

Andy Blunden. March 2007

The Subject Matter of Hegel's *Logic*

A review of *An Introduction to Hegel. Freedom, Truth and History*, by Stephen Houlgate. Blackwell 2005.

Within limits imposed by the passage of 200 years, Stephen Houlgate's "Introduction to Hegel. Freedom, Truth and History," (Blackwell, 2005) aims to be a faithful exposition and defence of Hegel's system. He introduces to the modern reader, the *Phenomenology* and all parts of Hegel's mature system beginning with the *Logic*:

"Firstly, in contrast to most other commentators, I have taken seriously Hegel's claim to have developed a *presuppositionless* philosophy. ... The account of Hegel's philosophy that I offer here is by no means exhaustive and may not be as critical of Hegel as some readers would like it to be. ... the aim of the book is not to erect an impregnable defence around Hegel's ideas, not to embalm them in detailed, historical scholarship. It is to kindle an interest in Hegel ..."

The *Logic* is the first topic taken up, and Houlgate sets out to demonstrate that Hegel has succeeded in deriving all the concepts covered in the *Science of Logic*, beginning with the simple, absolutely indeterminate, "presuppositionless" concept of Being. Houlgate aims to be faithful to the way Hegel himself presents the development, although only covering the first four concepts of the Doctrine of Being: Being, Nothing, Becoming and Determinate Being. By limiting himself to Hegel's formal derivation, skipping over the notes, remarks and asides, Houlgate brings into relief the problem of the subject matter of Hegel's *Logic*.

Houlgate renders the first transition in terms of the action of thought, as follows:

"At the beginning of Hegel's logic **thought thinks** - or **tries to think** - the utter indeterminacy of *being*, but that thought is so utterly indeterminate that **it evaporates** in the very attempt to conceive it. The thought of pure, indeterminate being thus **slides into** the thought of nothing because of its sheer indeterminacy," (p. 32)

Houlgate further explains this transition as follows:

"It is because being is conceived in such a pure and indeterminate way that **it leaves us nothing to think** and thus immediately **disappears into** - and so **becomes** - the thought of nothing at all." (p. 33)

He later sums this up in the following way:

"What I have sketched out in a simplified form in the past few pages is the process whereby, in Hegel's logic, **thought leads itself** from pure indeterminacy to the thought of bare determinacy. It is the process whereby - without taking anything for granted - **thought freely determines** the manner in which all determinacy, at least initially, is to be thought." (p. 35)

Alternatively:

"What Hegel lays out in the opening chapter of his *Science of Logic* is the process whereby **thought**, which **tries to think** pure indeterminacy, is **led by its own intrinsic necessity** to the thought of becoming ..." (p. 35)

I have used **bold type** in the above to highlight some of the expressions Houlgate uses to refer to the *movement* going on in the *Logic*, the movement from one concept to the next, the sequence of concepts from Being to Nothing to Becoming and so on. What Houlgate claims is that the movement (for example from Being to Nothing) is inherent in the concept of Being itself, and consequently, all that is necessary in order to reconstruct the *Science of Logic* is to *think* a concept rigorously and self-critically, and the thought will “slide into” another concept, and the thinker will be led from the thought of pure being, through all the intermediate concepts to the concept of the Absolute Idea. In my view, this approach is more Heidegger than Hegel.

Houlgate is at pains to point out that it is not the thinking human subject, nor the activity of thinking, nor any object to which a concept could be applied, but *the concept itself* which is the source of the movement.

“Hegel’s *Logic* does not, therefore, merely contain ideas and propositions *about* being. It presents in thought the self-determining and self-unfolding *of* being itself.” (p, 45)

So for Houlgate, the subject matter of the *Logic* is being, simply the *concept of being*. Neither the writer nor the reader have any part in the development, other than the requirement to think rigorously and self-critically. According to his claim for a presuppositionless philosophy, it is wrong to assume that the movement of concepts in the logic is the work of “spirit” or is abstracted from any kind of object to which categories can be applied. But following Fichte rather than Descartes, Houlgate claims that it is *thought* which is given without presupposition: “The least that thought can think about itself is simply that it *is*.” (p. 32) rather than “I think, therefore I am.”

This whole approach seems to have support in the way Hegel himself presents the *Logic*. But it has problems. But first it must be noted the basic claim Hegel makes for “the inner self-movement of the content of logic.” Hegel reviews the method of development of the *Phenomenology*, in which “we are dealing with forms of consciousness each of which in realising itself at the same time resolves itself, has for its result its own negation - and so passes into a higher form.” Returning to the content of the *Logic*, he claims that: “It is in this way that the system of Notions as such has to be formed - and has to complete itself in a purely continuous course in which nothing extraneous is introduced.” (Introduction to the *Science of Logic*, §62)

So the sequence of concepts presented in the *Logic* is such that each can be derived by a critique of foregoing concepts only. And in that sense the starting point must be ‘presuppositionless’, so far as is possible. In the Introduction to the Doctrine of Being, Hegel remarks: “there is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.” (With What Must Science Begin? *Science of Logic* §92) So at this point we must be cautious in what is claimed in terms of being ‘presuppositionless’.

It is one thing to retrace the first 4 concepts of the *Logic*, but is it then valid to declare that the remaining 200 concepts flow with such necessity from the thought of ‘being’, provided only that rigorously self-critical thought is applied to the task? Can we accept, along the lines of empirical psychology, the evidence of Hegel’s own thought of ‘being’? Given that plenty of professional philosophers have denied the validity of Hegel’s *Logic*: How can the truth of the *Logic* be *demonstrated*?

If the Logic is to be more than an exercise in empirical psychology, there has to be some way of demonstrating how the 204 concepts of the *Science of Logic* are indeed implicit in the concept of being, and that thought of being will “slide into” first one concept and then the next and so on. *Leading* someone through the sequence of concepts does not in itself constitute proof. The claim that the sequence of 204 concepts in the *Science of Logic* are the result of thought of ‘being’ freely determining itself cannot be sustained.

As things stand in Houlgate’s exposition, there is *no empirical domain* for the *Science of Logic*, no objective field of data in which the science can be tested. And neither is there any *criterion* against which the result could be tested. To clarify this point: formal logic is a propositional calculus; its validity can be demonstrated in the domain of formal propositions. It is not necessary to rely on the truths of formal logic being self-evident or ‘clear’. The *Science of Logic* is not a propositional calculus; indeed, various forms of propositional calculus appear as moments of the Logic. Without settling the question of the empirical basis for the Logic, it is difficult to see how its truth can be demonstrated. And even if one were to insist that the Logic deals solely with concepts, what basis is there for the widespread practice of transposing insights of the Logic to the particular sciences?

As Houlgate presents the transitions in Logic, the activity takes place not in the concept, but in the attention of the subject contemplating the concept, in ‘thought’. Attention moves from one concept to another, but the concept itself does not move. It is the nature of the concept itself which causes the attention of the thinker to move from that concept to another. Houlgate is not making a claim about the activity of *critique*, but about the concepts themselves. In making this claim, Houlgate seems to be faithful to Hegel.

Since we will have need to refer to Hegel’s own most succinct statement on this matter, in the original preface to the *Science of Logic*, I will quote the passage at length:

“[D]ialectical reason is usually taken to be something distinct from positive reason. But **reason in its truth** is *spirit* which is higher than either merely positive reason, or merely intuitive understanding.

“It is the negative, that which constitutes the quality alike of dialectical reason and of understanding; it negates what is simple, thus positing the specific difference of the understanding; it equally resolves it and is thus dialectical.

“But it does not stay in the nothing of this result but in the result is no less positive, and in this way it has restored what was at first simple, but as a universal which is within itself concrete; a given particular is not subsumed under this universal but in this determining, this positing of a difference, and the resolving of it, the particular has at the same time already determined itself. This spiritual movement which, in its simple undifferentiatedness, gives itself its own determinateness and in its determinateness its equality with itself, which therefore is the **immanent development of the Notion**, this movement is the **absolute method of knowing** and at the same time is the immanent soul of the content itself.

“I maintain that it is this self-construing method alone which enables philosophy to be an objective, demonstrated science.

“It is in this way that I have tried to expound consciousness in the

Phenomenology of Spirit. Consciousness is spirit as a concrete knowing, a knowing too, in which externality is involved; but the development of this object, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests solely on the nature of the **pure essentialities** which constitute the content of logic.

“Consciousness, as spirit in its manifestation which in its progress frees itself from its immediacy and external concretion, attains to the pure knowing which takes as its object those same pure essentialities as they are **in and for themselves**. They are pure thoughts, **spirit thinking its own essential nature**. Their **self-movement** is their spiritual life and is that through which philosophy constitutes itself and of which it is the exposition.” [Preface to the First Edition of the *Science of Logic*]

According to Hegel it is ‘spirit’ whose activity forms the subject matter of the *Science of Logic*. I will contend that ‘spirit’ is a meaningful, if problematic conception, for which ‘thought’, meaning simply the activity of a thinking person, is no substitute. Logic is “exposition” of “spirit thinking its own essential nature.” “Reason *in its truth* is spirit,” so thought approaches spirit when it is immanent, when it allows itself to be determined by the necessity inherent in the concepts of the Logic. But this still does not explain where the truth and necessity of what is, after all, a *word*, comes from, how its necessity can make itself immanent in thought, and how its truth can be demonstrated.

Houlgate insists that in a presuppositionless logic, spirit cannot be presupposed, but only *thought*. In his exposition of the Logic, Houlgate clearly uses ‘thought’ to mean the subjective thought of an individual person provided only that they are sufficiently *self-critical* to allow the concepts themselves to determine their thought.

Houlgate’s claim is that the nature of the concepts is such that the thought of a subject thinking ‘being’ will “slide into” the next concept, and go on “sliding” through to the Absolute Idea, not just because Hegel has written it this way, but because of the necessity inherent in the concepts themselves.

Not only is Houlgate’s claim that anyone thinking of ‘being’ will be led to think of all the remaining moments of the *Science of Logic* unsustainable, Hegel would never make such a claim. The necessity is one discovered by Hegel for the first time, and he makes it clear that the reasoning process entailed in understanding, let alone discovering, the sequence of concepts in the Logic is difficult and requires practice and experience. So in what sense is it *necessary*?

When Houlgate claims that:

“Since any rational person is capable of performing this act of abstraction, anyone is able to begin speculative logic.” (p. 50)

Perhaps it is possible for anyone to follow the derivation of the first couple of concepts in the Logic; after all, these first few ‘definitions of the absolute’ were the products of the very first philosophers in history, c. 500BCE, whose philosophical speculations *had* to be ‘presuppositionless’. That everyone can understand the sense in which “Pure Being is Nothing,” cannot be the basis for an assumption that *all* transitions in the Logic are equally self-evident. But if something else is required, Houlgate is not considering it.

Hegel remarks in the Introduction to the *Science of Logic*:

“It is only after profounder acquaintance with the other sciences that logic

ceases to be for subjective spirit a merely abstract universal and reveals itself as the universal which embraces within itself the wealth of the particular - just as the same proverb, in the mouth of a youth who understands it quite well, does not possess the wide range of meaning which it has in the mind of a man with the experience of a lifetime behind him, for who, the meaning is expressed in all its power. Thus the value of logic is only apprehended when it is preceded by experience of the sciences; it then displays itself to mind as the universal truth, not as a *particular knowledge alongside* other matters and realities, but as the essential being of all these latter.” (*Science of Logic*, §71)

This is more than a metaphor; *understanding* most of the concepts of the Logic presupposes life experience as well as familiarity with abstract thought. It is simply untrue that the only prerequisite for understanding speculative logic is to be a rational person. Hegel himself held that students should not tackle logic until they were already familiar with abstract thinking through the theory of law, psychology, and so forth.

So the question is: What is the content of the concept and what knowledge or experience in the reader permits the reader to understand that necessity? In Houlgate’s presentation it is simply impossible to see this. Any rational person, he says, can follow the necessary movement inherent in a given concept.

Hegel makes a claim about the necessity of the movement of thought by presenting a critique of the concept and convincing the reader of the necessity of the relevant transition. But if *argument* is the objective basis for the *Science of Logic*, then we have lost the “presuppositionless” science. Instead we have the question: under what conditions can consensus can be freely established by rational argumentation, on the necessity of a particular transition in the *Science of Logic*?

This still leaves unanswered *what moves* in Hegel’s *Logic*. The question is complicated by the fact, mentioned in passing by Houlgate, that in the three books of the *Logic*, Being, Essence and Concept, the form of movement is different.

“The onward movement of the Concept is no longer either [as in Being] a transition into, or [as in Essence] a reflection on something else, but Development.” (*Science of Logic*, §161)

so demonstrating the transitions in Being does nothing to enlighten us about how Essence and the Concept develop, and the significance of these two sections surely exceeds that of the Doctrine of Being.

It should be mentioned as an aside that throughout his book, Houlgate slips into the Hegelian trope of speaking of abstract concepts, not only as things which *move*, but as *subjects*, with habits, desires, intentions, abilities and so on. But nothing in Houlgate’s treatment of the *Logic* provides us with a justification for talking of concepts in this way.

Let us see what Hegel has to say about the subject matter of the *Logic*.

In the excerpt from the preface to the *Science of Logic* quoted above, Hegel had explained it this way:

“Consciousness is spirit as a concrete knowing ...; but the development of this object, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests solely on the nature of the pure essentialities which constitute the **content of**

logic.” (*Science of Logic*, §10)

So the subject matter of the Logic is “pure essentialities,” but pure essentialities of “formations of consciousness” and “the development of all natural and spiritual life.” Thus the forms which appear in the Logic are the universal forms abstracted from the development of *shapes of consciousness* and the corresponding forms of natural and spiritual life.

The *Phenomenology* is commonly understood to be concerned with shapes of consciousness [*Gestalten des Bewusstseins*], and takes the form of an immanent critique of each formation in turn. Hegel shows how problems arising within each formation lead to their resolution in the next formation which overtakes its predecessor, each shape “turns out” to be something other than it first appeared. The *Phenomenology* not only deals with ‘shapes of consciousness’ as such, but also the real, albeit schematic, history of the emergence of modern life in Europe.

And, as Houlgate emphasises, the formations of consciousness and forms of life with which the *Phenomenology* is concerned and the sequence in which they are taken, is not tied to empirical history, but rather reflects the internal ‘logic’ of each formation, to which real empirical history may or may not approximate, according to contingencies. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Phenomenology*, it is possible to discern a *real object of enquiry*. *Shapes of consciousness* animate social formations, constituting the subjective and objective forms of one and the same object; these shapes of consciousness and forms of life, change according to internal problems (as well as external forces), according to a logic which can be discovered by a ‘self-construing’ or immanent critique.

As Houlgate observes, “the categories which are discovered in the *Logic* to be immanent in pure thought (and being) are discovered in the *Phenomenology* to be immanent in consciousness, too - namely, as constituting the logical form of the object as it appears and transforms itself in the experience of consciousness itself.” (p. 55)

The relation between empirical history (including the history of philosophy, religion, science, etc.) and phenomenology then is the same as the relation between the empirical observation of nature and the natural sciences: one is concerned with particulars, the other with universals.

The domain in which the *pure universals* of the logic are subject to demonstration is therefore these ‘shapes of consciousness’ and ‘natural and spiritual life’. From the standpoint of the Logic, the ‘shapes of consciousness’ figure as *particulars*. The *Logic* traces what is universal in them.

The observation that ontology, the thought of pure being, formed the starting point for the Logic as well as metaphysics, just as it formed the starting point of the history of philosophy, gave Hegel the insight necessary for an exposition of the inner, necessary dynamics of all formations of consciousness.

The dynamics which are internal to a social formation are determined by what is taken to be authoritative for drawing inferences within that formation. So a reader with life experience and education is able to follow the Logic insofar as the community of which they are a part has incorporated the necessary conceptual content. In a modern society, Hegel can appeal to the reader’s critical reflection on a concept as a basis for establishing transition to another concept. The reader will not only be able to affirm the necessity of a transition in the Logic through critical reflection, but can draw on the material of

experience and empirical history.

Hegel's intentions can be clarified by briefly tracing the path which led him to the writing of the *Science of Logic*. We have highlighted the fact that the notion of 'spirit' figures in Hegel's conception of the subject matter of the Logic: "pure thoughts, spirit thinking its own essential nature." To the modern reader, the concept of spirit is suspect, tainted as it is with mysticism. 'Spirit' was the first concept to which Hegel turned his attention as a young man, long before he decided to become a university professor and devise his own system of philosophy. Witnessing the spectacular progress of the French Revolution, while Germany stagnated, fragmented by a patchwork of local, medieval customs and privileges, Hegel latched on to the idea of the 'spirit of a people' (*Volksgeist*) and its 'fate', as a focus of his enquiry: was Germany destined forever to be a backwater of Europe or would Germany play its role at a later stage in the Revolution.

The Young Hegel's conception of spirit, or *Volksgeist*, was not at all mystical, although in its conception of a people *as a whole*, blind to differences of class, gender, ethnicity, etc., it would today be regarded as antique and oppressive. Hegel saw this spirit as tied up with the day-to-day activities in which the people are engaged, as a consequence of the inherited relations of production and culture which constitutes them as a people.

Note that at this stage, 'spirit' is something plural; that is, there was a 'Spirit of the Germans' and a 'Spirit of the French', and so on. In each case, the spirit undergoes a kind of life-process, as a people rises in the world, enjoys its maturity and goes into decline, and so forth. So 'spirit' is not simply identified with certain life activity, but rather has continuity through the history of a certain people, passed on through culture.

As Hegel later outlined in *System of Ethical Life*, in the raising of plants, tending of animals, the use of tools and machinery, trade, the supervision of labour, the raising of children, and so forth, different elements of consciousness are developed, corresponding to the complexity and specific structure of the activities in which people are obliged to engage by the kind of objects (land, plants, animals, tools, words, their own bodies, ...) they have inherited from their past, and underpin their custom and practice and which they use to reproduce themselves as a people. For example:

"In the tool the subjectivity of labour is raised to something universal. Anyone can make a similar tool and work with it. To this extent the tool is the persistent norm of labour." (*System of Ethical Life*, 1.A(bb))

The *System of Ethical Life* dates from 1802/3, the time at which Hegel was collaborating with Schelling on the *Journal of Critical Philosophy*. In this work Hegel spells out quite specifically how everyday productive and reproductive activities develop the thinking of people in a given culture. His earliest ruminations on *Volksgeist* and Fate, date from his time at the Seminary at Tübingen in 1792 (*Volksreligion*) and in 1793 when he was a tutor in Berne and read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But it would seem that the same general conception of 'spirit' is active throughout this period. A way of *thinking* is taken together inseparably with a way of *living*. Further, he saw the way of living if anything as primary. What Marx would call 'forces of production', together with non-economic activities such as methods for the raising of children and the language taught people to think in a certain way, participating together in regular, customary forms of social activity. Such a spirit of the people had its culmination in the people's religion, itself the most powerful lever for the regulation of social life. But for Hegel, spirit had its

origin in the labour process, in its widest sense.

In *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel approaches the Kantian distinction between Intuition and Conception, rather than taking them as two innate human faculties, by looking at the emergence of subjectivity from nothing. *Intuition* arises from the separation of a subject from its object, creating a feeling of *need*. Need is superseded in its satisfaction, and domination of the object in labour is *conception*.

Although he saw the origins of the spirit of a people in the day-to-day activities of people, he always saw ideas as the means by which social *change* can be brought about. In his youth, he aspired to becoming a kind of agitator for the Enlightenment, raising the cultural level of the people and awareness of the ideas of modernity. Later he dabbled in the idea of launching a new religion, but seeing what a farce Robespierre's effort in this direction had turned out, he looked at the possibility of a reform movement within Christianity based on a re-writing of the *Life of Jesus* (1795), which would promote the idea of an 'invisible church' in which the people were bound by conviction rather than the authority of the clergy.

“From the Kantian system and its highest completion I expect a revolution in Germany. ... the aura of prestige surrounding the heads of the oppressors and gods of this earth are disappearing. The philosophers are proving the dignity of man The peoples will learn to feel it.’ (Letter to Schelling, 16 April 1795)

But ultimately, witnessing the successes of Fichte and Schelling, he decided that becoming a University professor and promulgating a new system of idealist philosophy, engaging the battle of ideas at the top, was the most effective way of fighting for a modern Germany, which would take the banner of the French Revolution forward, past what France could achieve with its politicians and its soldiers.

So when Hegel is talking about 'spirit' in the preface to the *Science of Logic* in 1812 (at the age of 41), it is fair to presume that he means spirit in the sense in which he first embraced the idea in his twenties and thirties. However, the conception of spirit had undergone a significant concretisation in the *System of Ethical Life* (1802/3), the *Realphilosophie* (1805/6) and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

I have mentioned already how the exposition of the *System of Ethical Life* begins with the Intuition and Concept emerging with the subject's first labour process in the separation of need from its satisfaction by labour. The exposition then proceeds through successive and alternating subsumption of the Concept under Intuition (Objectified concepts becoming themselves objects of need and the content of perception) and the subsumption of Intuition under the Concept (Needs superseded by a labour process). Intuition and concept are always in disharmony, as the world is never just as it should be, and human-nature is subject to continuous transformation.

In a move which looks perhaps Schellingian at first sight, Hegel defines the *Idea* as the unity of Intuition and Concept, but this conception of the unity of Intuition and Concept is radically different from Schelling's mystical and abstract Absolute, simply defined as the unity of the two opposite kinds of knowledge, but lacking any real substance. The Idea is not a primary, underlying or pre-given unity - indeed at the beginning there is no Intuition and no Concept, so the unity of subject and object actually means that there is no subject or object at all. The Idea is the *outcome* of the long (perhaps unending),

historical march of humanity to build a world in which the problems of social justice, ignorance and want have been overcome:

“Knowledge of the Idea of the absolute ethical order depends entirely on the establishment of perfect adequacy between intuition and concept, because the Idea itself is nothing other than the identity of the two. But if this identity is to be actually known, it must be thought as a made adequacy.” [opening words of *System of Ethical Life*]

This is really a stunning conception: addressing himself to a fundamental problem of Kantian philosophy: how can the two faculties of a subject, sensation and reason, be reconciled, Hegel finds not a ‘theoretical’ answer, such as Schelling’s invention of a third ‘absolute’ faculty defined as the unity of the two - but a revolutionary-practical answer: revolutionise society!

Rather than miring himself in empty metaphysical concoctions, rather than defining away the disjunction between reason and sensibility by a philosophical sleight-of-hand, Hegel discovers the source of the conflict in the human world, and declares that the making of this unity is a practical task. Institutions, culture and forms of life must be created which really *are* what they *appear* to be.

However, by the time of the writing of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, his Jena lectures of 1805-6, known also as the *Realphilosophie*, although the ideas are similar in content to the *System of Ethical Life*, Spirit is now posited at the very beginning. Instead of the alternate action of Intuition and Concept, we see the action of Spirit in its diverse forms. Straight away the exposition takes on the aroma of mysticism. The materialist and revolutionary-practical idea which is clear as daylight in the *System of Ethical Life*, has now been disguised under the ambit of the work of ‘spirit’.

By the time of writing of the *Phenomenology*, if not before, it is clear that Spirit is singular and not plural: spirit takes different shapes in this or that people, at different times. In his letters, remarks Hegel makes about current political events are phrased in terms of the action of Spirit, in basically the same way people refer to the “laws of history” or “the market” - as inexorable forces operating “behind the backs” of the actors in history. For example, commenting on current events in April 1816, he comments to Niethammer:

“... the world spirit has given the age marching orders. These orders are being obeyed. The world spirit, this essential, proceeds irresistibly like a closely drawn armoured phalanx advancing with imperceptible movement, much as the sun through thick and thin. Innumerable light troops flank it on all sides, throwing themselves into the balance for or against its progress, though most of them are entirely ignorant of what is at stake and merely take head blows as from an invisible hand.”

It was in the *Phenomenology* however that Hegel first works out how to trace the dynamic of the successive forms of spirit, by means of an immanent critique of each form of consciousness. Thus Hegel has worked out the motor force of spirit, residing in its *own logic*.

In the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), his last complete book, Hegel says: ‘Spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse*’:

“Spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse* and their nature is therefore

twofold: (i) at one extreme, explicit individuality of consciousness and will, and (ii) at the other extreme, universality which knows and wills what is substantive. Hence they attain their right in both these respects only in so far as both their private personality and its substantive basis are actualised.” (§264)

So it is clear that from beginning to end, ‘spirit’ means just this for Hegel, ‘the nature of people *en masse*’. This nature is intelligible, and because the nature of human beings *en masse* is, after all, only ‘*thought*’ - objects vested with meaning and human activity oriented around those objects and their meanings, all intelligible and actual only by and through human thought.

The only qualification which it is necessary make about this definition of Spirit as ‘the nature of human beings *en masse*’ is that by ‘nature’ Hegel does not mean our ‘merely natural and primary condition’ as in the ‘state of nature’ which Hegel regarded as a fiction, but rather the *truth* of humanity, its destiny, its potential, the self-construing or self-disclosing or self-overcoming nature of human beings - Freedom, attained by human beings *en masse* in the struggle to emancipate themselves from the brutish and irrational conditions in which they find themselves, overcoming the deficiencies in a succession of historical forms of association. (See *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, §42)

Hegel’s notoriously impenetrable writing style obscures the meaning of ‘spirit’. The habit he adopted from around 1806 of taking spirit as something which pre-exists its manifestation in human activity - rather than either being a *product* of a people’s activity or the *outcome* of an indefinitely long drawn-out, still unfinished historical process - mystifies the whole procedure.

However, if we were to drop the concept of ‘spirit’ from our reading of Hegel’s works, for example the *Science of Logic*, we are left in the erroneous and untenable position of taking ‘thought’ to mean the subjective thoughts of an individual person, insofar as they are true, without any criterion for what is ‘true’. Better is to accept the concept of spirit, but so far as is possible, understand it as “the nature of human beings *en masse*.”

Being result of human activity and its nature, spirit cannot pre-exist human activity nor stand outside it. Further, its scope and continuity are inherently relative, rather than totalising and absolute. In such a pragmatic conception of spirit, universals are understood as material culture (artefacts or signs), vested with meaning in the human psyche by their incorporation into human activities.

On the other hand, Hegel’s conception is far more developed than just this. Under the heading of spirit he understands the lawful character of history, as well as the institutions which govern a people’s social life and the ideas, literature and religion of a people. He also understands, as in his famous remark about his seeing Napoleon at the battle of Jena, that a single individual can embody the World Spirit. And just as Marx liked to refer to the Revolution as a “mole” which disappears underground only to reappear elsewhere, Hegel deifies the World Spirit as if it were a personage, or agent in its own right. This kind of *deification* of a principle of social life has no part in science, but may be more at home in motivational psychology.

To understand the full import of Hegel’s conception of ‘spirit’, given that spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse*, it is necessary to start from the Doctrine of the Concept in the *Science of Logic*, and work backwards.

The Idea is spirit in and for itself, and the Idea is the unity of Subjectivity and Objectivity. The meaning of the Idea as the unity of Subject and Object, is that in their conscious activity people are forever creating things - writing books, putting up buildings, raising children, creating institutions - and in their activity they are having to deal with and modify the objects that they or previous generations have created. So mind is active both in its living aspect as subjects, and its dead aspect as objects, and vested by subjects with meaning (including body-image, as well as language and culture generally). Both Subjects and Objects have their own distinctive dynamic and the combination of the two is the resultant 'pure essentiality' of the nature of human beings *en masse*, the Idea.

The key thing at the moment is to grasp this idea of Subjectivity, since this is key to understanding what Hegel means when he talks about 'thought' or 'consciousness' and therefore when he talks about 'spirit'.

Hegel avoids the trap into which all his predecessors from Descartes to Kant had fallen in dealing with subjectivity; Hegel *does not* begin with a mind/matter duality, or an inner/outer dichotomy, a conception of an outer world 'reflected' in an inner world, or any version of such a conception. And this is of crucial importance when dealing with notions of 'intersubjectivity' which have become so central to Hegel scholarship. He avoids the whole mind/matter business altogether. "Matter" is after all, an abstraction like any other, and a very poor one at that. Likewise the individual/social dichotomy which is so troublesome at the present time is simply not an issue for Hegel.

The basic structure of subjectivity for Hegel is a *trichotomy*: Individual, Particular and Universal. All are both material *and* ideal; all are mind.

The Universal is all those creations of the culture to which Individuals attach meaning. It is all those things we denote with abstract nouns which we think of as "universals" but also have a material existence just as much as individuals and particulars. But in isolation from the individual and particular they lack *meaning*; they would be meaningless objects, empty words.

The Particular is the system of relations and activities in and through which the Universal exercises its meaning - institutions, customs, languages, and so on. The Individual is a single instance of Mind, the mind of an individual person, a given specific object of a certain kind, and so on. The Individual can only know the Universal through some Particular relation; that is, in order for a Universal, such as a word, to be meaningful for an individual person, there must be some Particular relation or activity in which the Individual interacts with an instance of the Universal.

My own life experience in which I have come to develop an understanding of what Hegel calls spirit is the trade union movement, so I have always found it easy to explain these relations in terms of unions: there can be no unionism without particular unions, and no unions without individual members. No-one can have any conception of unionism, other than through some contact, however remote, with a particular union. Etc., etc. Unions are collective subjects made up of people united by the ideal of solidarity and other ideals perhaps peculiar to the particular union, but at the same time also members of some particular category of work or trade.

This is more or less what Hegel understood by 'State'. For Hegel, the state was not some arbitrary authority governing a piece of territory, but a collective subject uniting people brought together around a common ideal (*Volksgeist*) as well as being citizens in a certain

territory.

Conversely, *any* concept in modern society is also a universal which is instantiated only through particular forms of activity, institutions, social relations, etc., among individual living people, in a definite community. So in calling the third book of the Logic the Doctrine of the Concept, Hegel intended that he was not only presenting the logic of subjectivity, but also of concepts, the forms of consciousness. One and the same. And the institutions of modern society he saw as Reason, or “objective spirit.” So the Logic is in principle, *simultaneously* the logic of society, of consciousness and of thought forms. In my opinion, while it is possible to read a section of the Logic on the basis of a more limited interpretation, I don’t believe the whole of the Logic makes sense unless the tripartite nature of spirit, from which the Logic is abstracted, is recognised.

Why is it necessary for the Logic to have this tripartite meaning? Because universals which are not enlivened and given meaning by individuals within some form of community are unthinkable (literally). Because forms of society are unintelligible outside of the activity of conscious individuals utilising cultural products (signs, artefacts) to coordinate their activity. Because individual minds cannot exist outside some definite social formation, without cultural objects to which they can attached meaning. There is no logic of the one without the logic of the other two, and a logic understood in any other way is unintelligible.

These observations do not take away from the fact that each concept in the Logic is derived by *critique* of the foregoing concepts. Hegel’s insight was that a critique of a given concept (e.g. Causality = Reciprocity) points to a particular instance of the concept (e.g. the cause of the nature of the Spartan constitution) being open to a critique leading to a particular instance of the relevant concept of the Logic (e.g. reciprocity between the nature of the Spartan people and the nature of the Spartan constitution).

In each and every case, Hegel is able to exhibit the logic of particular instances by critique of the universal categories. It seems to me that this remarkable achievement is explicable only because, as Hegel says: the Logic is “the universal which embraces within itself the wealth of the particular.”

Let us return now to the criticisms I have made of Stephen Houlgate’s reading of the Logic.

Houlgate pulls a rabbit out of the hat. The claim that close inspection of the word ‘B-E-I-N-G’ will lead to the discovery of another word ‘N-O-T-H-I-N-G’ and so on through 204 words, is a magic trick. Magic, that is, unless you presume that the reader is an educated member of a modern English-speaking society in which the letters ‘B-E-I-N-G’ spell ‘being’ (and so on) and is understood to have a certain meaning with the various relevant connotations and nuances, that it has taken on in connection with the resolution of problems in the particular sciences. And that the reader will be familiar enough with certain types of abstract thinking to follow the exposition of the Logic up to a certain point. The words, of course, are material forms of universals that exist in a certain form of consciousness, and consequently are thought by individual members of that social formation in connection with particular activities. It is only in and through those relations that the transitions in the Logic are realised, and only in and through the same relations that they can be understood by a reader. “There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and

mediation.”

Consequently, to talk of the universals that arise in the Logic as if they were *simply* universals, that ‘contained’ other universals which are revealed by thought, begs the serious question as to what space these universals exist in? As was shown above, it also begs the question of how the truth or otherwise of a given transition can be demonstrated.

Perhaps it should be reiterated here, just in case there is any misunderstanding: the insistence on the tripartite meaning of the Logic is not at the expense of the fact that ‘spirit’ means *thought in its truth*. That is, the Logic is not a psychology, and nor is it a sociology or a historiography. The brilliance of Hegel is to have divined that the *internal* dynamics of all formations of consciousness is encapsulated in the logic of its *concepts*. For thinking of the concept of ‘being’ is a great deal different from thought which is utterly indeterminate, and simply is.

People will think and do all sorts of things, all sorts of institutions are created and destroyed in the course of history: spirit is what is *necessary* in all these processes, and the logic is concerned only with that necessity, not chance and individual caprice. (The problem of the determination of what is essential and inessential is taken up in the Doctrine of Essence.)

There are a couple of corollaries of the tripartite reading of the Logic which should be mentioned. Firstly, the word ‘subject’ no longer means an individual person. The individual is one moment of the concept, which also includes universal and particular moments. Consequently, subjects can equally be collective agents, formations organised around an idea, or a concept in the normal, logical sense of the word, which equally has its existence only in its connection with individual members of a social formation in which the concept is meaningful. It is not that concepts exist in a ‘medium’ of subjectivity, but rather, concept is a forms in which subjectivity itself is constituted.

Consequently, the Hegelian trope of talking of abstract concepts as if they were subjects is quite meaningful. But without the tripartite understanding of the subject matter of the Logic, talking of “Identity” or “Science” as if they were agents walking the streets alongside ordinary human beings, would be nonsense.

The Doctrine of Being deals with forms of representation which come and go, as one thing after another, without raising themselves so far as to suggest a something, somewhat like road accident statistics, or weather, or public opinion, until something new makes its appearance - an unexplained increase in fatalities, global warming, a sea change in public sentiment on a question, and so forth.

The Doctrine of Essence is the genesis of a new abstract concept once it first finds its reflection in consciousness. This is like a train of contradictory interpretations, each of which compete against their contraries and ultimately fail until a new concept emerges which overcomes all the preceding contradictory forms, and makes the beginning of the Doctrine of the Concept.

The Doctrine of the Concept is the life story and structure of how a concept concretises and objectifies itself and exists in the world, in the minds and activities of human beings living in a specific community, governed by norms and ideals.

In each case, Hegel is concerned with the relevant relations in their truth, and in their fullest possible development.

Finally, the Logic should not be seen as a kind of ‘meta-theory’ in relation to the other sections of the Encyclopaedia. Rather, the Logic deals with universals as pure essentialities, rather than in connection with particulars dealt with in the other sciences. But Individual, Universal and Particular do not exist in different ontological realms or at different ‘levels’. Rather they exist only in connection with one another and are all equally material and ideal. The Logic makes no sense otherwise.

The reading of Hegel’s Logic that I am proposing begins from the recognition that the Logic was written by a human for human readers, about concepts whose meaning is vested in objects by human activity. Hegel explains in the concluding paragraph of the *Phenomenology* how the Logic pre-supposes the entire development of human civilisation:

“Here it [Spirit] has to begin all over again at its immediacy, as freshly as before, and thence rise once more to the measure of its stature, as if, for it, all that preceded were lost, and as if it had learned nothing from the experience of the spirits that preceded. But re-collection has conserved that experience, and is the inner being, and, in fact, the higher form of the substance. While, then, this phase of Spirit begins all over again its formative development, apparently starting solely from itself, yet at the same time it commences at a higher level.” [*Phenomenology* §808]

The greatest mistake that can be made is to believe that when you read the Logic, an individual is perceiving concepts without presupposition, that is to say, without mediation. “There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.”