



Hegel and Wittgenstein on Difficulties of Beginning at the Beginning

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Abstract

Both Hegel and the later Wittgenstein were concerned with the problem of how to begin speculation, or the problem of beginning. I argue that despite many differences, there are surprising similarities between their thinking about the beginning. They both consider different kinds of beginnings and combine them into complex analogies. The beginning has a subjective and an objective moment. The philosophizing subject has to begin with something, with an object. For Hegel, the objective moment is pure being. For Wittgenstein, the objective moment is something that cannot be doubted. As regards the subjective moment, the philosophizing subject has to decide, without any reason, to conclude her quest for the presuppositionless beginning and finally begin at the beginning. The arational moment of this decision is echoed throughout any rational thought. Any application of a (rational) rule is, ultimately, a blind decision to apply this rule.

Keywords Hegel · Wittgenstein · Beginning · Resolve · Doubt · Pure being

Vladimir: We could start all over again perhaps.
Estragon: That should be easy.
Vladimir: It's the start that's difficult.
Estragon: You can start from anything.
Vladimir: Yes, but we have to decide.

(S. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)

1 Introduction

There are many words that mark a beginning: 'creation', 'start', 'origin', 'outset', 'commencement', 'genesis' to name just a few. Each of these terms accentuates a certain aspect of the beginning, and each can be used in certain collocations and applied within certain domains. And so the beginning can be spoken about in many ways. There are many beginnings. Many different kinds of things, entities, objects and processes can be said to have a beginning. There can be the beginning of a series, a sequence or an order, and, again, these beginnings can be taken in many ways. Let us unravel this tangle of beginnings and distinguish various

kinds of entities and orders. First, we can distinguish the subjective and the objective moment of a beginning. We distinguish the agent, the *subject*, from what they begin, the *object*. The subject can be any human agent and the object any ordinary thing, e.g. Alice (*subject*) begins reading a book (*object*). First, I shall focus on the object. We have to understand the object broadly. It can be a material thing, a piece of knowledge or a chain of reasoning.

A beginning is the first element of a certain ordered series. Otherwise, there would be no sense in speaking of a beginning. Various kinds of ordered series provide us with our first classification of beginnings. We can distinguish *temporal*, *spatial*, *causal*, *epistemological*, *ontological*, *logical* and *expository* series. Distinguishing these series will be the main heuristic framework employed in this essay.

The *temporal* beginning is the beginning of an object's existence in time, i.e. the moment when the object begins to exist. The temporal series can be conceived as natural (causal, mechanical) or historical (spiritual in Hegel's terms). The *spatial* beginning of an object is its border with another object or with outer space (e.g. my garden begins with a fence). One can take the spatial beginning in a different sense, namely, as the smallest part of which the object is composed, i.e. a kind of atom. The *causal* beginning is the object's immediate mechanical cause. Given the standard (linear) account of time and causality, the temporal beginning coincides with the causal one. The temporal or causal

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beginning can, but does not need to, coincide with the spatial beginning.

The *epistemological* beginning marks the beginning of the acquisition of knowledge of an object X by the subject Y. Typically, it is the beginning of a learning or discovery process. A more specific kind of epistemological beginning is the origin of language. And even here there are several variants: the historical origin of a certain language (e.g. English), the origin of language as such (or the first language), the origin of a person's acquisition of her first language.

The *ontological* series covers a variety of relations, ranging from Aristotelian causality to contemporary notions of fundamentality, grounding and ontological dependence. The ontological beginning of X can be characterized as the ground of the existence of X. I will flesh out this notion in more detail when discussing Hegel and Wittgenstein in the following sections.

The *logical* series is of utmost importance with regard to the problem of beginning. The logical beginning is a presuppositionless axiom (or set of axioms), the first principle. The logical beginning does not presuppose any prior logical condition, justification or proof. It is the ultimate ground, where the term 'ground' must be understood in the logical, not the ontological sense.

Finally, the *expositional* beginning is the beginning of an exposition of some topic. An exposition may be spoken (as a lecture) or written (in a book). The beginning of a spoken exposition coincides with its temporal beginning and the beginning of a written exposition coincides with its spatial beginning. This only holds, however, if we disregard preliminary matter such as prefaces and introductions, which may be regarded as beginnings before the beginning.

Many expositional beginnings are themselves about some kind of beginning. Book V of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (which might have been a stand-alone treatise) begins with the concept of ἀρχή. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* begins with the assertion that all knowledge begins with experience. Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* begins with the first axiom. Marx's *Capital* begins with the remark that every beginning is difficult. Most notably, Hegel's *Science of Logic* begins with the essay 'With What Must the Beginning of Science be Made?'. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* begin with the problem of the acquisition of language by a child (or more precisely with Augustine's account thereof).

These series and their beginnings do not need to be independent. Two series may be identical, they may coincide, one may supervene over another, all of them may be reducible to a single series. For instance, Spinoza maintained that the logical and the causal series coincide (or that they are modes of one substance). One may reduce all these series to mechanical causality. Alternatively, Hegel maintained that

the historical, i.e. temporal, succession of philosophical systems is the same as their logical development, while one of Wittgenstein's key insights is that the logical and the causal series may be concomitant, but are different from each other.

All these series are ordered. There is a sense of a forward movement, for instance a progression in time, from a cause to its effect, from a logical presupposition to its conclusion, from an ontological foundation to an entity dependent on it, from one part of an exposition to the next (from one page to the next). Sometimes, such a movement has an essentially subjective moment. For instance, a person's growing knowledge (of something) or their journey from the beginning of a town to the end. The question is now whether a series can move backwards. This seems to be possible when a series has this subjective moment. One can move from the beginning of a town to its end and back. Assuming the standard accounts of time and causality, we cannot move backwards in time, and the causal series moves only from a cause to its effect, never backwards. All this is more or less common sense. More crucial is the direction of the logical series. One can reason from a presupposition to its conclusion, but reasoning from a conclusion to its presupposition is also possible. The quest to find the ultimate presupposition of one's thinking is the quest to find the logical beginning.

Let me say a few words about the subjective moment of the beginning, i.e. about the agent who begins something. The chief question is: does the beginning need or presuppose an agent at all? Time, space, causality and logic can be taken objectively without presupposing any agent. An epistemological series, in contrast, requires a cognizing agent. It is straightforward to conceive such an agent as a human being. A human agent can begin cognizing something, can begin a chain of logical reasoning, can approach an object, can begin its existence in time, can begin a lecture. However, this agency can transcend a single human being. It can be a plural 'we' (as often in Wittgenstein) or what Hegel calls spirit, or it can even be God. Hence, for instance, God's creating the world can be taken as God's (temporal, causal) beginning with the world.

The fact that most of the series are ordered brings us to the question of where the subject who is considering the problem of beginning is located. We can deliberate about the temporal beginning of something that does not yet exist (e.g. how should I begin my next lecture?). We can also consider the beginning of something that has already begun. As we shall see, our typical question is: what *was* in the beginning? What was the origin of language? Or, more cautiously, what might the beginning have been? Analogous considerations apply to the logical beginning. We can develop a logical system (or a system of reasoning) and then begin to reason according to it. However, we are already reasoning, and, by this very reasoning, we try to figure out what our logical

presuppositions are or what must have been presupposed (without imposing any temporality). The same applies to the epistemological and ontological series. We already know something and are seeking the beginning of this knowledge. In the case of the ontological series, the question of fundamentality appertains to already-existing entities. For a given entity, if it is not fundamental, to find its ontological beginning means to go *back* to the fundamental entities it depends on. Two series are different in this respect: the spatial and the expository series. They pose no significant problem of beginning with respect to the subject. We can easily go back to the place where a spatial thing begins (e.g. where a town begins) or back to the beginning of a book.

Given this terminological framework, we can now specify which kind of beginning we are interested in: namely, a person's logical beginning with philosophical thinking. Hence, the problem of beginning concerns how a philosophizing subject begins to think without any logical presupposition. As noted above, there are several analogies and coincidences among the series and their beginnings. Thus, other kinds of beginning shall be discussed too, especially the temporal, causal and ontological beginning of the world, which may have a subjective moment, i.e. God's creation of the world. As we shall see, these two kinds of beginning are analogous for both Hegel and Wittgenstein.

The primary aim of this essay is to juxtapose Hegel's and the later Wittgenstein's views about the problem of beginning in order to reveal surprising similarities and, of course, obvious differences in their approaches. Wittgenstein was not directly influenced by reading any of Hegel's works. However, I shall make the case that he might have been influenced by Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's account of the beginning.

I will begin by considering whether the series delineated above can be found in Hegel or Wittgenstein. Did they explicitly or implicitly distinguish them? With regard to Hegel, we can distinguish all these series, although he does treat some of them as parallel or equivalent. Most notably, he equates the logical development of categories with their (temporal) development in history, as discussed later. Some contemporary interpreters (who adopt a 'non-metaphysical' or 'post-Kantian' view of Hegel) deny or at least downplay the fact that Hegel was concerned with the ontological series. This issue shall also be discussed later. Wittgenstein, in his later works, quite explicitly distinguished between the logical and the causal series. The other series can be found implicitly there too. There is one exception to this: the later Wittgenstein's philosophy is definitely not an ontology, and does not consider the ontological series. This is indicated by the fact he very often uses the term 'reason' and 'ground' interchangeably.

So, what does it mean to *begin at the beginning*? Obviously, it means that a person's subjective beginning must coincide with the objective beginning. Let us consider, as an illustration of this point, a scene from *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice is in the court before the King, the Queen and the jury. As evidence there is a piece of paper with some verses written on it. The White Rabbit is urged to read these verses. He replies:

'Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?' he asked. 'Begin at the beginning,' the King said gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.' (Carroll 1866, p. 182).

This is a kind of wordplay based on two senses of begin/beginning. The White Rabbit's subjective temporal beginning of reading the verses must coincide with the objective expositional beginning of the poem.

Closer to our present concern is the following question: what does it mean to *begin at the logical beginning*? Analogously to the White Rabbit's case, it means that one begins one's reasoning with a thought that does not presuppose anything else. To clarify the notion of presuppositionlessness, let us consider the possibility of someone beginning *after the beginning*, i.e. they begin with something that has further presuppositions. They begin with an unstated presupposition. In contrast, to begin *before the beginning* means to start a chain of reasoning before the objective presuppositionless beginning. This may be an attempt to justify the beginning. Or it may be a case of failing to recognize the objective beginning and seeking in vain for presuppositions where there are none. We shall see that here lies the very core of the problem of beginning for both Hegel and Wittgenstein.

2 Hegel: A Resolve to Begin with Pure Being

Hegel's deliberations on the beginning are highly complex. It is not surprising that there is no scholarly consensus as to what his account of the beginning amounts to. Let us begin with his claim that his *Logic* might be considered the exposition ('Darstellung') of God's mind before the creation of the world. This claim is rooted in Hegel's interpretation of the opening of the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Logos' (ETW, p. 256). Here it is enough to say that this claim presents a kind of analogy or agreement between the logical and temporal series. I think that the main attraction of this kind of agreement is that it involves pure thinking.¹

¹ This is not to deny that this analogy is puzzling or even 'coupled with a controversial theological image' (Nuzzo 2018, 95). Nuzzo further maintains that 'Hegel's dialectic-speculative logic transforms

One's logical beginning must be made in the element of pure thinking, i.e. thinking without any presupposition, without anything given. In the beginning, one cannot presuppose any thought distinction (e.g. between subject and object, or form and content). One cannot presuppose any form of thought. In this sense, the *Logic* presents thinking before the temporal beginning of the world.²

2.1 'With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?'

In the essay 'With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?'³ Hegel aims to find the logical beginning of such pure thinking – before the temporal beginning. One can say that thinking is pure if it is independent of any temporal development. A few words about the location of this essay: it appears in the *Science of Logic* after two prefaces and two introductions as the first section of Book I, entitled Being. Hence, following the structure of the whole book, this essay is the first part of the *Logic*. However, the content of the essay consists of a justification of Hegel's preferred logical beginning with pure being (as well as additional arguments that point to problems with Reinhold's hypothetical beginning and Fichte's beginning with the pure I).

After this essay, Book I continues with the actual beginning, i.e. with pure being. Hegel's *Science of Logic* thus begins before the beginning. More precisely, its expository beginning precedes the logical beginning. It is not plausible to suppose that the thoughts expressed in this essay might have been God's thoughts before the creation of the world. The essay is clearly written from the perspective of a finite philosophizing subject. We can regard this essay as another introduction. This interpretive move, however, leaves us with the issue of the status of this reflective thinking before the logical beginning. The ambiguous position of the essay is indicative of this problem. There is, apparently, some philosophical thinking before the logical beginning of philosophical thinking.

Hegel is aware of the problematic status of this essay, which concludes with the following statement:

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. (GW, 21.65)

This argument resembles what Hegel writes at the beginning of the preface to the *Phenomenology*, where he argues that a philosophical work must not have a preface. At the end of the essay about the beginning, Hegel claims that the insight that one must begin with pure being is so simple that it needs no justification. Furthermore, he claims that the purpose of this preliminary essay is to dispense with all preliminaries, including, paradoxically, this very essay. These claims are in sharp contrast with the content of the essay, which is anything but simple, and dispenses with Reinhold's and Fichte's accounts of the beginning. If the insight is so simple why, then, did Reinhold and Fichte propose other ways of beginning? Before I suggest how the status of this essay should properly be understood, let us focus on how Hegel conceives the beginning with pure being that is both immediate and mediated. For it is clear that this essay in some way mediates this very beginning.

2.2 Mediation and Immediacy

Hegel addresses the problem of beginning in terms of mediation and immediacy. These two terms have different meanings within his works. Here, in the Beginning essay, something is mediated if it has a relation to something else. A beginning must not be mediated by any preceding element (in a series). The main focus is on the logical series and its beginning. A preceding element in this series is simply a presupposition. Hence, the logical beginning must not be mediated by any presupposition. However, such an immediate beginning would be wholly arbitrary. Hegel concludes ('it is easy to show', GW, 21.53) that the logical beginning can be neither something mediated nor something immediate.

To unravel this problem, Hegel presents his key insight: mediation and immediacy are not binary opposites. Rather, they are two determinations of the same thing: 'there is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be *unseparated* and *inseparable*.' (GW, 21.54) As noted above, immediacy can be taken to mean not having any presuppositions. The moment of mediation has proven more difficult to explain and there is no scholarly consensus as to the sense in which the beginning is mediated. Hegel's line of thinking goes as follows. The logical beginning must presuppose neither any given content, nor any form of thought. Its content must be identical to its form. It must be the first principle of thought. The logical beginning must, Hegel insists, be both objective and subjective: 'Thus the *principle* ought to be also the beginning, and that *which has priority* for thinking [i.e. the

the metaphysical (theological and cosmological) question of "origin" into a logical and methodological question of action—first and foremost of thinking's pure action' (ibid., 116).

² The emphasis on the presuppositionless character of the beginning follows the influential account of Houlgate (2006).

³ Abbreviated as the 'Beginning essay' henceforth.

objective beginning] ought to be also the *first* in the process of thinking [i.e. the subjective beginning].’ (ibid.) Here Hegel utilizes, following Aristotle, two meanings of ἀρχή, ‘beginning’ and ‘principle’. The crucial point here is that the objective logical beginning must be subjectively recognized as such. This recognition, i.e. knowledge, must, again, not presuppose anything, i.e. it must be pure knowledge. Then, however, this pure knowledge would mediate the logical beginning: ‘A beginning is *logical* in that it is to be made in the element of a free, self-contained thought, *in pure knowledge*; it is thereby *mediated*, for pure knowledge is the ultimate and absolute truth of *consciousness*.’ (ibid.) Hegel is quite clear that the path to the standpoint of pure knowledge is described in the *Phenomenology*. This work presents an epistemological series from the sensuous consciousness to the absolute knowing or the concept of pure science, which Hegel also calls pure knowledge.⁴ Logic, i.e. pure science, is also mediated by its own concept. This concept is, however, not given externally – as in particular sciences – for every relation to something external has been sublated in the transition from sensuous certainty to pure knowledge. Hence, the logical beginning is mediated by the epistemological series described in the *Phenomenology*. This mediation, however, does not make any logical presupposition about the logical beginning.

Hegel continues by noting that pure knowledge, mediated by the journey described in the *Phenomenology*, ‘has sublated every reference to an other and to mediation; it is without distinctions and as thus distinctionless it ceases to be knowledge; what we have before us is only *simple immediacy*.’ (GW, 21.55) Now comes the decisive move: ‘The true expression of this simple immediacy is [...] pure being.’ (ibid.)⁵ To understand this move from pure knowing to pure being – from the epistemological series to the logical series – let us consider what ‘pure’ means in this context. Pure knowledge, Hegel explains, is knowledge as such. Analogously, pure being is being as such, that is, ‘without further determinations’. Pure knowledge ceases to be knowledge because it is without any distinctions or determinations. What remains, however, is different from what is mediated, i.e. different from pure knowledge. Hegel calls this abstract remainder ‘pure being’, i.e. being as such, without further determinations. Pure being is the content of pure knowing. The unity of pure knowing and pure being is

that of form and content. Hegel could have chosen another expression instead of ‘being’, e.g. ‘God’, ‘the absolute’, ‘the eternal’ (GW, 21.65). What matters here, in the beginning, is its purity, its lack of any determinations, its emptiness. Hence, the *Logic* understood as God’s thinking before the creation of the world begins with pure being.

2.3 ‘With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?’ again

This is, however, not the whole story. The Beginning essay is written from the perspective of the philosophizing subject. God before the creation of the world does not go through the journey described in the *Phenomenology*. Hence, the move from pure knowledge to pure being is relevant only to the philosophizing subject. This gives us a clue as to what the status of the Beginning essay is. Since the essay is placed in the *Science of Logic*, it is an expository beginning. The *Phenomenology* was originally intended as the first part of the multivolume work called the *System of Science*, whereas the *Logic* was intended as its second part (followed by the *Science of Nature* and the *Science of Spirit*). The essay mediates between the first and the second part, between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. Hence, this essay can be taken as another epistemological and, of course, expository, presupposition of the logic, but not a logical one.

2.4 The Resolve

The objective beginning of the logic is pure being. What is the subjective beginning? The demand to be fulfilled at this point between the epistemological and logical series is something we already discussed above: how to begin at the beginning. The objective logical beginning is clear at this point. The philosophizing subject, occupying the standpoint of pure knowledge, i.e. absolute knowing, knows that the content of this knowledge is pure being. However, this is not enough to begin the logical series. There is no *necessary* transition from the epistemological to the logical series.

From the objective point of view, the beginning, as pure being, is without any determination. However, for the philosophizing subject, there is one determination that ultimately triggers the logical movement: ‘the only determination of this beginning is that it is to be the beginning of logic, of thought as such’ (GW, 21.56). This passage sounds almost like a tautological truism: The only determination of the logical beginning is that it is the beginning of logic, of thought as such. Hegel utilizes the fact that this is the logical beginning as opposed to other kinds of beginning. This apparent truism, however, has important consequences. Hegel goes on:

⁴ Possible relations between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* have been extensively debated in Hegel scholarship. I follow Maker (1994) and Dunphy (2020), who argue that the task of the *Phenomenology* is negative. The *Phenomenology* aims to free the natural consciousness of its prejudices and preconceptions. This is what the beginning of the *Logic* actually demands: presuppositionlessness.

⁵ Givsan (2008, p. 76) argues that the notions of ‘pure being’ and ‘simple immediacy’ are very close to each other: ‘Pure being’ is a quasi-definition of ‘simple immediacy’.

There is only present the resolve, which can also be viewed as arbitrary, of considering *thinking as such*. (ibid.)

Much depends on the understanding of this resolve – *Entschluß*. And much depends on how we translate *Entschluß* into English. Or, rather, we have to set out the myriad meanings of this speculative German word. On a first approximation, we can take *Entschluß* as a *decision*. The subject makes the decision to consider thinking as such. This reading of *Entschluß* accounts for a contingent (arbitrary) transition from the epistemological to the logical series. This aspect of *Entschluß* is captured by Goethe's Faust's famous line: 'In the beginning was the deed'. This is Faust's reinterpretation of the beginning of the Gospel of John. As discussed above, the same holds true of Hegel's logic and his account of the beginning in particular. Note that Faust's line was also reinterpreted by Wittgenstein, as we shall see later.

Let us focus now on the German compound *Entschluß*. It is comprised of the prefix *Ent-* and the root word *Schluß*. *Schluß* is a well-known Hegelian term which means 'syllogism' or 'inference'. Other possible meanings are 'end', 'closure' or 'conclusion'. *Schluß* is also a cognate of *schließen*, that is, 'to lock something'. The *Ent-* prefix indicates removing something or a reversal, i.e. a particular or overall negation. The closest English equivalent would be 'un-'. It can also indicate the beginning. These meanings of *Ent-* and *Schluß* give us a very broad range of possible meanings of *Entschluß*. The most straightforward is the negation of the end, i.e. 'beginning' or 'opening', or even 'unlocking'. *Entschluß* is also a partial negation of the syllogism, a conclusion without any presupposition: that is, an arbitrary conclusion.⁶ Later in the *Logic*, the syllogism becomes the ultimate form of rationality: 'Thus the syllogism is the completely posited concept; it is, therefore, the *rational*.' (GW, 12.90) Accordingly, *Entschluß* is an opening that leads to this rationality. But it is an opening that can be taken as *arational*, i.e. outside the domain of rationality.

With the resolve, the philosophizing subject decides to consider thinking as such, i.e. pure thinking. To resolve to consider pure thinking is ultimately a resolve to begin philosophical thought. In the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel speaks of 'the subject who resolves to philosophize' (Enc, §17, p. 45). Pure thinking is the object of this decision. In other words, '*thinking* would have to be made the object of thinking' (ibid.).

⁶ From the viewpoint of the *Logic*, the decision is arbitrary (cf. GW, 21.56; Enc, §78). The arbitrariness is, however, alleviated by the epistemological series preceding the logical beginning. A conclusion without any antecedent can be characterized, following Nuzzo, as an 'intransitive beginning'. She further adds that it is 'pure intentionality devoid of intention and devoid of meaning' (Nuzzo 2018, 122).

This means, however, that the unity of pure knowledge is split up into the subject and the object, i.e. 'thinking is the object for a seemingly external, philosophizing subject' (ibid.). The decision, the resolve, the *Entschluß*, performs this separation. The resolve of the thinking subject to make its own thinking the object of thinking is a resolve of thinking of thinking, of Aristotle's divine *noesis noesos*. If the *Logic* can be viewed as presenting God's thinking before the creation of the world, the resolve is ultimately to consider this very thinking.

One additional aspect of the resolve is worth mentioning. It is a resolve to *consider* thinking as such as opposed to a resolve to engage in thinking as such. The philosophizing *subject* resolves to consider the *objective* movement of pure thinking. The subject appears here in a passive role. It is an endeavour 'simply to take up, *what is there before us*' (GW, 21.55). (As we shall discuss later, Wittgenstein too subscribes to this view of the ultimate passivity of philosophical thinking.) This passivity ensures that the subjective logical series will follow the objective one and, more specifically, the beginning of both series will coincide, i.e. the subject begins at the beginning.⁷

2.5 The Second Resolve

There is also, however, another resolve, another beginning, within Hegel's *Logic*. Curiously enough, this resolve occurs at the end of the *Logic*. Still in the Beginning essay, Hegel makes the following reference to the end:

at the *end* of the development [the absolute spirit] freely externalizes itself, letting itself go into the shape of an *immediate* being – resolving [*entschließend*] itself into the creation of a world which contains all that fell within the development preceding that result and which, through this reversal of position with its beginning, is converted into something dependent on the result as principle. (GW, 21.57)

This is a highly complex sentence. The second resolve occurs at the end of the logical development initiated by the first. The absolute spirit resolves itself into the creation of a world. This second resolve refers to the temporal (and causal and historical) beginning of the world. Before we try to disentangle the idea of the reversal of the beginning and the end, let us see what Hegel writes at the very end of the *Science of Logic*:

⁷ Comay and Ruda (2018, p. 89) provide another illuminating formulation of this demand: 'the problem of how to begin is an immanent problem of thought's exposition of pure thought. How to begin with thought when the thought of beginning [...] must at the same time be the beginning of thought?'

the idea *freely discharges* [entläßt] itself, absolutely certain of itself and internally at rest. [...] But what is posited by this first resolve [*Entschluß*] of the pure idea to determine itself as external idea is only the mediation out of which the concept [...] raises itself up. (GW, 12.253, translation modified)

If the *Logic* provides an exposition of God's mind before the creation of the world, then when the logical movement is completed God as absolute spirit *can* resolve himself to create the world. This second resolve – like the first – is a free act.⁸ This means that the transition between the logical and the causal series is not necessary – analogously to the transition between the epistemological and the logical series at the beginning of the *Logic*.⁹ I leave aside the details of this second transition, i.e. Hegel's account of the absolute idea.

What is more important in the present context is Hegel's ideal of the reversal of the logical beginning and the end. How can the beginning depend on the result, the end? Is the logical movement circular?

2.6 Circularity and the Ontological Series

Hegel makes several remarks that may give the impression that the logical movement is indeed circular. Consider the following (almost Heraclitan) remark: 'that the whole of science is in itself a circle in which the first becomes also the last, and the last also the first' (GW, 21.57).¹⁰ If this claim is taken out of context, Hegel may be interpreted as suggesting that the beginning is identical to the end. This would be a vicious logical circle. However, Hegel makes this remark in the context of a discussion of the notion of ground. He says: '*progression* is a retreat to the *ground*, to the *origin* and the *truth* on which that with which the beginning was made [...] depends.' (ibid.) A few clarifications: the logical progression, i.e. the movement forwards, from the beginning, from

pure being, up to the end, i.e. the absolute spirit, is a retreat to the ground.¹¹ Hence, the absolute spirit is the ground of the whole of science.

Let us attempt to clarify the notion of ground. The ultimate ground is that on which everything else depends. My interpretive claim is that Hegel is dealing here with the notion of ontological dependence, which goes back to Aristotle and has undergone a revival in contemporary analytic metaphysics under the headings of 'grounding' and 'fundamentality'.¹² We can now restate Hegel's claim about the progression as follows: the logical progression is a retreat to the ontological ground. Or: the logical movement forwards is the ontological movement backwards.¹³ Hence, the circle must be conceived as composed of both the logical and the ontological series. The ontological beginning is the logical end or result, and the logical beginning is the ontological end. We have here a circle marked by two beginnings, which are also two ends.¹⁴ This is also a crucial point where Hegel departs from Aristotle. For Aristotle, the beginning, ἀρχή, is the first principle of all being and the ontological ground of all being.

The logical beginning, pure being, is not completely different from the logical end, the absolute idea. The beginning with pure being is immediate, i.e. without any determination. The logical movement is an accumulation of determinations of this beginning. Pure being remains preserved in this movement: 'the beginning of philosophy is the ever

⁸ In the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel writes that the beginning is 'thinking's free act' (Enc, §17). Houlgate (2006, 90) for further development of this insight. Stern (2011) provides critical objections to Houlgate's account.

⁹ There is a crucial difference between these two decisions or resolves. The subject of the first resolve at the beginning of the *Logic* is the philosophizing subject who decides to consider pure thinking. In contrast, the subject of the second resolve at the end of the *Logic* is God as absolute spirit, who resolves himself into creating the world. God before the creation of the world does not need to decide to consider pure thinking, for all his thinking is pure anyway. In terms of time and history, the first resolve by the philosopher occurs *after* the second, which takes place at the beginning of time. I think this difference is overlooked in the otherwise quite illuminating recent study by Comay and Ruda when they write: 'The *Logic* begins by presenting God's resolve to create the world, and it ends when this creation is decidedly finished or *resolved*' (2018, p. 109).

¹⁰ Cf. Heraclitus: 'The beginning and the end are common on the circumference of a circle.' (B103).

¹¹ Towards the end of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel says quite explicitly: 'The *retrogressive grounding* of the beginning and the *progressive further determination* of it, run into one another and are the same.' (GW, 12.251) Cf. also the *Encyclopedia*: 'What appeared as a consequence shows itself equally as a ground, and what presented itself at first as a ground is demoted to a consequence.' (Enc, §36, p. 77).

¹² For a detailed argument in this connection, see Kreines (2015, p. 208): 'In many senses, Hegel's view is close to the newly popular view, often compared with Aristotle's, according to which metaphysics is about grounding and fundamentality'. Cf. Schaffer (2009, p. 351): 'The primary is (as it were) all God would need to create. The posterior is grounded in, dependent on, and derivative from it. The task of metaphysics is to limn this structure.' Transposed to the Hegelian framework, this would read: God's mind before the creation of the world, i.e. the absolute spirit, is the ground of all science.

¹³ The distinction between the logical movement or series and the ontological series is controversial in Hegel scholarship. Beiser (2005, p. 57) distinguishes between the order of explanation and the order of existence. Furthermore, he links this distinction to that between logical and ontological priority.

¹⁴ This may contradict Hegel's claim that 'philosophy shows itself to be a sphere that circles back into itself and has no beginning in the sense that other sciences do' (Enc, §17, p. 45). Nancy radicalizes this claim when he writes: 'Hegel neither begins nor ends; he is the first philosopher for whom there is, explicitly, neither beginning nor end' (2002, p. 9). What Hegel actually claims is that philosophy does not begin in the same way as particular sciences do, that is, with a principle given from the outside. He does not claim that philosophy has no beginning whatsoever, as Nancy seems to maintain on his behalf.

present and self-preserving foundation of all subsequent developments, remaining everywhere immanent in its further determinations.’ (GW, 21.58) Hence, the beginning remains immanent in the end. The logical movement is the movement from the immediacy of pure being to the mediation of the absolute idea. And this movement can be taken as a circle or, rather, it ‘turns *into a circle*’ (ibid.), for one ends up with what was already there in the beginning, only now completely determined.

This has several important consequences. The logical beginning not only has epistemological presuppositions, as described in the *Phenomenology*, but also ontological ones. Or, rather, the ultimate ontological presupposition of the logical beginning is the absolute idea. However, the absolute idea is the fully developed, fully determined pure being. Then one can say that the beginning is grounded in itself, or that it is self-mediated.¹⁵ Another consequence of the fact that the beginning remains immanent throughout the logical development is this: what is immanent in the whole of science is not only pure being – the objective moment of the logical beginning – but also the resolve – the subjective moment. Henrich (1971, p. 93) maintains that the immediacy of the beginning remains present in each stage of the development of the logical system. Nancy radicalizes this view: ‘Thought is a decision [...] of the infinite subject that decides for this infinity itself. [...] Every beginning that would not be in decision would be a given beginning’ (2002, p. 9). The decision, a rupture, penetrates all thought. Comay and Ruda write (with reference to Henrich): ‘the beginning keeps repeating throughout the *Logic* as something necessarily impossible to sublimate.’ (2018, p. 105) The whole of science, all rational thought, has a moment of *arational* decision. As we will see, Wittgenstein also takes the beginning as a decision that keeps repeating in rule-following, which is ultimately *blind*.

2.7 The Three Syllogisms

Hegel’s whole system (not only his logic) culminates, at the end of the *Encyclopedia*, in three syllogisms, which bring the three main domains into relation: logic, nature and the spirit. From these meta-relations, we can find clues as to how the series discussed here, and their beginnings, are related. The *first syllogism*, logic – nature – spirit, relates logic and spirit, mediated by (or from the perspective of) nature. This

is to say that from the objective natural perspective, the logical movement (of determinations of thought) is identified with the temporal movement of a person’s thinking and with the development of thought in history. This is Hegel’s well-known thesis that the logical development of the categories is the same as their development in history (cf. LHP, vol. 1, p. 30). The beginnings of these two movements (which are ultimately two aspects of the same process) have to coincide, too. And, indeed, Hegel identifies the historical beginning of philosophy with Parmenides’ beginning with being. (Conceptions of beginnings before Parmenides, e.g. water or air, focus only on the content, but less on the form of thought.) Moreover, the philosophizing subject has to passively observe the logical movement as if it were a natural process (as we have already discussed). The beginning of this process appears like a natural drive (‘the beginning [...] must be endowed with the drive to carry itself further’ (GW, 12.240, translation amended)). For the philosophizing subject, the beginning as a drive is experienced as a resolve which is immanent throughout the logical movement.

The *second syllogism* has the schematic form nature – spirit – logic. In this movement, the spirit as a mediator begins with nature as given and reworks it into logical structures. The beginning of this movement is nature or, rather, the givenness of nature. And, indeed, any endeavour that attempts to discover the logical has to presuppose its object as given. This is crucial for Hegel’s philosophy of nature. In the second part of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel writes: ‘In the theoretical approach [...] we start from our sense-knowledge of nature’ (Enc II, §246 add, p. 197). The sensory givenness of nature is, however, the objective beginning here. The subject of this movement is the spirit: ‘It is however a spirit, a thinking entity, which sees and hears etc.’ (ibid.) The spirit aims to find its mirror image in nature. This is, however, a problem at the beginning. Nature is an enigma: ‘We find nature before us as an enigma and a problem, [...] nature is an alienation in which spirit does not find itself.’ (Enc II, p. 192) This enigma, this alienation, is the subjective beginning of philosophy of nature. Hegel refers back to ‘Aristotle’s dictum that philosophy has its origin in wonder’ (Enc II, p. 194). It must be stressed that this beginning in wonder is meant for philosophy of nature structured by the second syllogism (and elaborated in the second part of the *Encyclopedia*).

The movements of the first and the second syllogism begin with the split into the subject and the object. The first movement begins with the subject’s resolve to consider pure thinking, whose initial standpoint is pure being. The second movement begins with the subject that wonders about the alienated nature which is given to her in sense perception. These two movements are related in the *third syllogism*, which relates the objective movement of the first syllogism

¹⁵ Hentrup (2019) makes this claim when he writes: ‘Because pure being proves to be grounded upon – that is, mediated by – the absolute idea, its initial claim to immediacy turns out to be a mere presupposition, supplanted by the subsequent demonstration of its absolute self-mediation.’ However, on Hentrup’s view this grounding of pure being makes up its (self-)mediated aspect. I argue, in contrast, that the logical beginning is mediated by pure knowing (and so by the *Phenomenology*).

and the subjective movement of the second syllogism from the perspective of self-knowing reason. The third syllogism thus sublates the split between the philosophizing subject and the object of its knowing. In §17 of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel writes that the first concept of science ‘contains the separation whereby thinking is the object for a seemingly external, philosophizing subject’ (Enc, §17, p. 45). Later we read: ‘From the vantage point of the speculative idea, [... the beginning is] the speculative idea’s self-determining which, as the absolute negativity or movement of the concept, judges and posits itself as the negative of itself.’ (Enc, §238, p. 300) This is to say that from the perspective of self-knowing reason, the beginning of philosophy is the split into subject and object. As Başdaş (2020, p. 15) puts it:

Self-knowing reason both ‘judges itself’ into a finite philosophizing subject and a seemingly external object of study (i.e., self-knowing reason makes them into its presuppositions), and overcomes this seeming externality when the philosophizing subject recognizes himself as self-knowing reason (i.e., self-knowing reason sublates its own presuppositions).¹⁶

To conclude our discussion of Hegel’s account of the beginning: as we have seen, Hegel distinguishes many kinds of beginnings, which makes the problem of beginning multi-layered. The most important beginning, for Hegel as well as for the present study, is the objective logical beginning with pure being or the immediate. It is a beginning that does not presuppose any prior determinations. From the perspective of the philosophizing subject, the logical beginning appears as a resolve or decision to consider pure thinking. This resolve, which repeats itself throughout the *Logic*, can be considered *arational*. The logical beginning does, however, have several presuppositions within other domains. It epistemologically presupposes the journey of consciousness described in the *Phenomenology*, i.e. the journey from sensuous certainty to absolute knowing. The logical beginning presupposes its ontological foundation, the absolute spirit. The logical beginning coincides with the ontological end result and *vice versa*. The logical movement culminates in the release of the absolute spirit into the creation of the world, i.e. into the temporal and causal beginning of nature. Hence, from the perspective of philosophy of nature, the beginning is the givenness of nature. And finally, from the ultimate perspective of self-knowing reason, the beginning consists of the split between (or the judgment into) the philosophizing subject and pure thinking as the object of its study.

¹⁶ This subsection about the three syllogisms is indebted to Umur Başdaş’ recent paper ‘Meta-encyclopaedic reflections on the beginning of philosophy’ (2020).

3 Intermezzo: Kierkegaard’s Critique of Hegel

Before we proceed to Wittgenstein’s account of the beginning, let us briefly consider Kierkegaard’s critical remarks on Hegel’s account of the presuppositionless beginning in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (2009). There are two main reasons for this intermezzo. The first is that Wittgenstein read the *Postscript*, and hence might have been familiar, albeit indirectly, with the basic outlines of Hegel’s account of the beginning. The second reason is that despite the fact that Kierkegaard’s critique ultimately fails – at least so I shall argue – it presents certain critical points that might have inspired Wittgenstein.¹⁷ It must be pointed out that it is not quite clear whether Kierkegaard is referring directly to Hegel’s primary texts or to the ‘Danish Hegelians’, especially J. L. Heiberg. Following Stewart (2003), I shall argue that it is probably the latter. But for sake of brevity, let us refer to Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* as a dialogue with Hegel.

Kierkegaard agrees with Hegel that the beginning must be made with ‘the most immediate of all’ (2009, p. 94). This must be, according to Kierkegaard, the absolute beginning. He is also quite explicit that ‘the most immediate’ means without any presuppositions. Kierkegaard also, in agreement with Hegel, maintains that the beginning ‘is then itself attained through a reflection’ (ibid., p. 95). Or, in a formulation that owes much to Heiberg: ‘Hegelians [...] define the immediate with which logic begins as follows: the most abstract remainder after an exhaustive abstraction.’ (ibid., p. 96) Hegel does indeed say: ‘Simple immediacy is itself an expression of reflection’ (GW, 21.55).

In the next step, Kierkegaard focuses on this reflection:

How do I put an end to the reflection which was set in motion to reach that beginning? Reflection has the notable property of being infinite. But its being infinite must in any case mean that it cannot stop by itself, because in stopping itself it uses itself, and so can only be stopped in the same way that a sickness is cured if allowed to prescribe its own medicine, i.e., by nourishing the sickness. (2009, p. 95)

Let us disentangle Kierkegaard’s argument here. Any reflection is potentially infinite. For any thought p_1 one can invoke a thought p_2 that is about p_1 . This move can be repeated *ad infinitum*.¹⁸ Kierkegaard’s point is that the reflection ‘cannot stop by itself’. This means that the reflection has no inherent criterion for recognizing its termination. This problem lies, in my view, at the heart of the problem of beginning. In

¹⁷ Cf. Schönbaumsfeld (2007, p. 70).

¹⁸ Cf. Watts (2007).

other words: how to begin at the beginning and not before it. Let us discuss two options that are available to address this worry: either the reflection stops by itself after all, or it is terminated from the outside. On the first option, the principle of the reflection must be endowed with a criterion for where to stop. This would indeed mean that the sickness is cured by nourishing itself. Some Hegel scholars, notably Žižek (2014, p. 140), argue that this is a Hegelian solution. This may be true of the logic itself and its dialectical development. But here we are before the logic, before any dialectics. If a dialectical movement, i.e. a logical consideration, were possible here, it would be a beginning before the beginning. Hence, from a Hegelian perspective, to claim that a reflection can stop itself is not a viable option. As we shall see, Wittgenstein nevertheless seriously considered this account of the beginning.

Let us consider the second alternative, i.e. the reflection is terminated from the outside. The reflection may be terminated by its object, i.e. by pure being. Stewart seems to ascribe such a position to Hegel: ‘true speculative thinking will stop by itself when it reaches the level of abstraction, beyond which thought cannot go.’ (2003, p. 495) I find this view deeply problematic. There is no true speculative thinking before the logical beginning of speculative thinking. Hence, the same argument as employed in the previous paragraph applies here.

Finally, the reflection may be terminated by the philosophizing subject. This option, according to Kierkegaard, boils down to the subject’s decision: ‘I require a decision [...] for that is the only way of halting the process of reflection.’ (2009, p. 96) As we have seen, Hegel himself puts a subjective decision or resolve at the beginning of philosophy. Hence, in this respect Kierkegaard does not diverge from Hegel. The fact that Kierkegaard makes this point against ‘Hegelian logicians’ indicates that his target was not Hegel himself. Where Kierkegaard does diverge from Hegel, however, is in his conviction that the subjective decision would spoil the presuppositionlessness of the beginning: ‘But to require a decision is to abandon the presuppositionlessness.’ (ibid.) I have argued that the decision/resolve cannot be taken as a logical presupposition (of the logical beginning). Even that Kierkegaard is willing to admit: ‘this something else is something quite other than the logical, because it is a decision’ (ibid.). Kierkegaard’s misunderstanding can be explained if we distinguish between logical and non-logical presuppositions. He thinks that the beginning must be without any presupposition whatsoever, whereas Hegel demands that the beginning be free of any *logical* presuppositions. As we have seen, Hegel’s logical beginning has epistemological and ontological presuppositions. Kierkegaard is, in a way, right that a beginning without any presupposition whatsoever is ‘a pure chimera’ (2009, p. 95).

Kierkegaard goes on to question the movement from pure being to pure nothing. But I want to leave this aside, because the present topic is only the beginning, not its subsequent development. To conclude our discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique: one problematic point nevertheless remains. Kierkegaard writes: ‘I charge the individual in question with not wanting to halt the infinite reflective process.’ (2009, p. 96) The philosophizing subject’s decision or resolve can be taken as *arational*. What, then, does ensure that the individual terminates their reflection at the right moment? In other words: what ensures that the individual begins at the beginning and does not try to go further back? This is precisely Wittgenstein’s question.

4 Wittgenstein: ‘It is so Difficult to Find the Beginning’

Before we move on to Wittgenstein’s deliberations about the beginning, a few preliminary remarks are in order. As noted above, Wittgenstein, most probably, never read any of Hegel’s works. His knowledge of Hegel’s philosophy was imparted to him at second hand by Kierkegaard and Russell. As already indicated, Wittgenstein might have drawn on Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel, and this hypothesis will be taken up in the remainder of this essay. We shall leave aside the arguably distorted picture of Hegel’s thinking that Wittgenstein acquired from Russell. I will point to similarities and differences that go beyond direct or indirect influences.

As early as the 1930s, Wittgenstein was already considering the possibility that the beginning might be the most immediate description of something. He discussed what would happen if one tried to go beyond the most immediate description: ‘anything which tried to be more immediate still would inevitably cease to be a description’ (PR, §68). It would, instead, be an inarticulate sound. Wittgenstein concludes: ‘You simply can’t begin before the beginning.’ (ibid.) This claim seems to be in sharp contrast to his later claim that the most difficult thing is not to begin before the beginning. On closer inspection, I do not think there is any contradiction. Any attempt to go before the beginning results in speaking nonsense. To begin before the beginning is to begin with nonsense, i.e. it is not a beginning at all. A beginning before the beginning is thus impossible. However, to recognize that one is attempting to begin before the beginning is still the most difficult thing. As we shall see, this is Wittgenstein’s charge against Moore, which he adopted from Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s account of the beginning.

Our main focus is Wittgenstein’s views about the beginning from his final manuscripts, which are collected in the volume *On Certainty*. The beginning of a reasoning process,

i.e. the logical beginning, does not need to be one proposition. Wittgenstein says clearly that it can be a class of propositions without any explicit limitation: ‘What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions.’ (OC, §225) In a sense this nest is unlimited because there is an infinite number of propositions that cannot be reasonably doubted. The process of finding the beginning can lead, at best, to a part of the beginning.

This process of seeking the beginning consists of doubting. Is it not the case that one can doubt everything? Wittgenstein insists that a doubt that doubts everything – or a doubt without end – is not really a doubt (OC, §§450 and 625). Hence, the process of doubting must come to an end, and this end is the logical beginning. Wittgenstein puts forward two interrelated suggestions (if not arguments) for why it must be so. First, he points out that doubting presupposes certainty (OC, §115). Secondly, he notes that one needs grounds for doubt (OC, §122). That is, a reason why the original proposition might not be true. A doubt without any ground would not be a doubt. Such a ground for doubting must be certain, i.e. without doubt. Doubting comes to an end if there is no reason or ground for further doubt.

It is important that the absence of such a ground needs to be established objectively. Wittgenstein says: ‘If everything speaks *for* a hypothesis and nothing against it, is it objectively certain? One can call it that.’ (OC, §203)¹⁹ Hence, the objective moment of the beginning involves the absence of any reason for doubt. What, then, would be the subjective moment of the beginning? Wittgenstein maintains, in line with Hegel, that the beginning involves an active role on the part of the philosophizing subject. He uses several related terms to describe this act: decision (*Entscheidung*), assumption (*Annahme*), acknowledgement or recognition (*Anerkennung*), persuasion (*Überredung*), deed (*Tat*).²⁰ For instance, he says: ‘Somewhere I must begin with an assumption or a decision’ (OC, §146), ‘Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement.’ (OC, §378) and ‘At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*.’ (OC, §612) We can thus say of Wittgenstein’s account of the beginning that *the logical beginning has both an objective moment, the absence of grounds for doubt, and a subjective one, the decision to begin a chain of reasoning*.

As already noted, Hegel maintains that the initial decision keeps repeating itself throughout the logic. An analogous view can be attributed to Wittgenstein. We can take the logical beginning as a rule, even if it can have the form of an empirical proposition. The search for the beginning comprises a chain of justifications of rules by more basic rules. The beginning is a rule that cannot be grounded in

any more basic rule, and that there are no grounds to doubt this rule. This means that there is no further rule for applying this rule. Wittgenstein says in one of the most pivotal remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations*: ‘When I obey a rule, I do not choose. / I obey the rule *blindly*.’ (PI, §219) In obeying the last or ultimate rule, we do not choose; instead, we repeat the original decision without applying any further rule. We do this blindly because there is no reason for doubt. There is no choice in blind following or obeying, but there is a choice between blind following and invoking another mediating rule (of application). At the beginning, that is, at the end of giving grounds, there is ‘an ungrounded way of acting’ (OC, §110). This ungroundedness is repeated each time a rule is applied without the support of any mediating rule, that is, immediately or blindly.

Wittgenstein’s reflections are concerned with the beginning of a language-game, rather than with the beginning of all thought. There is one exception to this local approach, when he writes: ‘Every language-game is based on words “and objects” being recognized again.’ (OC, §455) This is a variation on the Humean uniformity principle, according to which all reasoning ‘proceed[s] upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past’ (Hume 2000, 4.2.19, p. 31). This principle cannot be rationally justified, for any justification presupposes this very principle. This principle as the beginning, however, is not analogous to Hegel’s pure being. This principle is not the sole beginning, but rather a part of the beginning of every language-game.

4.1 Hinge Propositions

There are many other truths that make up the beginning of a language-game. In Wittgenstein’s final manuscripts, they are called hinge propositions. Hinges are propositions that may have the form of an empirical proposition, but are exempt from doubt. The concept of a hinge proposition has been widely discussed in Wittgenstein scholarship. Moyal-Sharrock (2004, ch. 5–7) identifies several types of hinges in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*: linguistic (‘ $2+2=4$ ’, ‘A is a physical object’), personal (‘I’m called L. W.’, ‘I’m now sitting in a chair’), local (‘The earth is round’, ‘It isn’t possible to get to the Moon’) and universal (‘The earth exists’, ‘There are physical objects’). The uniformity principle can be counted as a universal hinge. Grammatical hinges also have a certain degree of universality. Universal hinges are part of the beginning of every language-game. To repeat, hinges can have the form of an empirical proposition, but they are not susceptible to doubt. They are ‘ungiveupable’ (ibid., p. 101).

Let us focus on local and personal hinges. The problem here is that the same words, the same sentence, can sometimes be used either as a hinge or as an empirical proposition.

¹⁹ Cf. ‘These grounds make the certitude objective.’ (OC, §270).

²⁰ Wittgenstein quotes the line from Goethe’s *Faust*: ‘In the beginning was the deed.’ (OC, §402).

Moyal-Sharrock's concept of a *doppelgänger* is helpful here: 'The *doppelgänger of a hinge* is a sentence made up of the same words as a hinge, but which does not function as a hinge.' (ibid., p. 141) In one language-game, certain words represent a hinge which cannot be doubted, and thus is a part of the beginning. In another language-game, the same words represent an empirical proposition that can, of course, be doubted. To take up the main thread of this essay, doubting a hinge, i.e. confusing it with its *doppelgänger*, would be an attempt to begin before the beginning.

Is there, then, any criterion that would allow us to distinguish a hinge from its empirical *doppelgänger*? There is, to be sure, no such criterion that could be employed in every language-game. Yet, Wittgenstein's ultimate answer is to let 'language-games decide' (ROC I, §6). This is, of course, not a criterion. The remark only says that the problem of distinguishing a hinge from its *doppelgänger* has to be settled in a language-game.

Personal and local hinges cannot be reasonably doubted in normal circumstances. There are, however, extraordinary circumstances where one can reasonably doubt or even negate a hinge. So, for example, 'I have two hands' can be doubted after an operation when a patient is uncertain whether her hand has been amputated – as Wittgenstein clarifies in OC, §23. This is an instance of a more general problem that we have already discussed, namely, how to find out whether there is a reason for doubt.

The task now is how to identify propositions that are exempt from doubt, i.e. that are part of the beginning, and not to try to doubt or justify them. Wittgenstein addresses the problem in the following series of remarks:

470. Why is there no doubt that I am called L. W.? It does not seem at all like something that one could establish at once beyond doubt. One would not think that it is one of the indubitable truths.

[Here there is still a big gap in my thinking. And I doubt whether it will be filled now.]

471. It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back.²¹

We have reached the most important remarks by Wittgenstein for our topic. He wrote these remarks on 4 and 5 April 1951, a few weeks before his death. He considers the sentence 'I am called L. W.' Why is this an indubitable truth, i.e. a hinge proposition? This is an instance of the more general problem of beginning at the beginning, and not before the beginning. Wittgenstein contends that he has no solution at hand to this problem. He left this issue unsolved. Instead

of trying to fill this gap, I shall attempt to describe and relate it to our previous discussion of Hegel and Kierkegaard.

The problem is to establish what kind of reasoning can make one recognize that there is no longer reason for doubt. Going back to Wittgenstein's earlier framework from the *Philosophical Investigations*, the problem can be put as follows: what can make a person recognize that a rule can be applied directly without any intermediate rule? And to apply a rule directly means to apply it blindly. It cannot be any general rule of recognition, for this would be only another intermediate rule that, again, must be applied somehow.

Kierkegaard's worry was that the reflection on seeking the beginning that was proposed by Hegel cannot terminate itself. Wittgenstein's worry is that a proposition does not say about itself that it is without doubt. Or, to weaken this point, at least some alleged hinge propositions, like 'I am called L. W.', do not imply that they are without doubt. Or, in yet another formulation of this problem, a rule does not say about itself that it can be applied directly without any further (intermediate) rule.

What remains is to apply the rule without any reason, that is, blindly, by a blind decision. However, such a decision implies certain commitments. To decide that 'I am called L. W.' – or anyone's proper name – implies a certain kind of conduct. I am committed to act in a certain way if I am called by my proper name, e.g. when asked: what is your name? (And of course, I can renounce my proper name in exceptional situations.) Hinge propositions are expressions of certain primordial ways of acting.²² This may contradict our earlier claim that hinge propositions are not empirical despite their empirical surface form. But there is no contradiction. The proposition 'I am called L. W.' can be empirical in a certain context. Wittgenstein could have been informing a stranger about his name, for instance. The hinge proposition 'I am called L. W.', by contrast, expresses a way of acting that is not restricted to the present moment (but can be restricted to a person's lifespan). In the same way, 'I have two hands' is a commitment to and expression of a certain kind of conduct which is contrasted to acting as if one or both of my hands were illusory. Hinge propositions, as parts of the beginning, are thus not completely independent of empirical reality. A hinge proposition indicates that empirical reality, or at least the portion of empirical reality that it describes, is a means of expression, a paradigmatic sample which is used for evaluating or measuring other empirical propositions.

²¹ OC, §§470–1, italics and the square brackets in the original.

²² Pritchard's (2015) notion of the 'über hinge commitment' might be seen as a way of filling the gap Wittgenstein is invoking before OC §471.

4.2 The Standard Metre

There is a far-reaching analogy here with Wittgenstein's treatment of the standard metre in §50 of the *Philosophical Investigations* (and with Wittgenstein's discussion of paradigmatic samples elsewhere). The proposition 'The standard metre is one metre long' has the form of an empirical proposition, but it is non-empirical. The proposition is, however, not independent of empirical reality, because the rod and practices of measurement it refers to do matter. The description of the rod as the standard metre is the logical beginning of the game of measurement. The proposition 'The standard metre is one metre long' or 'This is the standard metre' is analogous to 'I am called L. W.' These propositions pick out a certain object (or a part of empirical reality) as a paradigm in the language-game of measuring or naming. Both language-games place these paradigmatic objects into certain ways of acting, namely measuring other objects or naming persons.

The decision to take or accept a sentence as a hinge proposition does not need to be – and usually is not – made by a single human subject. The same holds for the subsequent practice. This is, again, analogous to the standard metre, which was not established by a single person, but by a procedure within the scientific community.

To recognize a hinge proposition boils down to recognizing this collective decision and the subsequent practice of the linguistic community to act according to this decision. There are, of course, no universal guidelines on how to do this. One thing is clear, however: any recognition of a hinge proposition, i.e. a decision to begin with this proposition, must occur within a linguistic community. This implies that one has to know this community, its language and its practices in order to begin. The logical beginning thus has epistemological presuppositions. And this is something which was already clear to Hegel.

5 Conclusions

Once more it must be stressed that Hegel and Wittgenstein worked in quite different philosophical traditions. Both, however, attempted to address the problem of beginning of philosophical thought. Let us summarize the common points of Hegel's and Wittgenstein's accounts of the beginning. The logical beginning has a subjective and an objective moment. The philosophizing subject has to begin with something, with some object. For Hegel, the objective moment is pure being, i.e. being without any further determination. For Wittgenstein, the objective moment of the beginning is something that cannot be doubted, i.e. something that we accept without any ground. The moral

is, obviously, that any determination or ground would spoil the presuppositionless character of the beginning. As to the subjective moment of the beginning, the agreement between Hegel and Wittgenstein goes even further. The philosophizing subject has to decide to conclude her quest for the presuppositionless beginning and finally begin at the beginning. This decision must not have any rational reason. It must be, in a sense, *arational*. If there were a reason to it, the beginning would not be presuppositionless, and hence not a beginning at all. Moreover, the arational moment of this decision is echoed throughout any rational thought. Any application of a (rational) rule is, ultimately, a blind (arational) decision to apply this rule.

I would like to point out two differences between Hegel's and Wittgenstein's accounts of the beginning. The first is related to the worry of whether Hegel and Wittgenstein were addressing the same kind of beginning. Hegel's *Logic* deals with logical and ontological issues whereas Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* focuses primarily on epistemological problems. Despite these obvious facts, I think that Wittgenstein's difficulty in finding the beginning relates to the logical beginning. Hegel is concerned with epistemological issues in the *Phenomenology*, where the goal is to free our consciousness from all preconceptions. Wittgenstein's later philosophy in general can be interpreted in the same way, i.e. as an endeavour to liberate the mind from illusions and confusions (cf. Read 2021). It is 'a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (PI, §109). The problem of finding the logical beginning can be addressed only after all this has been completed. For Hegel, this problem arises after the *Phenomenology*; for Wittgenstein, it comes into focus at the very end of his philosophical career. It must be stressed that Wittgenstein's way of addressing epistemological issues is quite different from Hegel's. That is to say, the dialectical method of the *Phenomenology* is different from Wittgenstein's piecemeal striving to dissolve philosophical confusions.

The second important difference concerns the objective moment of the beginning. The category, i.e. the determination, of pure being is quite different from Wittgenstein's hinge propositions. *A priori* determinations are difficult to compare with seemingly empirical propositions. Moreover, pure being is without any determination, hence there is nothing to compare from the logical point of view. However, the logical beginning is preceded by the epistemological series, and we can thus determine the logical beginning from the epistemological point of view. As discussed above, for Hegel the form of the beginning is pure knowledge which 'ceases to be knowledge' (GW, 21.55). Wittgenstein's charge against Moore is that one cannot say of a hinge proposition that one knows it: one cannot say, for instance, 'I know that I have two hands.' Knowledge presupposes the possibility of doubt

(OC, §121). When Wittgenstein says that ‘one must decide whether something is knowledge or not’ (OC, §230), this, too, is a decision about the beginning. In the same way, the sentence ‘The standard metre is one metre long’ has been accepted as a hinge and thus is not something that can be known. Hence, for both Hegel and Wittgenstein, the logical beginning cannot be counted as positive knowledge, but presupposes the epistemological series. The logical beginning may appear to be something that can be known, but this apparent knowledge ceases to be knowledge.

The main worry that Hegel and Wittgenstein were aware of is that the subject may fail to begin at the beginning. There are two forms such a failure might assume. Either the subject decides to begin too early, not reaching the presuppositionless beginning; that means that the subject begins with a possibly undiscovered presupposition, that is, dogmatically, *after the beginning*. We have not addressed this variation of the worry. Or the subject reaches the presuppositionless beginning without recognizing it as such and keeps on looking for it. The subject goes *before the beginning*. How, then, does the subject recognize that she has reached the beginning? Kierkegaard maintained that there cannot be any logical method of recognition because it would lead to a determination or ground, which would spoil the presuppositionless character of the beginning. Hence, Kierkegaard argues, the search for the beginning must be infinite. Anachronistically, Hegel’s principal reply to this worry could be formulated such that the subject must go through the complicated journey described in the *Phenomenology*. This journey with the standpoint of absolute knowing where the spirit ‘knows itself as it is *in and for itself*’ (PS, §794). All representational thought, that is, all reference to otherness, is sublated.

I have indicated that Wittgenstein accepted Kierkegaard’s challenge, but he left us with no detailed solution to it. More precisely, Wittgenstein’s unresolved worry was that the subject might fail to recognize the beginning and attempt to doubt it further. I have suggested that a solution may lie in his discussion of paradigmatic samples and standards. A hinge proposition, such as ‘I have two hands’, that is exempt from doubt is analogous to the proposition that the standard metre is one metre long. Both have the form of an empirical proposition, but they are in fact not an empirical proposition, and hence cannot be asserted or doubted. They nevertheless refer to empirical reality.

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