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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Understanding Hegel's Logic: On Houlgate's *Hegel on Being*

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Stephen Houlgate has long been among the leading authorities on Hegel, and he returns his attention (Houlgate, 2021) to one of Hegel's most crucial but also most opaque texts, namely his *Science of Logic*. Houlgate had previously covered some of this material in his earlier work *The Opening of Hegel's 'Logic'* (Houlgate, 2006); but this only dealt with the first two chapters of Book One of Hegel's text, on 'Being' and 'Determinate Being', while Houlgate's new publication covers the whole of Book One and hence his entire 'Doctrine of Being'—though despite running to some 850 pages, this still leaves it far short of commenting on Hegel's entire text, which goes on to provide a 'Doctrine of Essence' and a 'Doctrine of the Concept'. It is of course hard not to wonder what Houlgate would say about these sections of the *Logic* too, and we must all hope that at some point we will be informed. Nonetheless, we must feel grateful and satisfied with what we are told here, while in addition, Houlgate puts his reading in a broader context that makes clear his overall reading of Hegel's philosophy, as well as how it can be related to other philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling and Frege.

The result, I think, is one of the most significant books on Hegel that has been published in the past 30 years or so, perhaps since Robert Pippin's *Hegel's Idealism* (Pippin, 1989). This is not because it is on the *Logic*—for actually after a period of neglect, there have been quite a lot of publications on that text recently. And this is also not because one of the key themes of Houlgate's book—namely the presuppositionlessness of Hegel's method—is original to this text, as there has also been quite a lot on that too, including by Houlgate himself in earlier works. Rather, what makes Houlgate's book something of a landmark is the way it really considers things in detail, following through all the moves and micro-moves that Hegel makes in his own text. This attention to detail is not simply a form of hermeneutic scrupulousness on Houlgate's part—though he is always indeed a scrupulous and fair-minded reader—but is linked to his understanding of Hegel's project as such: namely, that Hegel is setting out a kind of presuppositionless inquiry that moves forward in an internally driven way from one position to the next, and unless we fully understand and grasp this movement in all its rich detail, we will miss what is really going on—to see the wood, we must inspect every tree. The result, then, is a rich study that I think will be an essential companion to any reader of Hegel's *Logic* for generations to come. At one point, Houlgate remarks: 'In fact, as Nietzsche said of

Wagner, Hegel is a great 'miniaturist': he is interested in fine—and significant—distinctions between concepts that often get confused with one another, and we, too, need to pay close attention to these distinctions if we are to follow his logic' (1, p. 165). It is to Houlgate's great credit that he is true to his word here and a much more satisfying and complex picture of Hegel and of this text emerges as a result. It is also obvious that Houlgate's book has not just been written in the study, but has previously been extensively taught to students for whom it was important to be as clear as possible, and this is carried over into Houlgate's presentation and writing here—key ideas and moves are patiently explained, and if necessary explained again, and every effort is made to help us follow Hegel's often tortuous prose. Houlgate also conveys his own boundless enthusiasm for Hegel and Hegel's ideas—and this also helps carry the reader over some of the more arid stretches of Hegel's text (not that Houlgate himself thinks any of them are arid, even the discussion of differential calculus in the chapter on 'Quantum').

Houlgate's fundamental approach to Hegel's text is summarised at the outset: 'Hegel's *Science of Logic* is a dense and difficult work, but its aim is easily stated: to 'clarify' or 'purify' (*reinigen*) the basic *categories* of thought' (I, p. 3). Of course, many philosophers, including Aristotle and Kant, have held that our thought is structured by our categories; but Houlgate emphasises the way in which Hegel takes this much more seriously and radically than his predecessors do in two respects. First, we cannot base our philosophy on making any assumptions or presuppositions about these categories themselves, and thus, for example, how 'quality', 'form' or 'cause' are to be understood. Second, we also cannot assume in a Kantian manner that these are *our* categories and so just tell us how things appear to us; but nor can we unproblematically assume in the manner of pre-critical metaphysics, that the categories of thought correspond to how things are—rather, this is to be settled by the process of 'clarifying' or 'purifying' the categories themselves. What we must do, therefore, is start with what Hegel calls the sheer 'simplicity of thinking', which Houlgate understands as follows:

> Such 'simplicity' has no defining features and so is in fact no more than the simple, indeterminate *being* of thought. Speculative logic must begin, therefore, with the mere being of thought, or with thought conceived *as* mere being … The least that thought can be is sheer indeterminate being—being that is not even identified *as* thought (as opposed to anything else). (I, p. 52)

Thus, both the Kantian who assumes thought falls short of being, and the metaphysical rationalist who assumes that they can infer from the one to the other, start too late on this view: instead, philosophy must just start with the category of being itself, and see where things go from there, where until we see how this inquiry develops, all bets are off. This still means that according to Houlgate, Hegel's *Logic* will start out taking itself to be a study not just of thought but also as an ontology, not because thought and being have been assumed to be aligned, but rather because at the outset one is not entitled to assume that they are not, as the latter view involves more presuppositions than the former. As Houlgate puts it: 'at the start of logic we must set aside our assumptions about *being*, as well as about thought, and so may not take it to be any more than indeterminate being—the very being with which abstract thought coincides. … [L]ogic [therefore] studies, and discloses the nature of, being and so is ontology, since it is the thought of thought itself *as* pure being and being, in turn, can initially be nothing other than such pure being' (1, pp. 108–109).

But this also means, Houlgate emphasises, that there must be a kind of passivity involved in tracing this development, as this is needed if we are to avoid imposing our prior assumptions on how the inquiry transpires. It will turn out, of course, that this development broadly takes a dialectical form as categories relate to their opposites—but again, Houlgate underlines that this is not because there is some prior method being imposed on this process, nor that the dialectical form is quite as rigid or unchanging as the myth of 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis' might seem to suggest. In proceeding in this presuppositionless manner, Houlgate also argues that Hegel's project exemplifies freedom in a particularly modern form, where on the one hand nothing is taken for granted, but on the other hand this freedom of thought is not arbitrariness, as it follows the object of inquiry as it develops in a necessary way.

Having set up these broad features of his reading of Hegel, and distinguished it from others in the field, Houlgate then proceeds with the main business of the book, which as we have said is to offer a detailed reading of Hegel's treatment of the categories that make up the 'Doctrine of Being', starting from being itself and the famous transition into nothing and then becoming, and from there into the later categories of determinate being, something and other, finitude, infinitude and so on, right up to the end of the doctrine of measure and the transition from 'being' to 'essence'. As I said, much of the richness of the book, and the basis for the influence that it will doubtless have, lies in the details of these discussions and the debates they will provoke; but they, unfortunately, cannot be covered in any depth here. Instead, I would like to briefly comment on three wider issues that address some of the features of the book that we have just discussed, namely: (1) Houlgate's view of Hegel's presuppositionless method, and the link he draws between that and freedom; (2) his account of Hegel's method in action, and of the transitions between categories; and (3) his account of the beginning of the *Logic* and the dialectic of being-nothing-becoming-determinate being, on which of course so much hangs. (1) When it comes to the first issue of presuppositionless, I am happy to agree with Houlgate that Hegel does intend his method to be presuppositionless, and we also broadly agree about what this means—where Houlgate usefully makes clear at the beginning of Chapter 5 in Volume I that some prior commitments are compatible with presuppositionlessness so that one does not have to be starting in a complete vacuum. Nonetheless, compared to many philosophical projects, Hegel sees the need to give up a lot that other philosophers might think they can take for granted—for example, common-sense beliefs like 'I have two hands'; that the pure and empirical sciences have been successful in telling us about the world; that various logical laws hold; that there are certain set forms of judgment, to mention just a few.

Where Houlgate and I disagree, however, is about what ultimately drives Hegel to adopt this approach, and I will now try to bring out the nature of this disagreement. The context for our dispute is the relation between Hegel and pragmatism, where in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* I see some important common ground between Hegel and pragmatism in rejecting a kind of Cartesian doubt that thinks we should begin philosophy by doubting everything (see Stern, 2009, pp. 209–237). Houlgate however is sceptical about drawing this connection, as he thinks Hegel's project is importantly Cartesian, as Hegel is committed to presuppositionlessness and this commitment involves taking this Cartesian doubt more seriously than the pragmatist is willing to do. In response, I now want to suggest that Hegel can be committed to presuppositionlessness without endorsing the Cartesian method of doubt, and so the former need not get in the way of both pragmatists and Hegel rejecting the latter.

To see how this is possible, consider three arguments for why we should not begin a philosophical inquiry by making assumptions.

The first is that these assumptions might be in error, and what we want in philosophy is certainty—so we should subject these assumptions to doubt in order to test their truth. The pragmatist objection to this approach is roughly that doubt requires some grounds or basis, so we should not question (for example) our cognitive capacities unless we have reason to think they are leading us astray. Likewise, in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel also seems to reject this kind of 'antecedent' scepticism as wrong-headed, asking: 'Should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is not just the error itself?' (§ 74). Moreover, I do not think Houlgate would disagree, as also for him the issue is not certainty, but freedom; but he holds that this does not make any difference when it comes to the issue of pragmatism, as freedom also requires us to begin by doubting everything in a way that the pragmatist is unwilling to do. This is why Houlgate still thinks Hegel adopts a Cartesian method of doubt, but not based on Descartes's own rather naïve argument from certainty, but on a deeper argument from freedom, which is now the second argument for presuppositionlessness we can consider.

This second argument might be put as follows: freedom requires us to question everything, to take nothing for granted, to subject it to doubt and hence critical scrutiny. Thus, universal doubt is required, though on the basis of freedom rather than the pursuit of certainty. Here, the reason for universal doubt is not fear of error, but the desire or imperative to think freely.

But if this is the Hegelian argument for the Cartesian approach, I think the pragmatist might reasonably reject it by asking why freedom requires any such approach to be adopted. For, I think the pragmatist can argue, two key

features of free thought can be met without any such doubting of everything: first, no beliefs one adopts are based on an external authority telling you what to think, and second, anything we think can be questioned if it turns out that we have reason to do so, so I am perfectly at liberty to doubt it should this prove necessary—but this is not the same as saying we must question everything at once if our thinking is to be free. This second argument, which tries to move from freedom to universal doubt, thus appears too strong, as there is nothing in the former that requires the latter.

I also do not think this is Hegel's argument from freedom to presuppositionless, but that he relies on a third argument, namely: to make a presupposition is to accept a belief or claim not knowing why it is the case, the reasons for which are unknown, which is to make it external to thought and thus to limit thought in a way that makes thought unfree. Unfreedom thus does not arise here because universal doubt is necessary for freedom, and presuppositions have not been subjected to such doubt. Rather, unfreedom arises because presuppositions lack a proper grounding (which is what makes them presuppositions) and as such, they are a limit to thought, and so to the capacities of the reflective agent. This is an argument from freedom to presuppositionlessness which Houlgate acknowledges when he writes: 'The task of Hegel's *Logic* is thereby also to raise us to greater freedom: for in such logic our thought is guided by the categories no longer instinctively but 'consciously' (*mit Bewußtsein*), and so is what Hegel calls 'intelligent and free activity' which 'knows itself' to be what it is' (I, p. 7).

But now, of course, the pragmatist can agree with this third argument without compromising their hostility to the Cartesian project of universal doubt—because this argument does not make an appeal to any such project. The third argument above requires no reference to the need for doubt in either motivating or conducting the kind of free thinking involved. Thus, while Houlgate thinks Hegel's opposition to presuppositions tells against any pragmatist reading of his position in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, I (still) do not. (2) The second issue I would like to raise concerns how Houlgate sees Hegel's method in action, and the transitions between categories that he traces. Houlgate characterises that transition as follows:

> Each category thus gives rise through its own logic to a new category (or new categories), and in this sense, they develop logically *into* one another. Since each is a further determination of being, the latter in turn proves to be the process of its own self-development or 'self-movement': the 'movement of being itself' (SL 56/LS 69). We follow this logical development and we articulate it in thought, but the development is not driven by *our* activity. It is not the result of assumptions that we make, nor is it produced by our reflection on the categories. Categories develop into one another, not because of judgements that we make about them on the basis of our reasoning, but because of what *they* are logically, that is, through their own immanent logic. (I, pp. 69–70)

As I have already said, one of the really significant contributions of Houlgate's book is the painstaking way he explains these developments from one category to the other, showing in detail how exactly these transitions work.

But my question here is a much simpler one: namely, when we look on and see one category make a transition into another, *what is it that we learn*? Or put another way, when 'we articulate in language how one category gives rise to another' (I, p. 76), *what does that tell us*? What is the significance of what we have just witnessed, as it were? One phrase Houlgate often uses in discussing these transitions is that they tell us what one category 'proves to be', for example: 'Logic, as Hegel conceives it, starts with indeterminate being and then shows (via the thoughts of nothing and becoming) that such being proves to be determinate being and quality' (I, p. 161). But again, in learning that one category 'proves to be' another, what are we learning? What do we now know that we did not know before? In asking this question, I am not asking: what are we learning *about?* Houlgate is admirably clear about that: on his view, we are learning something that is both ontological (and thus about reality) and logical (and thus about our thought), where he takes it that Hegel has earned the right to cover both by the way the *Logic* begins, and which I will discuss in the next section. My question here is more basic than this: it is rather, what kind of thing does this inquiry tell us at these two levels?

As far as I can tell, the answer for Houlgate seems to be: what we learn is a series of modal claims, concerning the necessity of the subsequent categories, if the prior categories are to be made intelligible—and so given that we are starting with being, we are learning about the necessary conditions for both what is, and about the thought of what is. If that is right, then it would seem that on Houlgate's account, Hegel's *Logic* becomes one big transcendental argument—being requires there to be a determinate being as its necessary condition, determinate being requires quality as its necessary condition, quality requires something (*Etwas*) as its necessary condition, and so on. 'Being' thus 'proves to be' determinate being, as unless it took this form, it could not be; and likewise determine being 'proves to be' quality, as quality is required for being to be determinate, and so on. This transcendental argument is both transcendentally idealist (as it is about the necessary structures of our thought) and transcendentally realist (as it is about the necessary structures of being)—but insofar as it is focused on claims regarding necessities at both levels, it would seem to be a transcendental argument nonetheless. However, it is not clear to me that Houlgate would agree with me that on his account, what we learn from Hegel's dialectic is this kind of modal information so that this is what the transition from one category to the next is really telling us, as he never himself puts things in these terms; but if this is mistaken, I am not sure how to characterise what is going on instead.

A further question I would like to ask, is whether Houlgate is arguing here for a 'twin track' approach—namely, just as we can consider the necessary conditions for being, so we can consider the necessary condition for thought, and the *Logic* tells us about both; or whether one grounded in the other. That is, do the necessary structures of what we can think to arise out of the necessary structures of being because of being grounds thought—or the other way round? Of course, how one answers this question will push one in either a more realist or a more idealist direction, while to say there is no grounding relation at all leaves it rather mysterious why the one should parallel the other.

And this question then also brings us to another very interesting and central issue in Houlgate's book, namely the contrast he draws between his view and that of Robert Pippin. Roughly speaking, in the terms, I have just used, Pippin adopts the strategy of offering a transcendental idealist transcendental argument, which focuses on the conditions needed for intelligible thought—but he holds that this still counts as a metaphysics in Hegel, as Hegel unlike Kant rejects any gap between such thought and what there is. By contrast, Houlgate reads Hegel as offering us the two forms of transcendental argument in parallel, so we learn both about the necessary conditions of thought and of being.

But how is this possible? The answer for Houlgate hangs on the beginning of the *Logic*, where due to the presuppositionlessness of the starting point, 'thought thinks its own pure simplicity, but such simplicity is precisely sheer indeterminate *being*; thought thinks being, therefore, in thinking nothing but itself' (I, p. 129). I think we can understand Houlgate's idea here as follows: in thinking nothing but itself, which it must do to avoid putting anything 'before' itself and so working with a 'pre-supposition', thought must take itself to be considering being itself, rather than the thought of being—for to start with just the thought of being is to have started with the assumption that there is being and in addition the thought of it, which is too complex a position with which to begin. It must therefore start in ontological mode, as it were—rather than, on Pippin's account, starting with the thought of being, and then having some further argument that the thought of being and being itself cannot come apart. Houlgate also has an interesting objection to that latter argument. For, he suggests, Pippin goes too far in having to identify being with what is intelligible to thought, as this is to reduce the former to the latter, and thus 'to overlook the fact that thought itself conceives of being as *irreducible* to being-for-thought'—but Houlgate then adds 'where "irreducible to" does not have to mean "beyond"' (I, p. 395 n 96).

Houlgate thus claims to be able to respect the irreducibility of being to thought on the one hand, while denying that Hegel's metaphysics leaves being as outside or inaccessible to thought on the other hand, because it starts with a 'direct ontological consciousness of being' (I, p. 131), and proceeds from there, in what looks like a transcendental realist manner, by seeing what the conditions for that being prove themselves to be, as made necessary by the nature of being itself, not just our thought about being. Thus, it seems that on Houlgate's account, it is at least clear that reflection on the necessary conditions of being does not have to proceed via the necessary conditions of

thought, but it still remains less clear whether those latter conditions are independent of the conditions of being or somehow related to them.

Now, a lot of this discussion obviously hinges on the beginning of the *Logic*, so the final point I want to focus on is what Houlgate says about Hegel's position there. This will also bring to light two reasons why even the transcendental realist reading of Houlgate's position may not be correct, in a way that is perhaps problematic. (3) The beginning of the *Logic* is of course one of the most discussed and disputed parts of Hegel's text, where readers have rightly seen that much hangs on what may or may not be achieved by what happens here. Houlgate thus gives it a characteristically thorough and insightful analysis, addressing many of the familiar complaints from Schelling and others.

Houlgate's chapter starts as follows, picking up on the issues we have been discussing: 'Speculative logic begins with the thought or category of being; yet this thought brings to mind *being* itself in its immediacy. Such logic is thus from the start both a logic and a metaphysics' (I, p. 135). Now, as Houlgate notes, this may seem surprising to many Hegelians, given Hegel's apparent hostility to the idea of immediacy, where he quotes Hegel saying: 'there *is* nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain both immediacy and mediation' (cited I, p. 138)—so how *can* thought 'bring to mind *being* itself in its immediacy'? Houlgate's response to this question is to argue that given that we must begin presuppositionlessly, we cannot *assume* what Hegel claims here concerning the need for mediation, and so 'We have no choice, therefore, but to begin with pure being in its immediacy' (ibid.).

However, another option here is to say that this is what we must set out or *try* to do; but we fail insofar as in trying to bring being to mind in its immediacy (i.e., pure being), we end up bringing nothing to mind instead—and it is precisely from this that we learn something about the necessary conditions for being, namely that being requires mediation and not just immediacy so that the modal insight we gain as part of this transcendental argument arises precisely because we *fail* to 'bring to mind *being* itself in its immediacy'. But then, of course, if we fail to do so, we cannot be starting from a position that is 'both a logic and a metaphysics', as we have failed to bring pure being to mind at all—indeed (on this account), it is precisely Hegel's point that this cannot be done, which is how we learn what else is needed to make being and the thought of being possible.

Thus, the problem is that where Houlgate writes, 'Our task, as philosophers, is then to consider *what else*, if anything, such indeterminate being proves to be' (I, p. 138, my emphasis), this suggests that we first think of indeterminate being and then add to it from there—but it seems to me that we move beyond indeterminate being by coming to see that there is and can be no such thing. Houlgate is right that we cannot *assume* there is no such thing at the outset—but nonetheless, I think that this is what the dialectical transition from pure being to nothing shows us, in a properly presuppositionless manner.

And if the dialectic *does not* work in this way, then how does the 'proof' work that an indeterminate being requires 'something else'? If that proof is transcendental, it is based on the claim that it needs more because it cannot *be* an indeterminate being, as the 'more' is a necessary condition for being to avoid nothingness. But Houlgate seems to allow that it can be an indeterminate being, but just needs other features added—but why? What is the argument for those features being necessary, unless an indeterminate being cannot itself be? But then, if an indeterminate being cannot be, how can we begin the *Logic* by actually thinking it, as Houlgate's argument against Pippin seems to require? As Houlgate himself puts it: 'Through its sheer indeterminacy, therefore, pure being disappears before our very eyes: it proves not to be being after all, but to be sheer and utter nothing' (I, p. 141) But then, if being turning out to be nothing, how can we claim to have started with the thought of pure being at all, and thus to have begun on an ontological path as a result?

Now, in response, and based on what he says in the next sections in which he brings in nothingness, Houlgate might reply by saying that I have exaggerated here the identity between being and nothingness, as Hegel also suggests they remain distinct—and if this is not preserved, we cannot get to the next category of becoming, which involves some transition between them. So even though being 'vanishes' into nothing because it is indistinguishable from it, it is also distinct from it, as vanishing is a movement from one thing into another—so there is a difference, but an 'unstable' one.

Now, at this point, Houlgate has one of his touching periodic expressions of sympathy for the reader of Hegel: 'Some readers will find [this] dialectic to be a source of insight and, indeed, inspiration; otherwise will find it to be a source of intense frustration' (I, p. 146). Indeed. However, I think Houlgate misdiagnoses the frustration, which he thinks arises because it seems to be 'deliberately flouting the traditional principles of reasoning for its own sake'. But I think the worry is deeper than that. For on the one hand, as Houlgate says: pure being 'proves not to be being after all, but to be sheer and utter nothing'; but on the other hand, somehow it does not—it is still pure being, distinct from nothing. Now, that can make sense, if these states are the same in some respect, but different in another—but of course, we cannot say anything like that here, as that thought requires us to have gone beyond immediate being which has no 'aspects'. So clearly more needs to be said about how this is all meant to work.

In my view, it is something like this: The simplest ontological account of what there is is that what there is pure being. But that cannot be the correct account, as if what there is were pure being, it would be nothing. But nothing is an absence of being—which involves the possibility of the transition from being into nothing and vice versa and hence becoming. But then becoming requires a determinate being, as only a determinate being can undergo such a transition, and so we then move on from there. Thus, the pure being from which we begin is really nothing; but nothing is an absence of being, and for being to be absent it must be able to arise and pass away, and so not be pure being at all.

But if this is right, it still makes trouble for Houlgate's account: as where we start in fact turns out to be, not being but nothing, and it is hard to build any ontology on that alone.

Finally, let me move on to a second point about the beginning, which also puts pressure on even the realist transcendental reading of Hegel, but which again leaves me wondering how the various dialectical transitions are to be understood if this reading is then rejected. This issue emerges not in Houlgate's discussion of the beginning of the *Logic* itself, but a little later in the discussion of 'Something and Other' (Chapter 8 of Volume 1)—but where it there transpires that Houlgate sees this beginning as enabling Hegel to answer Leibniz's question 'why is there something rather than nothing?'

There are two ways Leibniz's question could be taken. One reading is 'why is there anything at all, why is there not rather just nothing?' Let us call this the 'nihilism question'. Another reading is 'why does being consist not just of pure being, becoming, determinate being, but of 'somethings', of things which are a certain way?' Let us call this the 'somethings question'.

Now the second question can be addressed in a transcendental manner, as one can try to show that for there to be anything at all, there must be some things—so not just becoming, and so on. And the way Houlgate sometimes puts it suggests he has this reading, for example:

> For Kant, 'something' is the most abstract concept we can entertain (besides 'nothing'). This concept cannot be derived from that of 'nothing' or from any other concept, but is simply fundamental to thought. In Kant's view, therefore, we cannot explain why we should employ the concept of 'something'. Hegel, by contrast, thinks we can explain this. According to speculative logic, the category of pure being gives rise to that of determinate being and then that of something, and so in this way, it makes the latter logically necessary. Moreover, since such logic is at the same time metaphysics, it shows that being itself thereby requires that there *be* something. Indeed, beginning with nothing leads to the same result, since nothing, via becoming and determinate being, also makes *something* necessary. Hegel's *Logic* thus not only explains why we must think in terms of 'something', but it also provides a definitive answer to the question posed by Leibniz: '*why is there something rather than nothing*?' (I, p. 169)

If we take Hegel to be addressing the 'somethings' question, then the transcendental reading makes sense, because the transcendental approach is to try to determine the necessary conditions *for* being rather than to try to argue for the necessity *of* being.

But then, of course, one is not addressing the nihilism question, as this question wants to know why there is anything at all—not just why there are 'somethings', given that there is anything at all. One way to address this question would be to demonstrate that being is necessary—so there could be nothing, which is then the reason why there is something rather than nothing. But then one would be going beyond any transcendental argument, which can only tell you about the necessary conditions *for* being, but not that being itself is necessary rather than contingent.

Now, I am not quite sure where Houlgate stands on this. When I first read the passage I quoted, I thought he was claiming Hegel is answering the nihilism question. But I am now not sure—I think he could be taking Hegel to just be answering the somethings question instead. And this may explain why here Houlgate does not mention Schelling as a critic of Hegel, though Schelling is prominent in the discussion elsewhere—because if Hegel is just answering the 'somethings' question, I do not think he is answering Schelling, who I take to be asking the nihilism question. But then, of course, this question is left hanging.

So there seems to be a dilemma here: Either Houlgate thinks Hegel is answering the nihilism question—but then that takes us beyond the transcendental method of starting from being and uncovering its necessary conditions by seeing what being 'proves to be in truth'. Or Houlgate thinks Hegel is just answering the somethings question, which can plausibly be answered transcendentally—but then I am not sure that Leibniz's question, at least as this is posed by Schelling, is really answered by Houlgate's reading of Hegel after all.

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