account of method.

To begin with, does it entail a unity of form and content? Is foundation-free discourse, proceeding from indeterminacy and presenting the logic of self-determination or self-grounding, a conceptual development whose content and ordering coincide? Hegel suggests as much in observing how philosophers had first considered the principle of philosophy as if it merely concerned what content should be conceived but had now recognized that the act of knowing was essential to truth, requiring the method of philosophy to be united with its content and its form united with its principle, so that what is first for thinking also be first in the path of thinking.⁹ If philosophy begins with indeterminacy to be free of foundations and to provide the only admissible commencement for a development determined by nothing but itself, then, indeed, the indeterminate content with which philosophy begins is equally indeterminate in form, insofar as no determinate method can already be operative. Hence, contra Kierkegaard,¹⁰ the beginning not only begins with immediacy but begins immediately.¹¹

Moreover, insofar as what proceeds from indeterminacy is and can only be self-determination per se, its ordering is a self-ordering, where the succession of categories is equally rooted in what they present. Hence, the content of the ensuing development just as much determines the form of its own presentation as its ordering is inseparable from its content. Since what is being determined is self-determination per se, how it is being determined is identical to what it is. If, on the contrary, the form of exposition were distinct from its content, the content would be ordered by something else, undermining its self-determined character, just as the determining principle of the content would no longer coincide with the identity or "self" of the latter, as self-determination requires.

If this suggests how the demands of philosophy entail the same unity of form and content required by logic, it equally entails that the method emerge as the final term of philosophy's initial undertaking. The ordering principle or method of self-determination per se consists in nothing less than the "self" or subject matter that is under way determining itself. Consequently, the ordering of what philosophy first presents is not at hand until self-determination has completed its own development, at once establishing what it is and how it is determined. As the unity of form and content already implies, only when the content of self-determination has constituted itself is its form or method equally established.

This means that philosophical discourse, like logic, will proceed immanently as a self-development whose every advance is equally a retreat towards its ground. Insofar as philosophy must begin with indeterminacy and offer self-determination per se, it consists in a self-development whereby the subject matter provides for its own exposition, generating its own content and ordering. In order for this to occur, each new determination must be incorporated into the self-constitution of the subject matter whose self-determination is under way. Otherwise, the connection between terms would depend upon something outside their development. Since what each new determination is a determination of is only established at the end of the development, every advance beyond the indeterminate beginning represents a closing in on the whole that will end up containing every preceding determination as an element in its own constitution. Thus, although the resulting whole is not a given foundation, antecedently underlying the development, it turns out to be the ground supporting each category, providing the sole basis for determining of what they are part.

This allows the ensuing movement to be analytic and synthetic at once. As was the case with logic's self-thinking of thought, here each advance is synthetic by presenting something not already contained in what precedes it, yet analytic insofar as it provides nothing that is not contained within the whole that is in the process of determining itself.

Similarly, the development could be said to proceed by determinate negation. Each new term does represent a negation of what proceeds it because it has an irreducible otherness. If it lacked that element and were merely contained in its predecessor, the movement would not be self-determining but would instead be determined by contents given prior to the ensuing development. However, because each term ends up integrated within the whole of self-determined determinacy, the otherness differentiating the terms from their predecessors equally incorporates the former terms as constitutive elements of the determination under way. Consequently, each term arises through a determinate negation, negating the preceding term by comprising something other to it yet incorporating this predecessor as an element of its own determination.

In sum, then, the requirements of philosophy in general entail the same methodological prescriptions that are required by logic. As we have seen, if logic is to achieve its constitutive goals, it must achieve precisely what philosophy turns out to demand. In fact, the self-thinking thought that logic should comprise is identical to the presuppositionless self-determined discourse to which philosophy must aspire. This is why Hegel has good reason to call the discourse with which philosophy must begin a science of logic and to introduce it with parallel discussions of the methodological problems of logic and of philosophy in general. Perhaps their convergence also gives us good reason to endure our frustrations and buckle down to the toils of speculative thought.

Notes

1. The first of these accounts, scattered in the two introductory discussions, "General Notion of Logic" and "With What Must Science Begin?" lists general features that apply throughout the method's application. A second account, surfacing in the remarks preceding the Logics of Being, of Essence, and of The Concept, describes how each section has its own manner of advance, suggesting that the method operates differently in each logical sphere. Finally, Hegel provides a third account at the very end of the Logic, where he first addresses the method in a self-consciously systematic fashion as a topic falling within logic under the heading of the Absolute Idea. This final analysis describes a three-stage method, unrelated to the division into logics of being, essence, and the concept, that hardly seems to correspond to either of the two earlier accounts.

2. G.W.F. Hegel *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. by Georg Lasson (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 23.

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

5. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

7. This is largely what Hegel's analysis of the method in the Absolute Idea demonstrates when it shows how the determinate negation by which logic advances expands into the whole system of logical determination.

8. For a more detailed discussion of this problem, see Richard Dien Winfield, *Reason and Justice* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), Chapter 3.

9. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 52.

10. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 101-102.

11. For a discussion of why this immediacy is not disrupted by the mediation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Richard Dien Winfield, "The Route to Foundation-Free Systematic Philosophy," *Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring 1984), p. 337ff.