

5 ‘With What Must Transcendental Philosophy Begin?’

Kant and Hegel on Nothingness and Indeterminacy

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§1 Introduction

At the end of the Transcendental Analytic Kant makes a fascinating remark about how the system of transcendental philosophy should begin:

Before we leave the Transcendental Analytic behind, we must add something that, although not in itself especially indispensable, nevertheless may seem requisite for the completeness of the system. The highest concept with which one is accustomed to begin a transcendental philosophy is usually the division between the possible and the impossible. But since every division presupposes a concept that is to be divided, a still higher one must be given, and this is the concept of an object in general (taken problematically, leaving undecided whether it is something or nothing).

(A290/B346)¹

These remarks precede a brief discussion of different concepts of “nothing” and a table in which these concepts are arranged, which has come to be known as the “Table of Nothings.”

These observations on transcendental philosophy are said to “seem requisite” for the “completeness of the system.” However, the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*KrV*) does not itself contain the complete system of transcendental philosophy, but only the preparatory critique of our cognitive capacities.² In this passage Kant is discussing what the “beginning” of that eventual system must be, that is, whether it is the distinction between something (the possible) and nothing (the impossible), or instead the higher and more general (and thus less determinate) concept “object in general.” We might then think of this section as bearing the title “With What Must Transcendental Philosophy Begin?”

This means that this short section is thematically connected to the beginning of Hegel’s own transcendental philosophy, the *Wissenschaft der Logik* (*WdL*), and its methodological preface, “With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?” In that short section Hegel, like Kant, argues that his “transcendental philosophy”—the pure science,

the science of logic—must begin with an indeterminate concept.³ But Hegel differs from Kant in thinking that this indeterminate beginning must be *absolutely* indeterminate (rather than merely less determinate than “something” and “nothing”) and identifies this absolutely indeterminate beginning as “pure being.” In the opening sections of the Logic, Hegel argues that after “pure being,” the next concept of Logic is “nothing.” Thought then gets involved in the contradiction that pure being both is and is not identical to pure nothing, a contradiction which is then resolved by introducing a further concept, “becoming” (*Werden*), and eventually ‘determinate being’ (*Dasein*), which includes “something” (*Etwas*) as one of its moments.

To my knowledge, Hegel nowhere discusses the “Table of Nothings,” and the parallels I have pointed out may seem merely verbal.⁴ However, I will argue in this essay that they are more substantive than this. The Table of Nothings gives us a unique vantage point on Kant and Hegel’s different methodological reflections on the “beginning” of transcendental philosophy. Although Hegel never presents them this way, we can see his methodological reflections on the role of *<being>*, *<nothing>*, and *<something>* as responding to problems that arise purely immanently within Kant’s own theory.⁵

In **Section 1** I examine Kant’s argument about how transcendental philosophy should begin and uncover two key premises in it, which I call *Concept Division* and *Highest Concept*. In **Section 2** I turn to the details of the Table of Nothings and explain what the concept “nothing” means for Kant. In **Section 3** I argue that Concept Division and Highest Concept, when thought through, pose a serious problem for the “beginning” of Kantian transcendental philosophy: the highest concept of transcendental philosophy (“object in general”) is completely indeterminate, and this indeterminacy threatens to infect every more specific concept (‘something’ and ‘nothing’). In **Section 4** I briefly explain Hegel’s project of a science of Logic and argue that it constitutes his transcendental philosophy. In **Section 5** I explain why Hegel embraces the conclusion that proved so problematic for Kant: the beginning of transcendental philosophy (Logic) is a completely indeterminate concept: not “object in general” but “pure being.” In **Section 6** I reconstruct why Hegel thinks, contra Kant, that the opposition between this completely indeterminate concept and its negation, “pure nothing,” is enough to generate the rest of the content of Logic. I conclude in **Section 7** by comparing Kant and Hegel’s methodological reflections on the concept of nothing to the opening of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*.

§2 The Beginning of Transcendental Philosophy

In the second sentence of the passage I quoted in the Introduction, Kant speaks of how one is “accustomed” to begin in transcendental

philosophy. This can cause some perplexity if one assumes that “transcendental” means what Kant had said it means at A56/B80: *a priori* cognition “by means of which we cognize that and how certain representations (intuitions or concepts) are applied entirely *a priori*, or are possible (i.e., the possibility of cognition or its use *a priori*).” It is odd that one can be “accustomed” to anything in transcendental philosophy in this sense, for one of Kant’s main contentions in the *KrV* is that his predecessors had failed to inquire into how *a priori* cognition is possible in the first place; that is, they had failed to engage in transcendental philosophy in precisely this sense. It is more natural, then, to read Kant here as meaning “transcendental” in the broader sense originally defined in the A Introduction: “I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy” (A11–12).⁶ In this sense, something can be ‘customary’ in transcendental philosophy because even before the *KrV* there has been transcendental philosophy, that is, the systematic exposition of our *a priori* concepts.

Kant’s claim about how one “customarily” begins transcendental philosophy is, I think, a reference back to the beginning of the work of transcendental philosophy he knew best (having taught from it for years), namely, Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*. Baumgarten does indeed begin with a distinction between the impossible and the possible:

§7. Nothing, negative (cf. §54), what cannot be represented, impossible, inconsistent, (an absurdity cf. §13), involving or implying a contradiction, contradictory—is both A and not-A. Or, there is no subject of contradictory predicates, or, nothing both is and is not. $0 = A + \text{not-A}$. This proposition is called the principle of contradiction, and it is absolutely primary.⁷

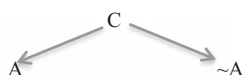
§8. That which is not nothing is SOMETHING* [*Aliquid*]: the representable, whatever does not involve a contradiction, whatever is not both A and not-A, is POSSIBLE.

(§7)⁸

The nothing is that which contains mutually contradictory predicates, such as a square circle or wise ignorance. The possible, conversely, is whatever does *not* contain a contradiction, whatever has mutually logically compatible predicates.⁹

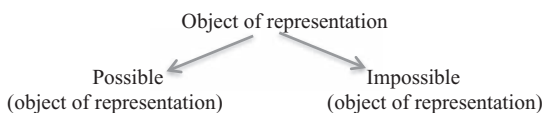
Kant makes a critical comment about Baumgarten’s “customary” way of beginning transcendental philosophy: “But since every division presupposes a concept that is to be divided, a still higher one must be given, and this is the concept of an object in general (taken problematically, leaving undecided whether it is something or nothing).” (A290/B346). This sentence contains two crucial claims that will orient the rest

of the discussion in this essay. The first is that all division, that is, all distinction, between concepts presupposes a concept that is thereby divided, which must be a “higher,” that is, more general, concept than either of the concepts that are distinguished. The thought is that a distinction between A and $\sim A$ (e.g., between the possible and the impossible) presupposes a more general concept in which this distinction is made; that is, a concept C such that the distinction is one between two ‘determinations’ of C . Call this claim *Concept Division*.



Concept Division

The second main claim is that in transcendental philosophy, the “higher concept” that is divided into the possible and the impossible is the concept of an object in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*), which I take to be the concept of an object of representation in general.¹⁰ Call this claim *Highest Concept*. We can see an echo of this claim in Baumgarten’s description of the impossible and the possible as, respectively, “unrepresentable” and “representable.” Kant’s point is that Baumgarten should have reflected on the role of representation here, and should have begun his transcendental philosophy with an investigation of how *a priori* representation of objects is possible in the first place. Then he would have written a transcendental philosophy in the proper sense, that is, a critique of the capacity for *a priori* cognition, and he would have distinguished the possible from the impossible within the concept of an object of representation in general: an impossible object of representation, and a possible object of representation.¹¹



(Highest concept)

This is a very minimal notion of “object,” for as we will see, it includes objects that are impossible and even self-contradictory (the “objects” of self-contradictory concepts). Furthermore, it is a notion of object that is constitutively tied to representation: it is the concept of the “content” of a representation, what a representation is about.¹² This concept of “object” is always implicitly relative to a representation, of which representation it is the object. While there may be concepts of objecthood for which the principle “no object without representation” is false or question-begging, these are not the concepts of objecthood that Kant is here using.¹³ The highest concept of transcendental philosophy is the concept of the object of representation for some subject.¹⁴

§3 Kant's Table of Nothings

If the highest concept of transcendental philosophy is *<object of representation>* then the distinction between “something” (possible) and “nothing” (impossible) is the distinction between a possible object of representation and an impossible object of representation. Before we continue to the details of Kant's Table it is important to understand what this distinction consists in.¹⁵

<Possibility> is a modal category, and modal categories, according to Kant, do not contain determinations of objects, but merely express the relation of objects to our capacity for cognition. “The categories of modality have this peculiarity,” he writes in the Postulates of Empirical Thinking in General: “they do not augment the concept to which they are ascribed in the least as a determination of the object but rather express only the relation to the capacity for cognition [*Erkenntnisvermögen*]” (A219/B266). If *<possibility>*, being a modal category, is not a determination of objects that can be added as the mark of a concept but rather expresses the relation of a concept to our cognitive capacity, then the distinction between ‘possible object’ (something) and “impossible object” (nothing) is not a distinction between kinds of objects (those that share the possibility mark, and those that lack it), but a distinction between concepts of objects: those that agree with the form of our cognitive capacity (concepts of possible objects), and those that do not (concepts of impossible objects).¹⁶

Cognition has two stems: understanding and sensibility. Since possibility is a relation to our capacity for cognition, this generates a distinction between logical possibility and real possibility. The concept of logical possibility expresses the relation between the form of our understanding (our conceptual capacity) and a concept that agrees with that form, (i.e., one that applies to logically consistent concepts). The concept of logical impossibility expresses the opposite relation: that is, it applies to logically inconsistent concepts.¹⁷ The concept of real possibility expresses the relation to the form of our capacity for cognition as a whole, not just understanding but sensibility as well. Thus, it applies to concepts of objects that can be given in intuition *and* can be subsumed under concepts by the understanding. This means that it applies to concepts that agree with the formal conditions of both intuition (space and time) and concepts (categories), as Kant says in the first Postulate of modality: ‘Whatever agrees [*übereinkommt*] with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuition and concepts) is possible’ (A218/B265). The concept of real impossibility applies to concepts of objects that cannot be so cognized, either because their objects cannot be given in intuition (e.g., concepts of noumena) or because they cannot be brought under concepts (e.g., concepts of objects that do not fall under the categories or that violate the principles of experience).¹⁸

The next sentence of the Table of Nothings reads: “Since the categories are the only concepts that relate to objects in general, the distinction of whether an object is something or nothing must proceed in accordance with the order and guidance of the categories” (A290/B246). The complete set of formal conditions of experience includes categories of all four moments: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Modality. We can then specify a nothing (i.e., an impossible object of representation) with respect to each of these moments:¹⁹

- 1 *Quantity*. The quantitative nothing is what cannot be represented using the categories of quantity. The categories of quantity are: <unity>, which denotes a single object of intuition; <plurality>, which denotes a collection of such objects brought under a concept; and <totality>, which denotes a plurality of objects which are also thought as a single object which is a whole of which those objects are the parts.²⁰ The determinate quantity of Fs is the number of ‘numerically distinct’ Fs, because all Fs are generically identical qua Fs. Since only intuition represents numerically distinct but generically (i.e., conceptually) identical objects, only concepts of objects that can be intuited have a determinate quantity (a number) that we can cognize. This means that we can only cognize the determinate quantity (number) of a concept if it is a concept of objects we can intuit. Otherwise, we can represent Fs only in respect of generic identity and distinctness, which means precisely *not* representing them in respect of numerical identity and difference, in other words, not being able to number them.²¹

Now compare Kant’s highly condensed explanation of the first moment of the Table of Nothings:

To the concepts of all, many, and one there is opposed the concept of that which cancels everything out, i.e., **none**, and thus the object of a concept to which no intuition that can be given corresponds is = nothing, i.e., a concept without an object
(A290/B347)

The quantitative nothing, Kant says, is not merely the concept that happens to have no instances (e.g. “child of Immanuel Kant”), but the concept to which no corresponding object *can be given* to us. This means that such a concept is quantitatively indeterminate for us, that is, we cannot cognize the quantity of its extension. Kant then gives as an example “the noumena, which cannot be counted among the possibilities although they must not on that ground be asserted to be impossible (*ens rationis*)” (A290/B347). The concept <noumena> is a “quantitative” nothing because we cannot cognize noumena in respect of numerical identity and difference, for by definition we cannot intuit them.²² This does not mean that

noumena are impossible, or even that there is no determinate number of them, for some other form of intellect may be able to intuit them, and represent them in respect of numerical identity and distinctness, and cognize their number.²³ It means only that their determinate quantity is not a possible object of cognition *for us*.

- 2 *Quality*. Kant's explanation of the 'qualitative' nothing is shorter and more straightforward. The categories of quality are <reality>, <negation>, and <limitation>. The concept of a reality is the concept of a positive quality of some sort (e.g., a sensation), while <limitation> is the concept of that quality as a limited degree of an intensive magnitude, that is, one that can be greater or lesser. The concept <negation> is the concept of the complete absence of that quality. For instance, warmth is the concept of a reality, the concept of a temperature is the concept of a limited degree of warmth (which can be greater or lesser), and the concept of cold is the concept of the absence of warmth. As Kant writes, "Reality is something [*Etwas*], negation is nothing, namely the concept of the absence of an object, such as a shadow or cold (*nihil privativum*)" (A291/B347).²⁴ The concept of the absence of reality is the concept of a *nihil privativum* because it is a concept of a "privative nothing," a mere lack or absence (*Mangel*).²⁵

As we have seen, 'nothing' is in general the concept of the impossible object of representation, but it is puzzling why the qualitative nothing (*nihil privativum*) should be considered impossible. We not only represent absences of qualities (darkness, cold, etc.) on a regular basis, we do so using the second category of quality itself (<negation>). The answer, I think, lies in a remark that Kant makes later in this section: "If light were not given to the senses, then one would also not be able to represent darkness" (A292/B349). It is not representing darkness that is impossible, but representing darkness without ever having represented light; representation of the absence of a specific quality constitutively depends upon the capacity to represent its presence, which requires acquaintance with that very quality.²⁶ A being that has never tasted pineapple cannot represent it as absent. Likewise, the *nihil privativum ne plus ultra* would be the complete absence of any quality whatsoever. Without some qualitative sensory input or other, we cannot represent anything in respect of quality (reality, negation, or limitation).

- 3 *Relation*. The "relational" nothing is not, as one might expect, the concept of that which has only purely intrinsic properties (e.g., a Leibnizian monad), but the concept of that to which the relational categories—<substance-accident>, <cause-effect>, and <reciprocal action>—do not apply.

The mere form of intuition, without substance, is in itself not an object, but the merely formal condition of one (as appearance), like pure space and pure time, which are to be sure something, as the forms for intuiting, but are not in themselves objects that are intuited (*ens imaginarium*).

(A291/B347)²⁷

Space and time are ‘relational nothings’ because they are impossible objects of conceptual determination under the relational categories. They are pure forms in which we experience causally interacting substances, not substances in their own right.²⁸ This means we can imagine pure space and time, devoid of objects, but we cannot experience them.²⁹

- 4 *Modality*. The concept of nothing is the concept of an impossible object of representation, so the other moments of the table are already implicitly modal. What, then, remains for the fourth explicitly modal concept of nothing to do, other than to simply collect the formal conditions of experience already articulated and to form the concept of the “nothing *überhaupt*,” that is, the concept of an object that fails to meet one or more of them (i.e., an object that is an *ens imaginarium*, or a *nihil privativum*, or an *ens imaginarium*, etc.)? This not only would render the fourth moment fairly trivial, but also conflicts directly with what Kant actually says: ‘the object of a concept that contradicts itself is nothing, because the concept is nothing, the impossible, like a rectilinear figure with two sides (*nihil negativum*)’ (A291/B348).³⁰ This is an invocation of logical possibility, but in the other three moments Kant has been concerned with what is logically possible but not really possible, that is, what is consistently thinkable but which cannot be represented under one or more moments of the Table of Categories.³¹

Each of the moments in the Table of Nothings represents what is impossible according to the corresponding moment in the Table of Categories. Hence, we would expect that the fourth moment would correspond to what is not possible or representable according to the fourth moment, Modality. Just as the qualitative nothing is what has no quality, the modal nothing would be what has no modality. But since it is real (im)possibility that the Table has been concerned with all along (what it is really impossible to represent quantitatively, qualitatively, etc.), we should expect precisely that the fourth moment represents an object that fails to meet the conditions necessary to represent its *real* modality (just as, e.g., the relational nothing is that which fails to meet the conditions necessary to represent it in terms of substance, and force).

This, I want to argue, is precisely what Kant means when he identifies the modal nothing as the object of a concept that contradicts itself.

A concept that contradicts itself cannot be represented in respect of real modality (i.e., as being really possible, or really impossible, or really necessary, etc.) for it lacks a condition of real modality, namely, logical possibility.³² The fourth nothing, namely, the modal nothing, is the logically impossible, for real possibility and impossibility are determined only with respect to concepts that are logically possible. The logically self-contradictory is thus to modality as pure space is to relation, as the total absence of all reality is to quality, and as objects we cannot intuit are to quantity: they lack the necessary condition for cognizing objects in respect of the corresponding moment of the Table of Categories. But since the modal nothing is the logically impossible, and each of the other three nothings are “real” nothings, this means that the fourth nothing corresponds to the most *general* condition on being “something,” namely, being logically possible. If we were to represent the Table of Nothings in terms of logical generality, the distinction between “logical something” and “logical nothing” would stand higher than any of the others.³³ Baumgarten was right about this much. But above that distinction would stand a more general concept, namely, *<object of representation in general.>*

This means that the Table of Nothings is the photographic negative (as it were) of the structure of Kantian transcendental philosophy. In transcendental philosophy we begin with the most general concept, *<object of representation>*, and then successively determine it by uncovering the conditions of possibility of such objects. This raises the intriguing question of whether transcendental philosophy must take the “positive” form in which Kant presents it in the *KrV*, that is, the successive determination of the concept *<object of possible experience>* (i.e., something), or whether it could instead take a ‘negative form,’ that is, as the successive determination of the concept *<impossible object of experience>* (i.e., nothing). These manners of proceeding are of course isomorphic to one another, which is why it is easy to map the structure of “positive” transcendental philosophy onto its photographic negative in the Table of Nothings. The “negative” presentation of transcendental philosophy would correspond to determining the bounds of possible experience from the “outside in”, eliminating from cognition concepts of logically possible but really impossible objects, rather from the “inside out”, determining the bounds of a domain of positively characterized cognitions.³⁴ As we will see below in **Section 7**, Hegel thinks that his transcendental philosophy, the science of Logic, could begin negatively with *<nothing>*. And, as we have already seen, Baumgarten begins his transcendental philosophy, his ontology, with *<nothing>*, the *nihil negativum*. But first I want to inquire into an aspect of Kant’s presentation of the structure of transcendental philosophy in the Table of Nothings.

§4 With What Must Transcendental Philosophy Begin?

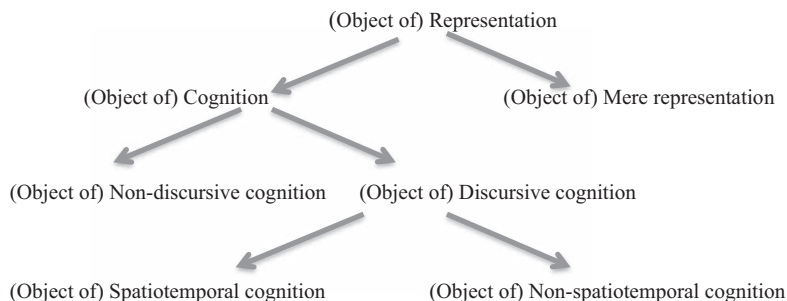
As we have seen, in the Table of Nothings Kant makes two important claims, one about the structure of concepts in general, the other about the conceptual structure of transcendental philosophy in particular. These are respectively: that whenever two concepts are distinguished from one another, there must be a more general concept in which they are divided and under which they both fall (Concept Division); and that the highest concept of transcendental philosophy is *<object>* (Highest Concept).

Earlier I assumed that this is the concept of an object of representation in general, but now I will defend that assumption.³⁵ Let us assume the highest concept of transcendental philosophy is something more determinate; for example, the concept specifically of an object of discursive spatio-temporal cognition. This would make sense, since transcendental philosophy is an inquiry into our cognitive capacity, and we possess a discursive spatio-temporal capacity for cognition. I will now argue that Kant's own Concept Division principle entails that transcendental philosophy requires the more general concept of an object of representation in general.

Notice that relations of logical generality among concepts of objects are isomorphic to relations of logical generality among concepts of the kinds of representations of which they are objects. If the concept of representational kind *K* (e.g., representation) is logically more general than the concept of representational kind *K** (e.g., intuition) then the concept *<object of representation of kind K>* (e.g., the concept of the object of representation in general) is logically more general than the concept *<object of representation of kind K*>* (e.g., the concept of an object of intuition in general).

The concept *<spatio-temporal discursive cognition>* is contradictorily opposed to *<non-spatio-temporal discursive cognition>*, which requires (by Concept Division) that they be distinguished within a general concept, namely, the concept of discursive cognition in general, *<discursive cognition>*. But *<discursive>*, as a mark of cognition, is contradictorily opposed to *<non-discursive>* (i.e., *<intellectual>*), so this distinction must be made within a more general concept, namely, the concept of cognition in general, *<cognition>*. The same process can then be iterated with respect to the concept of cognition. As a mark of representation, *<cognition>* is contradictorily opposed to representation that is not cognition (the so-called *mere* representation), so this distinction must be made within a yet more general concept, namely, the concept of representation in general, *<representation>*. All of these relations are mirrored by relations among the concepts of the objects of these kinds of representation: according to Concept Division, *<object of discursive spatio-temporal cognition>* must be subordinated to a series of more general

concepts of object, at the top of which is *<object of representation>*. This is represented graphically in Figure One.



(Figure One)

But we can now ask, Where does this most general concept of representation get its content? Consider Kant's remarks on conceptual content in the Jäsche logic:

§17. *Content and Extension of Concepts*

Every concept, as partial concept, is contained in the representation of things; as a ground of cognition, i.e., as a mark, these things are contained under it. In the former respect every concept has a content, in the other an extension.

(JL, 9:95)³⁶

Every concept contains further concepts, which are its marks. The set of marks contained in a concept is its content; the set of concepts that contain a given concept as a mark is that concept's logical extension.³⁷ For instance, *<animal>* is contained in *<human>*, that is, it is a mark of that concept. The content of *<human>* contains *<animal>* (as well as *<rational>*), so, conversely, the extension of *<animal>* includes *<human>* (as well as *<dog>*, *<cat>*, etc.). Note that these relations of containment also correspond to relations of logical generality. *<Animal>* is logically more general than any concept in its extension (any concept that contains *<animal>* as a mark, e.g., *<human>*), because all such concepts fall under *<animal>*, but *<animal>* falls under none of them. Likewise, *<human>* is a mark of further concepts (its logical extension), and is logically more general than they are.

The marks of a concept are the more general concepts contained in it. The less general concepts contained under a concept are *determinations* of that concept. A determination of a concept must always be opposed to a contradictorily opposed concept, which is its negation. The more general concept is said to be 'less determinate' than its further determinations, and to predicate a determination of a concept is to *determine* that concept.³⁸ A judgment in which a concept is determined in always

a synthetic judgment, because, by definition, the predicate is not a mark of the subject.³⁹ For instance, to judge that some animals are rational is to determine the concept <*animal*> by predicating <*rational*> of one part of its 'sphere.' In doing so, I posit that some animals are rational rather than non-rational; that is, I exclude the contradictory opposite of rational from that part of the sphere of <*animal*>. This is a synthetic judgment, because <*rational*> is not a mark of <*animal*>. A maximally indeterminate concept would be a concept that is not a determination of any higher concept, that is, it would be a maximally general concept.

We can then ask, What is the logical intension or 'content' of <*representation*> (or equivalently, <*object of representation*>)? What are its marks? If it is truly the highest concept then there is no more general concept above it, which means it has no logical intension, no content. Where, then, does its content come from?

This may seem like an easy question to answer: we simply abstract from the case where we are presented with an actual instance, our own case of discursive spatio-temporal cognition. We abstract from this instance to the general concept <*discursive spatio-temporal cognition*> and then abstract further by successively abstracting marks of this concept, to <*discursive cognition*>, to <*cognition*>, to <*representation*>. While this may be a plausible psychological or even epistemological account of how we come to form this concept, it does not, I think, explain the content of the concept that is the result of this process, <*representation in general*>. To see why, compare this to the paradigm case of concept-formation by abstraction, Kant's discussion of how we form the concept of a tree:

I see, e.g., a spruce, a willow, and a linden. By first comparing these objects with one another I note that they are different from one another in regard to the trunk, the branches, the leaves, etc.; but next I reflect on that which they have in common among themselves, trunk, branches, and leaves themselves, and I abstract from the quantity, the figure, etc., of these; thus I acquire a concept of a tree'.

(JL, 9:94–5)

But notice that this is not an account of why <*tree*> has the content it does, for its content consists of the more general marks contained within it, for example, <*perennial*>, <*plant*>, and <*living thing*>, which are mentioned nowhere in this passage. This is an account of how we go from instances to more general concepts; it is not an account of why those more general concepts have the content they do. We could go further, and abstract from <*tree*> to <*plant*> to <*living thing*>, etc., but at each stage, the concept to which we have abstracted has a content only because it is a species of some higher genus. For instance, <*living thing*> is a species of <*body*> or some other concept. The empirical case, which is the only one where Kant spells out the abstraction story, is precisely one

that gives us no account of how a highest concept (a concept that is not a species of some higher genus) could have any content. So simply appealing to abstraction from our own case (i.e., discursive spatio-temporal cognition) to the concept of representation in general, by itself gives us no explanation of why this highest concept has any content.

Of course, its marks are not the only possible source for the “content” (*Inhalt*) of a concept, in Kant’s theory; there is also the relation of the concept to objects that can be given in intuition.⁴⁰ However, I do not think that the relation to intuition will suffice to give content to the highest concept of transcendental philosophy, for the same problem that arose for the abstraction strategy will arise again here. Consider that the only objects that can be given to us for the concept *<representation in general>* are our own representational states, which are given to us through inner sense in temporal form, and thus fall under the more specific concept *<temporal representation>*. Likewise, the only objects that can be given to us for the concept *<object>* are spatio-temporal objects and thus fall under the more specific concept *<spatio-temporal object>*. But the arguments above show that we need to be able to think the more general concepts of representation and object *überhaupt*. Where then, does the more general concept get its more general content? Since intuitional content will be more specific, the relation to intuition does not explain it. We might try to say that these concepts get their content originally from their relation to the objects and representations we intuit, and we then abstract the more general concepts (of representation and object in general). But that lands us right back in the problems with the abstraction story: where do these more general concepts get their content?

Kant himself seems to have realized the problems involved in having a most general concept in transcendental philosophy:

The most abstract concept is the one that has nothing in common with anything distinct from itself. This is the concept of something [*Etwas*] for that which is different from it is nothing, and it thus has nothing in common with something.

(JL, 9:95)⁴¹

But this is precisely what he denies in the Table of Nothings, claiming instead that there is a more general concept, namely, that of an object in general, which subsumes both *<something>* and *<nothing>*. It is a sign that we have put our finger on a real difficulty that, in the very context in which Kant is talking about the hierarchical structure of concepts, he denies the very thesis that, I am arguing, generates a problem when thought through to its consequences.

If *<representation>* has no content, then Concept Division is a loose wheel, at least when applied to *<something>* and *<nothing>*. It requires us to think of these as specifications of some totally indeterminate

concept, namely, *<something + X>* and *<nothing + X>*, where X is a totally indeterminate mark. But a totally indeterminate mark cannot make a concept of which it is a mark any more determinate than it would otherwise be. This suggests that we can dispense with Concept Division, at least in the case of the highest concepts. In other words, it suggests the very model of where transcendental philosophy begins that Kant himself suggests in the Jäsche logic: the distinction between something and nothing, but not understood as a distinction made within a more general concept.

But this raises further questions: From where do *<something>* and *<nothing>* get their content, if not by being specifications of some more general concept? The very same problem that Kant faces with respect to *<object of representation>* will arise again with respect to these concepts when they are taken to be the highest concepts of transcendental philosophy. If these “highest” concepts have any content, there must be a yet higher concept, contra the assumption; but if they have no content, then they too are loose wheels, just like *<object of representation>*, and then the same questions repeats itself at the next level of concepts (e.g., more specific concepts of something and nothing), and every level of concepts after that.

I think that Kant does have a solution to this problem, but he never makes it explicit.⁴² Thus I do not want to claim that these issues pose insuperable difficulties for Kant, but only that they are real problems. In the next section I will argue that when we turn to the opening of Hegel’s *WdL* we will find him grappling with the very same issues – the role of indeterminacy and the concepts *<something>* and *<nothing>* in the fraught question of how transcendental philosophy should begin—but offering a solution very different from Kant’s.

§5 Hegel’s Logic as Transcendental Philosophy

Before turning to the role of *<nothing>* at the beginning of Hegel’s *WdL*, it is important to get clear on what the Hegelian project of a science of Logic is, and how it differs from the Kantian project of transcendental philosophy and its preparatory critique.

The science of Logic, the science contained in the eponymous *WdL*, is the science of pure thinking.⁴³ This means that it is the science of thinking qua thinking, or of thinking *überhaupt*: not thinking about any particular domain of objects, or under a particular set of conditions, but any thought about any content whatsoever. Since science is itself an exercise of thinking,⁴⁴ this means that in Logic, thinking thinks about itself, and does so without restrictions or conditions: in Logic thinking thinks about what it, just in virtue of thinking, thinks. Hegel’s term for the content of Logic, the content that thought thinks just in virtue of thinking, is ‘thought-determinations’ (*Denkbestimmungen*).⁴⁵ I take

this to mean that these contents are what make thought determinately what it is: thought, insofar as it is determinate, is determinate in virtue of thinking these contents.

The content of thought is not one kind of content among others. There is not some more general genus ‘content,’ of which thought-content is one species among others (e.g., content of perception and content of desire).⁴⁶ Instead, the content of thought is content *überhaupt*. If some putative content cannot be thought, then it cannot be represented at all; it is not, in fact, a content in the first place. Nor is thinking, insofar as it is the topic of Logic, to be qualified as human, or finite thinking: it is thinking *überhaupt*. Hence, the conclusions of Logic will not need to be relativized or qualified with any phrase like “according to our human mode of thinking,” “according to our conceptual scheme,” etc. The conclusions of Logic are about what any thinking whatsoever (any entertaining or representing of any content whatsoever) thinks, that is, what its content is.

This means that Kant’s original and most general characterization of transcendental philosophy applies to Hegel’s Logic as well: “I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy” (A11–12).⁴⁷ As I read Hegel’s Logic, it is precisely such a system of pure *a priori* concepts, though in a sense of “*a priori*,” “concept,” and “system” that is somewhat different from Kant’s. Logic concerns *a priori* or ‘pure’ thought-determinations because it concerns thought-determinations that thought, just in virtue of thinking anything at all, must think (i.e., think in terms of, or use in thinking); these thought-determinations are not specific to any domain of objects, and their availability to any given thinker does not depend upon a particular course of experience or historical tradition. The Logic concerns pure *concepts* because it concerns pure contents of thought, although Hegel reserves the term ‘concept’ for a specific stage or thought-determination in Logic: very roughly, the totality of thought-determinations understood as reflexively relating to itself (what Hegel calls *der Begriff*). For the sake of readability, I will also refer to thought contents prior to *der Begriff* as “concepts.”⁴⁸ Finally, Logic is a *system* of all such pure concepts, showing how and why thinking as such must think precisely these concepts in their systematic interrelations. It does not, as Kant accuses Aristotle, and Hegel in his turn accuses Kant of doing, merely assemble an aggregate of pure concepts, a “rhapsody” of those concepts one happens to find in thinking, in no order other than the contingent one in which one happens to have discovered them.⁴⁹ Rather, it unfolds those concepts from the very nature of thinking itself. But specifying the precise nature of the “systematicity” of Hegel’s Logic will have to await further clarification of precisely what the science of Logic is.

One aspect of Kant's most general characterization of transcendental philosophy might seem to fit uneasily with Hegel's Logic: it is said to be "occupied not so much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general" (A11–12). But of course, this never meant that (Kantian) transcendental philosophy is concerned with pure concepts to the exclusion of objects: Kant's transcendental philosophy is concerned in the first place with how *a priori* cognition of objects using pure concepts is possible, but in so doing, it has substantive consequences for how objects of such cognition are constituted.⁵⁰

Likewise, Hegel's Logic is concerned in the first place with pure thought contents (pure concepts), but in virtue of this, it has substantive consequences for how all objects whatsoever are constituted.⁵¹ This is Hegel's thesis that Logic (the pure science of thinking) 'coincides' with metaphysics (the pure science of objects).⁵² I do not have space to explain fully what this means, but one thing it means is that there can be no 'gap' between what we might call the 'laws' of Logic (what thought as such thinks) and the "laws" of metaphysics (how all beings as such are constituted). The topic of Logic is what thought as such must think, but this immediately "coincides" with how beings as such must be. So the Hegelian twist on the Kantian definition of transcendental philosophy would be that it is "occupied with *a priori* concepts of objects in general and thereby with objects."⁵³

Let me conclude this section by stressing that while Hegel's Logic satisfies Kant's most general characterization of transcendental philosophy, it does not satisfy his more specific characterization:

not every *a priori* cognition must be called transcendental, but only that by means of which we cognize that and how certain representations (intuitions or concepts) are applied entirely *a priori*, or are possible (i.e., the possibility of cognition or its use *a priori*).

(A56/B80)

This characterization would not apply to Hegel's Logic, for the science of pure thinking does not concern itself with how it is possible for pure concepts to be 'applied' to objects given by the faculty of sensibility. It does not concern itself with this Kantian topic because it is not about the representational capacities of the human mind at all: it is about pure thinking, that is, thinking as such, and does not begin by specifying whether this is the thinking of man, of God, or of beasts.⁵⁴ As we will see, Hegel also thinks that Logic, as the science of pure thinking, is able to provide itself with a content without relating its concepts to sensibly given objects. Finally, since Logic coincides with metaphysics, it does not restrict itself to claims about how objects appear to us, nor does it restrict its knowledge to objects that we can experience. It goes "all the way" to objects as they are in themselves, or rather, insofar as the

Kantian distinction between ‘appearances’ and ‘things in themselves’ is even a topic in Logic, it is one that Logic ultimately overcomes.⁵⁵ Thus, by identifying Hegel’s Logic as his transcendental philosophy, I am not denying fundamental differences between the ambition and scope of the original Kantian and the transformed Hegelian conception of the transcendental project; indeed, I am insisting upon them.

§6 ‘With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?’

Hegel’s *WdL* is prefaced with a methodological section about what “science” (pure science, the science of logic) must begin with, and whether that beginning must be mediate or immediate. In line with my suggestion that Hegel’s Logic is his successor to Kantian transcendental philosophy, we can profitably compare his methodological considerations there with Kant’s remarks about the beginning of transcendental philosophy in the Table of Nothings. But in order to make this comparison we need to understand what sense of “beginning” is at stake in Hegel’s prefatory discussion, ‘With what must the beginning of science be made?’ This question is tied up with another interpretive question about this section, namely, what “mediacy” and “immediacy” mean. For, one of its key claims is that the beginning of science must be immediate.⁵⁶

One thing “beginning” might mean is the *epistemic* beginning of a science, that is, the epistemic situation we are in when we understand the science, its object, and its way of knowing its object but have yet to set about knowing the object in that way. Likewise, mediation might mean epistemic mediation, that is, knowing something by means of knowing something else (e.g., inferential knowledge). But “beginning” might also mean the *metaphysical* beginning of a science, its *prius* or first principle. For instance, the first principle of metaphysics would be water or air in pre-Socratic metaphysics, the Forms in Plato, monads in Leibniz, or the one substance in Spinoza.⁵⁷ Metaphysical mediation refers to a being that exists in virtue of some other being, in other words, a being whose existence is grounded in something else (e.g., a mode of substance).

We can quickly dispense with the metaphysical beginning, however, since Hegel states explicitly that the beginning of pure science is *not* the metaphysical beginning or first principle; only what is *last* in Logic, in the development of the pure contents of thinking, will be metaphysically *first* (according to Hegel, the Absolute Idea).⁵⁸

Likewise, although the epistemic beginning of science is clearly crucial, I want to focus instead on what I will call its *semantic* beginning.⁵⁹ The semantic beginning of a science is the meanings or contents we must understand at the outset of that science. For instance, the semantic beginning of a science might be a concept of its object, which we must understand in order to begin the science. Semantic mediacy refers to a content that has its meaning in virtue of its relation to some other

content. A paradigmatic example is a concept that is a determination of some other concept; for example, <animal> as a determination of <living thing>. The science of zoology (the science of animals) is semantically mediated by the concept of <living thing>, for one cannot have the concept <animal>, and therefore cannot study animals as animals, without thinking of that concept as a determination of <living thing>. Semantic immediacy refers to a content that is not a determination of any further content and is thus not understood via (by means of) that content.⁶⁰

The argument of “With What Must the Beginning of Science Be Made?” is that the semantic beginning of Logic must be immediate, that is, it must be a content that is not (semantically) mediated by some further content. But this follows more or less directly from the very concept of a semantic “beginning” and the project of a science of Logic itself. For if Logic were to begin with a semantically mediated content, then the thinkability of that content would depend upon that mediating content, which by assumption it was not starting with, and in this sense, it would not be thinking (at least not explicitly). It would therefore not be thinking everything that thought needs to think, *not even its very first content*, its beginning. It would fail from the start to be Logic, properly speaking.⁶¹

But this also means that the beginning of Logic must be made with an indeterminate content, for a determinate content is always mediated by, and thus dependent upon, some other content. According to Hegel’s conception of the semantic determinacy of the content of thought, a content receives its determinacy through *negation*, that is, by not being some other content. This is Spinoza’s dictum *omnis determinatio est negatio*, but transformed from a metaphysical principle about being (all determinate beings contain negation) to a semantic principle about the content of thought: to be a determinate content is to be the negation of some other content. This means that in order to think of A as A (for A to be in the content of one’s thought) one must contrast A with something that A is *not*, which we will temporarily call not-A.⁶² I will call this the *Contrastive Principle*. But this means that A is determinately the content of thought it is (partly) in virtue of its negative relation to not-A; that is, one is determinately thinking A, rather than something else, partly in virtue of thinking it as not being not-A. The thought of A is mediated by the thought of not-A; only by means of thinking not-A is it possible to think A. So if determinacy requires negation, and negation is a form of mediation, a completely immediate content must be a content devoid of negation, and thus completely indeterminate.⁶³

This is why Hegel thinks that Logic must begin with a completely indeterminate concept, <being>.⁶⁴ The first thought-determination in Logic is not the concept of any particular being or beings or kind of beings. Any such concept would necessarily be mediated by, for example, the concept of other beings or kinds of being that they are *not*. The first

thought-determination of Logic is the concept of *what is*, abstracting from all thinkable differences among beings. It is the complete indeterminate thought of being *überhaupt*, or *pure* being.

§7 Indeterminate Concepts: Object and Being

We are now in a position to understand how Hegel's methodological considerations about the beginning of pure science connect with Kant's remarks about the beginning of transcendental philosophy. Many of Hegel's remarks about the "beginning" of pure science (Logic, transcendental philosophy) concern, I have argued, its semantic beginning. But the "beginning" of transcendental philosophy that Kant mentions in the passage quoted at the outset is also a "semantic" beginning, that is, the most general concept of transcendental philosophy, which is therefore not a determination of, and thus not mediated by, any higher concept of transcendental philosophy. Hegel thinks the (semantic) beginning of Logic must be absolutely indeterminate. Recall Kant's model of conceptual determinacy: a more general concept is less determinate than a determination of that concept (that concept combined with an additional mark), which is itself negatively related to another determination, its contradictory opposite (e.g., *<rational>* and *<non-rational>* are determinations of *<animal>*). Kant thought that transcendental philosophy must begin not with such a pair of contradictorily opposed concepts (*<something>* and *<nothing>*), but with a more general and hence less determinate concept, namely, *<object>*. As we have seen, there is internal pressure within Kant's system to think this concept is in fact completely indeterminate, and this generates a problem for him: if this concept is wholly indeterminate, it seems to add nothing to the original opposition between *<something>* and *<nothing>*; but if it is determinate then it cannot be the beginning of transcendental philosophy, for that science should begin with the less determinate concept that mediates *<object>*.

Hegel sees a way past this dilemma, a way to begin with an absolutely indeterminate concept and generate further contents from it. His proposal is that we start from an absolutely indeterminate concept, that of pure being, but that we reject Kant's Concept Division principle as applied to the concepts of Logic: we start with *<being>* and oppose it to its negation *<non-being>*, i.e., *<nothing>*, without assuming that these are determinations of some more general and less determinate concept.

But the similarities in the issues that both Kant and Hegel are concerned with at the beginning of transcendental philosophy go even deeper than this. First, consider Kant's and Hegel's beginnings: *<object>* and *<being>*, respectively. Recall that the concept that begins Kantian transcendental philosophy is *<object of representation>* and that the topic of Hegel's Logic is what thought thinks, that is, the *object* of thought. That the first concept of Logic is *<being>* means that the first object of thought, the object that thought thinks about at the beginning

of Logic, is being in general. But *<being>* is completely indeterminate. If *<being>* is completely indeterminate, and if it is the first object of thinking, then the first object of thinking is not one object of thinking among others, for it is not a determinate object of thinking. It is simply the indeterminate thought of the object of thinking in general. In other words, by beginning with a purely indeterminate concept, Logic begins by thinking of the object of thought fully indeterminately as simply *the object of thought* in general, or *what is*. This means that the first concept of the Logic could just as well be said to be *<object of thinking>*.

Recall further that thinking, for Hegel, is not one species or kind of content-bearing attitude among others; thinking is intentional relation to content *überhaupt*. But this means that, although Hegel's conception of thinking is radically different from what he calls 'representation,' "thinking" plays a role in Logic analogous to the role of "representation in general" in Kantian transcendental philosophy: it is the most general term for intentional relation to any content whatsoever. So the first concept of Hegelian transcendental philosophy is the concept of the most general object of what Kant would call "representation," but here abstracted from all differences among kinds of thinking: it is simply the thinkable as such. This means that Hegel's beginning radicalizes Kant's idea that the beginning must be *<object>*, in at least two ways. First, while Kant shies away from the potentially problematic idea of starting with a perfectly indeterminate concept, Hegel embraces it. The second way in which Kant radicalizes Hegel's beginning is that while Kant argues that a contradictorily opposed pair (e.g., *<something>* and *<nothing>*) must be understood as determinations of a more general concept (e.g., *<object>*), Hegel proposes an alternative to this Kantian conception: to begin with *<being>* and let its relation to its contradictory, *<nothing>*, generate everything that follows.

§8 The Dialectic of Being and Nothing

Hegel tells us at the beginning of the *WdL* that the central mistake of Kant's logic was that he considered the forms of thought only as "dead forms" rather than in their "organic unity."⁶⁵ He goes on to say that the 'movement' of thought-determinations in his transformed, speculative Logic will work by uncovering contradictions among thought-determinations and resolving them. This process of "movement" by contradiction and resolution is what Hegel calls *dialectic*.⁶⁶

The "movement" of thought in Logic consists, at the most basic level, in transitions from one thought-determination, or set of thought-determinations, to another. So what we need to understand is why thought transitions, that is, how the Logic proceeds in the way that it does. I think that part of the explanation of the movement in Logic is the Contrastive Principle from earlier: in order to think A as A (i.e., in order for A to be in the content of one's thought), thought must contrast

A with something it is not, a content we will call not-A. Contradictions arise, on my reading, when thought must think A and not-A as distinct (by the Contrastive Principle) but also must think of them as identical. This occurs because thought, at a particular stage in the Logic, thinks according to a set of thought-contents according to which A and not-A are the very same content, even though they cannot be, by the Contrastive Principle. This generates the contradiction. It is crucial to note that the contradiction is not merely that A and not-A are mutually contradictory. No contradiction results merely because one can think contradictorily opposed predicates. A contradiction arises when one predicates them of one and the same object (of thought). In this sense, the contradictorily opposed predicates (the predicates that generate the contradiction) are not A and not-A; they are *identical to not-A* and *not-identical to not-A*, and they are predicated of *A itself* (just as *identical to A* and *not-identical to A* are predicated of not-A).⁶⁷

The contradiction is resolved by thought introducing new contents which are sufficient to distinguish A and not-A, and thus resolve the contradiction. This means that ‘stages’ of the Logic correspond to thought trying to think with some proper subset of the complete set of contents it needs to think consistently (i.e., without contradictions), the set of contents that Hegel calls “Absolute Idea.” The “movement” of Logic is thus thought’s gradual evolution, out of itself, of the contents necessary to think consistently. Since lack of contradiction expresses a law of thinking’s nature (rather than something imposed on it from outside), the movement of Logic can also be seen as thought’s “becoming what it is,” or evolving, from its own nature, to its most complete or developed form. This is part of what is involved in Hegel’s claim that thinking, in his Logic, is “living” and “self-moving.”⁶⁸

This lands us immediately in some of the hardest questions about the beginning of the Logic. As before, I will sketch an answer, without pretending to resolve all issues or respond to every possible objection.⁶⁹

Logic begins with *<being>*. Why then does thinking transition to *<nothing>*? In other words, why doesn’t Logic begin and end with *<being>*: thinking in perpetual static contemplation of pure being? The explanation, on my account, is that in order to think being *as being* (i.e., in order for *<being>* to be in the content of thought), thinking must contrast it with what it is not, namely, *non-being*, that is, *nothing*.⁷⁰ In order to think *<being>*, thought must be able to think something it is not, *<non-being>*, i.e., *<nothing>*.

Consider the famous opening of the *WdL*:

A. *Being*

Being, pure being – without further determination. In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with

respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly. If any determination or content were posited in it as distinct, or if it were posited by this determination or content as distinct from an other, it would thereby fail to hold fast to its purity. It is pure indeterminateness and emptiness. – There is nothing to be intuited in it, if one can speak here of intuiting; or, it is only this pure empty intuiting itself. Just as little is anything to be thought in it, or, it is equally only this empty thinking. Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact nothing, and neither more nor less than nothing.

(WdL 68–9/SL 59)

In the first paragraph, Hegel describes what we think in thinking *<being>*. Because *<being>* is pure, that is, not mediated in any way, it is fully indeterminate. It is not the thought of any particular being or beings: in thinking pure being, thought has abstracted from any particular being or beings. The thought of being is empty, devoid of determinate content. But consider the final sentence: “Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing.” The crucial question is where did this concept of ‘nothing’ come from? I take it that this entire paragraph is simply an unpacking of what is contained in the thought of *<being>*, so the thought of nothing is the same as the thought of pure being: the completely indeterminate content. By saying that *<being>* is the thought of nothing, Hegel means that it is not the thought of anything, that is, it is not the thought of anything determinate.

The next paragraph continues:

B. *Nothing*

Nothing, pure nothingness; it is simple equality with itself, complete emptiness, complete absence of determination and content; lack of all distinction within. – In so far as mention can be made here of intuiting and thinking, it makes a difference whether something or nothing is being intuited or thought. To intuit or to think nothing has therefore a meaning; the two are distinguished and so nothing is (concretely exists) in our intuiting or thinking; or rather it is the empty intuiting and thinking itself, like pure being. – Nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure being is.

(WdL 69/SL 59)

The question immediately arises, however: What does this concept *<nothing>* have to do with ‘nothing’ as it was introduced at the end of the previous paragraph? My answer is this: in order to think *<being>*, thinking must contrast it with its determinate negation, that is, *<non-being>*, i.e., *<nothing>*. This is not the concept of some determinate

and therefore mediated non-being or nothing, such as the non-being of this or that being (e.g. cold, darkness, and empty space). It abstracts from all such differences, from all such determinations in negation. But by the Contrastive Principle above, if we abstract from all differences between thought-contents, we thereby abstract from all determinate thought-content, for determinate thought-content is constituted by its negative, contrastive relation to other contents. Thus, as Hegel here describes, thinking finds in <nothing> the very same content it found in <being>, namely, absolute indeterminacy. Thus, in the first paragraph, Hegel uncovers in the thought of <being> the absolutely empty thought, the thought that is not of anything determinate. In the second paragraph, he applies the Contrastive Principle to this content to find its determinate negation, <non-being>, that is, <nothing>. He then shows that this content is the very same we discovered <being> to be in the first paragraph, that is, the absolutely indeterminate content.

This is the source of the contradiction. On the one hand, being and nothing cannot be the same, for they are constituted by the negative relationship between them: to think being *as being* one must contrast it with nothing. On the other hand, when thought thinks only with the contents <being> and <nothing> they are the very same completely indeterminate content: they abstract from all determinate beings (pure being), which is equivalent to abstracting from all determinate differences between beings (pure nothing). If we abstract from all determinate beings, and if we abstract from all determinate differences among beings, we arrive, via the Contrastive Principle, at the same content: pure being and pure nothing are the same.⁷¹ This contradiction – that being is the same as nothing, and is not the same as nothing – generates thought’s movement to yet further contents: to becoming, which is simply the thought of this contradictory relation between being and nothing, and eventually to determinate being (*Dasein*), which resolves the contradiction.^{72, 73}

From Hegel’s point of view, Kant shrunk back from the thought that transcendental philosophy could begin with such a pair of mutually contradictory concepts because he did not understand the dynamic or ‘dialectical’ nature of logic. He failed to see, according to Hegel, that this mere relation of contradictory opposition between completely indeterminate and hence identical concepts was sufficient to generate the rest of the content of transcendental philosophy; that is, that thought, starting merely from such a distinction, is sufficient to generate all of its pure contents.

In fact, Hegel raises the intriguing possibility which we discussed at the end of **Section 2** in connection with Kant, that transcendental philosophy (Logic) could begin with *nothing*:

That ‘nothing’ is the result of the argument, and that the beginning would then have to be made with nothing (as in Chinese philosophy)

need not cause us to lift a finger. For even before we had lifted it, this nothing would have turned into being just as much.

(see Section B above, 'Nothing'; *WdL* 87/*SL* 75)

I take this to mean that if we had started Logic with pure nothing, this would have 'transitioned' into pure being (by the Contrastive Principle), just as pure being transitions into pure nothing, and we would be back with the same contradiction that Hegel originally confronted: pure nothing both is and is not the same as pure being. Whereas it was at least questionable whether Kantian transcendental philosophy could begin by articulating the conditions of the possibility of experience purely negatively (by successively determining the concept of nothing), Hegel thinks that beginning with pure nothing would make no substantial difference to Logic.

§9 Kant and Hegel on Nothing

We can think of Kant and Hegel's meditations on the beginning of transcendental philosophy as two different reactions to the opening of Baumgarten's transcendental philosophy, his ontology:

§7. Nothing, negative (cf. §54), what cannot be represented, impossible, inconsistent, (an absurdity cf. §13), involving or implying a contradiction, contradictory—is both A and not-A. Or, there is no subject of contradictory predicates, or, nothing both is and is not. $0 = A + \text{not-A}$. This proposition is called the principle of contradiction, and it is absolutely primary.

§8. That which is not nothing is SOMETHING [*aliquid*]: the representable, whatever does not involve a contradiction, whatever is not both A and not-A, is POSSIBLE.

(§7)⁷⁴

According to Kant, this represents a lack of self-critical reflection on the representational capacities involved in such an ontology. Were we to begin instead by reflecting on these capacities, before making the distinction between <nothing> (the impossible) and <something> (the possible) we would place above these concepts the higher, less determinate concept <object of representation in general.> We would then distinguish various representational capacities and their forms, and thus distinguish between what is nothing for them (what violates their form) and what is something for them (what agrees with their form). In particular, we would distinguish the understanding from sensibility, and thus distinguish the logical nothing (what cannot be conceptually represented because it contradicts itself) from the real nothing (what cannot be both intuited *and* conceptualized). We would then go on to distinguish

various moments or aspects of the understanding's application of concepts to objects given in sensibility, according to the Table of Categories. This would give us a systematically ordered Table of Nothings, that is, of concepts of objects that disagree with the form of conceptual determination by the relevant moment of the Table of Categories: impossible object of quantitative determination (*ens rationis*), impossible object of qualitative determination (*nihil privativum*), and impossible object of relational determination (*ens imaginarium*). At the end of this table, we would list the most general notion of nothing with which we began, the object that cannot be really modally determinate because it is not even logically possible in the first place, the *nihil negativum*.

Hegel's view is in a certain respect closer to Baumgarten's than Kant's, for he does not think that we must begin transcendental philosophy with a second-order reflection on our cognitive powers. Transcendental philosophy can begin with first-order consideration of nothing, as Baumgarten does. What is more, Hegel would welcome the fact that Baumgarten's ontology begins with nothing. This is a fine starting place, according to Hegel, as long as we understand 'nothing' as the completely indeterminate concept of pure nothing, the concept that abstracts from any determinate non-being (the negation of some determinate being) and represents the complete absence of any being whatsoever.

But Baumgarten is wrong, from Hegel's perspective, to identify <nothing> with that which contains a contradiction. On the contrary, every category short of Absolute Idea contains a contradiction; that is what drives thought forward, in Logic, to think the Absolute Idea. And insofar as contradiction is itself a category in Logic, it comes later and is not to be identified with <nothing>. ⁷⁵ Baumgarten is right to think that <nothing>, the concept of pure nothing, must be mediated by a distinct content, the determinate negation that makes it the content that it is, but he is wrong to identify this second content as *ens*, for *ens* is the concept of a determinate being (*ens = Etwasaliquid*, one being among others). ⁷⁶ Instead, the second concept of a transcendental philosophy that begins with pure nothing, is <being in general>, that is, pure being. The first task in this transformed order of presentation of Hegelian Logic would be to show that pure nothing is identical to pure being, but also is not identical to it. This is the contradiction that generates everything to come.

Nor is it appropriate to characterize <nothing> as "unrepresentable," as Baumgarten does, if this means unthinkable (as it does for Baumgarten). Not only is "nothing" eminently thinkable, the "unthinkable" has no place in Logic (or anywhere, for that matter), which studies precisely what is thinkable qua thinkable. The Hegelian nothing is thus not a concept of what is "outside" or "incompatible" with thinking; it is a constitutive moment of thinking itself, namely, negation. Thinking

works by thinking a content, thinking its negation (which is necessary to think the former content determinately as the content it is), locating a contradiction, resolving the contradiction, and so on. That second moment of negation is the source not only of Hegel's most general concept of nothing (pure nothing) but each of his more determinate concepts of nothing. Pure nothing is the determinate negation of pure being, the most indeterminate concept of all. This means that pure nothing is the most indeterminate concept of negation, of non-being. For each more determinate concept of being (the first in each triad of concepts in Logic), there is also a more determinate concept of non-being, of nothing (the second in the triad, the negation of the first). This means that at every stage of the Logic we can identify concepts of nothing: Hegel's complete "Table of Nothings" is nothing less than the entire Logic itself.

§10 Abbreviations of Primary Sources (and Translations)

- AA Kant, I. 1902–. *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (vols. 1–29). Ed. Berlin-Brandenburg (formerly: Royal Prussian) Academy of Sciences. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–. Cited by volume and page number.
- EL Hegel, G.W.F. 1830. *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Erster Teil: Wissenschaft der Logik*. 3rd ed. In HW 8. *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences in Outline. First Part: Science of Logic*. Trans. & Ed. D. Dahlstrom & K. Brinkmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- HA Hegel, G.W.F. 1968–. *Gesammelte Werke*. 31 Vols. Ed. Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Hamburg: Meiner.
- HW Hegel, G.W.F. 1986. *Hegels Werke in Zwanzig Bänden*. Ed. E. Moldenhauer & K.M. Michel. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. Cited by volume and page number.
- JL *Logik, herausgegeben von Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche*. AA 9: 1–150. *Jäsche Logic*. Kant, I. 1992. *Jäsche Logic*. In *Lectures on Logic*. Ed. and Trans. J.M. Young. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (A:1781, B:1787). AA 3 (B) and 4: 1–252 (A). Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. & Trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sein *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band: Die objektive Logik. Erstes Buch: Das Sein.* 1st. ed. (1812). Cited by page number in HA 11.
- Meta. Baumgarten, A. G. *Metaphysica*. 4th ed. Halle, 1757. AA 17:5–206.
Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant's Elucidations, Selected Notes and Related Materials, C. Fugate and J. Hymers (Trans. and Eds.). London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Refl. *Kants handschriftlicher Nachlaß*. AA. 14–23. Cited by four-digit number and volume and page number in AA.
- SL Hegel, G.W.F. 2010. *Science of Logic*. Trans. & Ed. G. di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Quoted by page number
- VL Kant. *Vorlesungen über Logik*. AA 24.
- VM Kant. *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik*. AA 28 & 29.
- WdL Hegel, G.W.F. 1832. *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band: Objektive Logik. Erstes Buch: Die Lehre vom Sein.* 2nd Ed. Cited by page number in HA 21. Translations quoted from *SL* (see above).

Notes

- 1 See the end of this chapter for a list of abbreviations and translations.
- 2 A11–14/B24–28.
- 3 See Section 4 for an argument that the Logic is Hegel's transcendental philosophy. (I capitalize "Logic" to indicate specifically Hegel's Logic, which is contained in both the *WdL* and the *EL*, as opposed to the discipline of logic in general.) See note 48 below for an explanation of my description of the contents of Logic as "concepts."
- 4 I am not the first to write about Hegel in relation to the Table of Nothings. Güngör 2017 discusses Hegel's critique of Kant, focusing on the concept of nothing; Hymers 2018 briefly notes the connection; while Cürsgen 2020 concludes with a discussion of Hegel on nothing. But none of them discuss the methodological issues that are my focus here.
- 5 In this essay I extend to Hegel the recent Kantian convention of denoting the contents of thought by angle brackets and italics (e.g., <triangle> denotes the concept of a triangle). See note 48 below for a defense of my calling these Hegelian thought-contents "concepts." I want to emphasize, though, that this notational and terminological choice is not intended, in any way, to suggest that they are concepts in Kant's technical sense (mediate, general representations).
- 6 At B25 this definition is amended to agree with that given at A56/B80.
- 7 I have modified the translation, for it adds "something" as a grammatical subject, which I think distorts Baumgarten's intent by undoing the contrast between nothing and something (what is possible). See the translator's note in *Meta.*, 100, note b, on the translation of *Nihil negativum* in the first sentence.

- 8 *Meta.* §7–8, 100–101. At the place marked by an asterisk, Baumgarten adds a gloss in German on *aliquid*: ‘*Etwas.*’
- 9 As Hymers 2018 notes, this means that Baumgarten begins his ontology with <*nothing*>. However, an alternate reading is possible, on which §7 introduces the principle of contradiction, and only then defines the possible/something in opposition to the impossible/nothing. This would bring Baumgarten into agreement with Wolff’s “German Metaphysics” (Wolff 1965, §10–13). But for the purposes of this essay I want to hold on to the fact that the ontology section of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* begins with the word *Nihil*, and the intriguing possibility (from a Hegelian perspective) of beginning ontology with *nothing*.
- 10 I discharge this assumption in Section 3.
- 11 In this essay I do not discuss Kant’s most famous objection to Baumgarten concerning <*nothing*>: that his proof of the principle of sufficient reason (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) illegitimately equivocates on the meaning of “nothing.” Cf. VM 29:815–6 and the discussion in Hymers 2018.
- 12 Though there are representations without objects, namely, sensations, or what Kant calls “subjective sensations” in the third *Kritik* (A320/B376, AA 5:206).
- 13 For instance, the modern “quantificational” notion of an object as the value of a bound 1st-order variable (though I have my doubts—see Stang 2017).
- 14 In the terminology I develop elsewhere, it is the concept of an r-object in general. See Stang Forthcoming.
- 15 There is a small, but growing, literature about the Table of Nothings: Vallengilla 1965; Vollrath 1970; Van Kirk 1990; Longuenesse 2000, 303–305; Blomme 2014; Stang 2016, Ch. 6.6; Hymers 2018. For a complete list, see the Bibliography in Cürsgen 2020.
- 16 “The postulate of the possibility of things thus requires that their concepts agree with the formal conditions of experience in general” (A220/B267, my emphasis). Modal categories are to be applied not directly to objects, but to concepts of objects.
- 17 A244/B302, A596/B204, JL 9:51.
- 18 In the Table of Categories, the first category of modality is listed as “Possibility-Impossibility” (A80/B106).
- 19 The Table corresponds to various passages in Kant’s lectures and unpublished *Reflexionen*: VM 28: 414, 543–4, 628, 811–12, and 29: 960–2; *Refl.* 5552 (18:219), 5724 (18:336).
- 20 Cf. B111. This draws on an interpretation of the categories of quantity articulated in greater detail in Stang Forthcoming.
- 21 My reading of the quantitative nothing thus ties it very closely to the Amphiboly discussion of numerical and qualitative identity. See A263/B219.
- 22 Cf. Kant’s distinction between *ens rationis ratiocinantis* (sophistical entity) and *ens rationis ratiocinatae* (entity of reason) at AA 5:468 and his description of the *ens realissimum* as the former at VM 28:1155, 1249.
- 23 This does however mean that noumena are impossible according to the definition of possibility in the Postulate (quoted in the main text), so Kant must have a broader notion of possibility that potentially includes concepts of noumena. See Stang 2016 for more.
- 24 By contrast, Baumgarten defines the *nihil privativum* as merely possible, non-actual being (*Meta.* §54). Cf. AA 2:72, and VM 28:12, 403, 938, 29:792.
- 25 In texts from the 1760s Kant draws a distinction between a *Mangel* or *privatio*, that is, a mere absence of reality (e.g. an animal’s absence of rationality),

- and a *Beraubung* or *deprivatio*, that is, an absence of reality that results from a real conflict between opposing realities (e.g. a body whose motion is impeded by a body moving in the opposite direction with an equal but opposite force); see AA 2:87, 177–8.
- 26 A29/B44, A175/B217.
- 27 Cf. VM 28:426, 494.
- 28 Nor are space and time modes of substances or relations among them; see A26/B42 and A291/B347.
- 29 See A24/B38–9 and A429/B457, as well as the long footnote on that page.
- 30 Cf. AA 2:71, A596/B624 n., *Refl.* 3711 (17:252), 3720 (17:267), and VM 28:403, 494, 542, 544, 623, 29:792, 807, 813.
- 31 Significant difficulties arise, however, in understanding the example Kant gives of the “modal” nothing: “the rectilinear figure with two sides (*nihil negativum*)” (A291/B348), for Kant had earlier claimed that that it is logically possible for two straight lines to enclose a space (A47/B65, A220/B268). For reasons of space, however, I will not attempt to resolve this interpretive puzzle here.
- 32 Bxxvi n., A596/B624 n., A611/B638. See however AA 28:811, where Kant says that a logically impossible object is also really impossible.
- 33 Cf. Stang 2016, Ch. 6.6.
- 34 In terms of Kant’s geographic metaphor at A235–6/B294–5, this corresponds to the difference between, in the positive case, surveying the boundaries of the “island” of cognition from within (positive), and, in the negative case, beginning by eliminating from the map the ‘broad and stormy ocean’ where no cognition is possible for us (negative). This connection is also made by Gungör 2017.
- 35 Cf. VM 29:960, where Kant explicitly identifies this as the concept of an object of representation in general.
- 36 This point is repeated throughout the logic lectures; see VL, AA 24: 453–4, 568, 655, 755.
- 37 I am temporarily ignoring objects and taking the extension of a concept to be constituted exclusively of more specific concepts contained under a given concept.
- 38 Kant defines *bestimmen* this way in several places; cf. VM 28:628, 818, and *Refl.* 5704 (18:331). Cf. A571/B599.
- 39 Cf. Stang 2016, Ch. 1.6, Bader 2018, and my reply, Stang 2018.
- 40 A51/B75, A55/B79, A58/B83, A62/B87, A239/B298.
- 41 Cf. VL, AA 24:911, and 24:569, where the highest concept is identified as *Ding*. In other texts, Kant sometimes follows the Table of Nothings in identifying it as ‘object’ (AA 24:454, 755), and sometimes simply does not say what the highest concept is (AA 24:655).
- 42 I omit my proposed Kantian solution for reasons of space. But let me note here one possible response to this problem which cannot be Kant’s. In empirical natural science we do not have a “highest” concept, but are given the regulative task of constantly finding more general species-concepts to subsume genus-concepts (A567/B785). The same cannot be the case in transcendental philosophy, much less in its preparatory critique, for the basic concepts of that science, unlike natural science, are supposed to be specifiable all at once. See Axiii, A13–14/B27–8, A136/B175.
- 43 *WdL* 54, *Sein* 30.
- 44 See EL §17, 8:63.
- 45 See *WdL* 35, 42, 48.
- 46 See EL §24 Zu1, 8:82. Cf. EL 8:24, 42, 44, 52, 58, 70, 74, 78, 83.
- 47 See Höhle 1987, Ch. 2, for a more comprehensive historical argument that Hegel’s Logic is his transcendental philosophy.

- 48 In this essay, referring to the *Denkbestimmungen* of Logic as “concepts” is a terminological stipulation. In work currently in preparation I argue that this is correct Hegelian usage: all the thought-determinations of the Logic are *Begriffe* in Hegel’s technical sense (though they are not all ‘*der Begriff*’).
- 49 Kant criticizes Aristotle at A81/B107, and Hegel makes the same point against Kant at HW 20:346.
- 50 Recall: ‘the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience’ (A158/B197).
- 51 EL 8:81, *WdL* 33.
- 52 EL §24. Cf. *WdL* 33, where Hegel states that pure science “contains thought in so far as this thought is equally the thing [*Sache*] as it is in itself; or the fact [*Sache*] in itself in so far as this is equally pure thought.” See also *WdL* 29, 45.
- 53 This means, among other things, that it will make no ultimate difference whether we describe the Logic as concerning, for instance, <*being*> or *being*. Because thought-contents in Logic are fully transparent to their ‘objects,’ these are fully equivalent to each other. No “use-mention error”, so to speak, can arise in Logic.
- 54 Admittedly, Hegel does characterize the content of the Logic as the exposition of the mind of God (*WdL* 34). However, I take this remark to be a promissory note: in the course of the Logic and the larger System of which it is the first part, it will be proved that the content of Logic is the thoughts in God’s mind. Cf. Tolley 2019.
- 55 On this point, see Pippin 2019, 217–250.
- 56 Henrich 1971 is the classic work on the problem of the beginning in Hegel’s Logic; see Dunphy 2020 for more a recent discussion.
- 57 *WdL* 53.
- 58 *WdL* 57.
- 59 I take Hegel’s view to be that the Logic is epistemically mediated by the *PdG*, but the beginning of Logic is epistemically immediate *within Logic itself*: the knowledge we have at the beginning of Logic, our epistemic starting point, is not epistemically mediated by anything else *in Logic*. It is epistemically mediated by a different science, namely, the science of the experience of consciousness, the *PdG* itself. See *WdL* 33, 54.
- 60 My notional distinction between semantic and epistemic beginning (and mediation) is by no means intended to deny that there is a close connection between them, or indeed that they are identical. As is often the case with Hegel, for the purposes of understanding the identity of two concepts it is helpful to notionally separate them and then see why that separation has to be *aufgehoben*. However, I do not undertake that latter, unificatory project in this essay.
- 61 I do not mean to deny that the beginning of Logic is semantically mediated by the *PdG*, as Hegel explicitly claims (*WdL* 32, 54). But as with the epistemic mediation of the *WdL* by the *PdG* (see note 59), we do need distinguish mediation *überhaupt* from mediation *within Logic*: the concept of pure science (Logic) is the ‘result’ of the *PdG*, but within Logic no other concept mediates the concept of its beginning, that is the concept of “pure being.”
- 62 Hegel repeatedly references this Spinozistic doctrine (HW 4:434, 5:121, 8:195, 18:287), even going so far as to say that it is “the Spinozistic idea in its entirety” (HW 20:164). See Melamed 2012 for discussion. In work currently under preparation I reconstruct the Spinozistic Contrastive Principle as driving much of the argument of the *WdL*.
- 63 This is my (condensed) reconstruction of the argument in the “*Anfang*” section that begins “[the beginning] be mediated by nothing” and ends “the

- beginning is therefore pure being” (*WdL* 56). Negation is massive topic in Hegel, which I cannot possibly hope to tackle fully here. For critical discussion, see Henrich 1976 and 1978, and Koch 1999.
- 64 See note 5 above on my use of angle brackets to denote Hegelian thought-contents and note 48 on calling them ‘concepts.’
- 65 *WdL* 32, 36.
- 66 *WdL* 39, 90–91.
- 67 Contradiction is also a massive topic in Hegel, which I cannot address fully here. See Wolff 1981, the classic study of contradiction in Hegel and Kant.
- 68 *WdL* 32, 45.
- 69 In particular, my response to the problem about the beginning of the Logic posed by Henrich 1971 must await a further occasion.
- 70 Some readers might object that the Contrastive Principle (like the Spinozistic principle on which it is based) is a principle about determinate being, and thus cannot be applied to *<pure being>*, for that is purely indeterminate. However, Hegel himself explicitly claims that *<pure being>* is a determination, namely, ‘the indeterminate,’ and because of this it cannot be the determination it is (i.e., the negation of pure being): “Or one can say, because Being is the indeterminate [*Bestimmungslose*], it is not the (affirmative) determination it is, therefore, not being, but Nothing” (*WdL* 86). Thanks to Jim Kreines, Tobias Rosefeldt, and Thomas Meyer for pressing me on this point.
- 71 Hegel states this very clearly in the first edition of the Doctrine of Being:
- Being is nothing, nothing is being. It has already been remarked, that the expression of speculative truth in the form of simple sentences is incomplete. Here must be added the further sentences: being is not nothing, nothing is not being; thereby is the difference also expressed, which was merely present in these sentences.
- (*Sein*, 74)
- Cf. *WdL* 78.
- 72 On my reading, ‘becoming’ does not resolve the contradiction between being and nothing; it is their contradictory relation. The contradiction that being both is and is not nothing is only resolved by the introduction of ‘determinate being’ (*Dasein*); but this lies outside the scope of this essay. See *WdL* 75.
- 73 See *WdL* (83) and the EL (8:186–8), where Hegel claims that the difference between pure being and pure nothing is “unsayable.” I take this to mean “unsayable using only being and nothing”; that is, we cannot think their relation consistently without introducing further thought-contents.
- 74 *Meta*. §7–8, 100–101.
- 75 See the *Widerspruch* section in the Doctrine of Essence (HW 6:64–79).
- 76 The third moment of *Dasein*; see *WdL*, 102–104.

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