Hegel's Critique of Foundationalism in the "Doctrine of Essence"

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I

It is a commonplace among certain recent philosophers that there is no such thing as the *essence* of anything. Nietzsche, for example, asserts that things have no essence of their own, because they are nothing but ceaselessly changing ways of acting on, and reacting to, other things.[1] Wittgenstein, famously, rejects the idea that there is an essence to language and thought — at least if we mean by that some *a priori* logical structure underlying our everyday utterances.[2] Finally, Richard Rorty urges that we "abandon [...] the notion of 'essence' altogether", along with "the notion that man's essence is to be a knower of essences".[3]

It would be wrong to maintain that these writers understand the concept of essence in precisely the same way, or that they are all working towards the same philosophical goal. Nevertheless, they do share one aim in common: to undermine the idea that there is some deeper reality or identity *underlying* and *grounding* what we encounter in the world, what we say and what we do. That is to say, they may all be described as *anti-foundationalist* thinkers — thinkers who want us to attend to the specific processes and practices of nature and humanity without understanding them to be the product of some fundamental essence or "absolute".[4]

One philosopher who is sometimes thought to appeal to just such an underlying essence or "absolute" in his explanation of natural and historical development, and so to be an undisputed foundationalist, is G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). In *Capital*, for example, Marx describes Hegel in overtly foundationalist terms:

> To Hegel, ... the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea", he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea".[5]

A similar interpretation of Hegel can be found in many other post-Hegelian writers (including Nietzsche). The exhortation to "abandon the notion of essence" is thus interpreted by many today as the call to abandon Hegel — or at least a certain side of Hegel. Some avowed anti-foundationalists, such as Marx and Dewey, are of course profoundly indebted to Hegel, in particular to his emphasis on the historicity of human life. But it is clear that they are equally concerned to distance themselves from what they perceive to be Hegel's unfortunate foundationalism or essentialism. As Richard Rorty aptly puts it, "Dewey, like Marx, wants Hegel *without the Absolute Spirit*".[6]

Even sophisticated modern commentators, such as Charles Taylor, who see in Hegel a trenchant critic of "reality-behind-appearance" dualism, find it hard to avoid slipping back into foundationalist vocabulary when characterizing Hegel's own position. Taylor points out, quite rightly, that for Hegel "the inner connectedness of things, or the totality, cannot lie behind but

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must be immanent to external reality". Yet, when he reaches Hegel's analysis of the Concept (*Begriff*) in the *Science of Logic*, Taylor resorts to the very foundationalist vocabulary he has just shown Hegel to be criticizing. For Taylor, the basic Hegelian ontological vision is thus

> that the Concept *underlies* everything as the inner necessity which deploys the world, and that our conceptual knowledge is derivative from this. We are the vehicles whereby this *underlying* necessity comes to its equally necessary self-consciousness.[7]

What I wish to suggest in this essay is that this foundationalist interpretation of Hegel is in fact deeply mistaken. It is certainly true that Hegel understands nature and history to be rational processes which lead necessarily to human freedom and self-understanding. It is also clear that even this belief is too much for advocates of radical contingency, like Nietzsche and Rorty, to stomach. Yet, it is important to recognize that, for Hegel, reason does not constitute the *foundation* of change in the world: reason is not some principle or "pre-existing 'Idea'" (as Nietzsche calls it) that underlies nature or history and drives us forward to freedom.[8] Hegel's claim is that natural and historical change *itself* proves to be rational, and that rational ends are brought about by nothing other than observable natural processes and historical actions. In this sense, Hegel is not a foundationalist.

What is set out in the *Science of Logic*, therefore, is not an account of a rational principle or Idea that *precedes* being and *grounds* all natural and historical development; rather, the *Logic* sketches an initial, abstract picture of being *itself* as self-determining rationality. As Hegel shows in the later parts of his system, such rationality proves, on closer examination, not just to be rationality in the abstract, but to be the concrete process of nature and history. The understanding of being reached in the *Logic* thus turns out (once we get to the *Philosophy of Nature*) to be an underdetermination of what being is in truth: it tells us merely what being must *first* be understood to be. But, for Hegel, what we first understand being to be should not be mistaken for some underlying ground or foundation of being. When we see a person from afar, we first say that we see *someone*, and then, as we approach the person, we recognize that it is a man or a woman, a friend or a stranger, and so on. It would be absurd for us to say that being *someone* constitutes the foundation of the whole person or grounds whatever the person does. That is simply what the person is first thought to be. The same is true of Hegel's philosophical system. We first understand being (in the *Logic*) to be Idea or self-determining rationality, but (in the *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Spirit*) we then recognize such rationality itself to exist as space, time, matter, and history. Pure self-determining rationality (or the Idea) does not serve as the underlying ground of nature, therefore, but is simply what rational nature (and history) is initially thought to be. As Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*, "the *basis* or principle of the system is, in fact, only its *beginning*".[9]

Now, it is true that at times Hegel does describe spirit, the Idea or the Concept in an apparently foundationalist way. In the *Science of Logic*, for example, he describes the transition from the concept of substance to that of "Concept" or *Begriff* as the process whereby substance passes over "into its *ground*".[10] This is what allows writers like Marx and Taylor to interpret

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Hegel as they do. To my mind, however, Hegel's use of such vocabulary should not be taken to commit him to a fundamentally foundationalist view of the world. The clearest evidence that he is not a foundationalist is to be found in his analysis of the concept of "essence" itself in the *Science of Logic*.

In the *Logic* Hegel argues that philosophical thought has to pass from the study of being in its immediacy — as simple *being* — to the study of being as it is *in truth* or *in essence*. He also argues that the essence of being inevitably seems to be something other than, and to underlie, being itself. This is due not to any hankering for foundations on our part, but to an intrinsic characteristic of the essence itself (a characteristic which we will examine later). Hegel maintains, however, that the very idea of essence also undermines this appearance and exposes it as an illusion. The essence of being thus turns out not to be something other than being or to underlie being after all, but rather to be what being itself is in truth. According to Hegel, then, there is no hidden *foundation* to being. Yet he does not take this view because, like Nietzsche or Rorty, he rejects the idea of essence as such. He takes this view because he believes that the concept of essence itself undermines the illusion (which it generates) that there is a foundation to being, and so prepares the way for the non-foundational insight that being is itself self-determining reason ("Concept" [*Begriff*] or "Idea"). Hegel is an anti-foundationalist thinker, therefore, precisely because he endorses the concept of essence, but has a much subtler understanding of it than either Nietzsche or Rorty.

There is a considerable risk in trying to explain how Hegel understands the concept of essence. His analysis is very dense, very abstract, very complex, and may well seem utterly absurd to those unfamiliar with Hegel. A large part of the difficulty we face in understanding Hegel's conception of essence is due to the fact that he believes it to be defined more negatively than any other concept in the *Logic*. As Robert Pippin puts it, this means that Hegel's text "often threatens to disintegrate under the opprobrious weight of the 'nothings', 'negations', 'nonbeings', and 'negatives'".[11] For those who have little time anyway for what Schopenhauer calls Hegel's "frantic word-combinations", this section of the *Logic* will undoubtedly try one's patience more than any other.[12] In my view, however, it contains one of the subtlest accounts of the concept of essence that we have, and the risk involved in trying to understand it (and even more in trying to explain it in public) is eminently worth taking.

II

Hegel's project in the *Science of Logic* (1812-16, second edition 1832) is twofold. On the one hand, its aim is logical: to identify the basic categories of thought. (In this sense, the *Logic* represents Hegel's alternative to Kant's "Metaphysical Deduction" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.) On the other hand, the aim of the *Logic* is ontological: to determine what it is to be. (In this sense, the *Logic* represents Hegel's alternative to Spinoza's *Ethics*.) Hegel believes these two aims can be met together, if we adopt a quasi-Cartesian approach to the categories, that is to say, if we suspend all our traditional assumptions about the categories and seek to derive them anew from the quite indeterminate concept of *being* as such. For by showing which categories are implicit in the very concept of being, we will be able to show all the different things that

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"being" means; and to determine what it means to be — and so what it *is* to be — is precisely to do ontology. The first categories to be considered in the *Science of Logic* (in the "doctrine of being") are those that are immediately entailed by the concept of being itself: categories such as "reality", "something", and "quantity". The initial ontological lesson of the *Logic* is thus that being is not just some utterly indeterminate condition, but that to be is to be *real*, to be *something*, to be *quantifiable*, and so on.

What becomes clear in the doctrine of being is that being in all its forms involves *immediacy*. Hegel understands the term "immediacy" (*Unmittelbarkeit*) to mean three intimately related things. Negatively, being immediate means not being mediated (or produced) by something else. Positively, it means simply *being* what one is, simply *being* this. Positively, it also means simply being *oneself*, having an identity of one's *own*, simply being *this* (rather than *that*). In this latter sense, immediacy implies determinacy (*Bestimmtheit*).[13] Such immediacy is enjoyed not only by individual things, but also by the constituent features of things, that is, by their qualities and magnitude (both extensive and intensive). Each thing is immediately what *it* is and not something else; similarly, the specific qualities and specific magnitude of a thing are immediately whatever they are. It is true, of course, that Hegel shows all such immediacy to be intrinsically related to, and connected with, other such immediacy. To be something is thus necessarily to stand in relation to other things, and the qualities of something always have a certain magnitude or degree. Nevertheless, such relations and interconnections hold between things or features of things that are *immediately* what they are: one thing relates to another thing as the specific thing that *it* is, and this specific quality has this particular magnitude.

Yet Hegel's analysis also shows that there is actually more to immediacy than meets the eye. In his discussion of what it is to be "something", Hegel argues that the immediate identity of a thing — that which distinguishes it from other things — is itself influenced by other things to which it relates.[14] The sheer immediacy of a thing — the simple fact of its being *this* thing rather than something else — is thus not simply immediate after all, but is rather *mediated* "immediacy".

At the end of the doctrine of being, it then becomes clear that the immediate qualities and magnitude of a thing are not simply immediate, either. Something can certainly change its magnitude — become bigger or smaller — and still remain the thing that it is. Yet the qualities of a thing are not utterly indifferent to size or degree, for at a certain point a thing can get so big or so small, or so hot or so cold, that it undergoes qualitative change. Water, for example, is a fluid at moderate temperatures, but ceases to be a fluid and becomes ice or steam at low or high temperatures. The magnitude or degree of something thus actually plays a role in determining the character of that thing.[15]

But once it is recognised that changes in the magnitude or degree of something can bring about changes in the thing's quality, it becomes clear that neither quality nor quantity can continue to be regarded as simply immediate features of things. The qualities of something cannot be simply immediate, since they depend upon, and so are mediated by, the thing's size or temperature. Equally, the magnitude or temperature of something is not simply immediate either, since the size or temperature that a thing can reach whilst remaining what it is depends

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upon, and so is mediated by, the qualitative make-up of *that* thing. Neither quality nor quantity is simply immediate, therefore, since (to quote from the *Encyclopedia Logic*) "each is only *through the mediation of* (*vermittels*) the other".[16]

The conclusion reached at the end of the doctrine of being is thus deeply paradoxical: namely, that the immediacy characterizing things — their being this or that, and having these qualities and this size — is not simple immediacy after all, because it is the result of *mediation*. This is not to say, however, that we may now do away with the idea of immediacy altogether. The lesson to be drawn from the doctrine of being, according to Hegel, is more complex than that. Things do exhibit immediacy, and must do so in so far as they are anything at all; but we now recognize that that very immediacy is not simple immediacy *in truth* or *in essence*. For Hegel, the doctrine of being thus leads directly into the doctrine of essence. The doctrine of being shows all being to be immediacy; the doctrine of essence then explores the ramifications of the insight that the essence of such immediate being is not immediacy itself, but mediation or *non-immediacy*.

This account of Hegel's derivation of the concept of essence has been far too brief and has neglected much of what Hegel has to say.[17] Nevertheless, the account does make three important features of that concept clear. First of all, the concept of essence has to be understood in relation to that of immediacy: for it only emerges when the immediacy of being proves not to be simple immediacy after all. The concept of essence thus cannot stand alone: we cannot talk of essence *tout court*, but only of the essence *of* something immediately given. Second, the concept of essence is not one from which we can start, but is by definition a thought that we must come to *after* having thought about what is immediately there before us. "Essence issues from being", Hegel writes; "hence it is not immediately in and for itself but is a *result* of that movement".[18] Third, the concept of essence is fundamentally *negative*. It is above all the thought of the *non*-immediacy at the heart of all immediate being, and as such it necessarily negates the idea of immediacy itself — at least initially.

According to Hegel, the negation of immediacy that is inherent in the very concept of essence takes two forms. First of all, it reduces immediacy to something merely *inessential*, then it reduces immediacy even further to mere *illusion*. We shall now look at each of these reductions in turn.

To understand why the very idea of essence causes us to regard immediacy as something inessential, we need to recall that the essence is initially conceived in simple and direct *contrast* to immediacy. Things do exhibit a certain immediacy as distinct things; but the essence of such things is not immediacy, indeed is sheer *non*-immediacy. To begin with, then, the essence is understood to be quite different from the simple immediacy of being, to be what Hegel calls the sheer "*negation* of the sphere of being as such".[19]

According to Hegel, however, this initial understanding of essence invests essence itself — paradoxically — with an *immediacy* of its own. For it makes us think of the essence as being *this* rather than that, as having its own character and identity that is quite distinct from that of immediacy itself. In other words, it makes us think of the essence of things as *being* something other than their immediacy. As Hegel puts it, our initial understanding of essence makes us think

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of "essence itself [as] *simply affirmative* [*seiendes*], immediate essence".[20] Furthermore, this idea in turn requires us to think of the immediacy of things as being something other than their essence. But if immediacy is understood to *be* one thing and the essence is understood to *be* something else, then both are understood to belong to the sphere of being and to form part of what there *is*.

In Hegel's view, therefore, drawing an immediate contrast between the essence of being and the immediacy of being makes less of a difference to the way we understand the world than we might imagine: for we still conceive the object of thought to be *immediacy*. We distinguish the essence from simple immediacy, but we are forced by the immediacy of that very distinction to regard each as having "*a being, an immediacy*" of its own (*ein Sein, eine Unmittelbarkeit*).[21] The distinction we draw thus turns out to be between *being* that is of the essence and *being* that is merely immediate and so not of the essence. Being that is not of the essence, Hegel says, is being that is *inessential* (*das Unwesentliche*), whereas being that is of the essence is being that is *essential* (*das Wesentliche*). The initial effect of introducing the concept of essence is thus not to force us to abandon the idea of immediacy altogether, but to force us to regard simple immediacy as something inessential. This is the first reduction or negation of immediacy brought about by the concept of essence.

The beginning of Hegel's doctrine of essence is abstract and terse, but his point is nevertheless clear: the introduction of the concept of essence initially does no more than divide being into two — into one kind of being that is inessential and contingent and another kind of being that is essential. Hegel does not state explicitly that what is essential is to be understood as the *foundation* of what is inessential, but it is clear that the two ideas are closely related. For the idea of an underlying foundation to things is merely a further refinement of the idea that inessential being points back to something more essential than itself. We can thus see why the essence of things should so often be conceived as their *foundation* by appreciating why the essence has initially to be understood as essential being.

For Hegel, the essence is conceived as *being* something other than immediacy — and so as essential being — because it is initially understood to be immediately *different* from immediacy itself. That is to say, it is initially understood *not* to be immediate being, but to be simple *non*-immediacy. Conceived in this way, essence is the simple *negation* of immediacy or, as Hegel puts it, as the "*first* negation" of being.[22] It is this, and this alone, that invests the essence with an immediate being or identity of its own and gives it "determinacy" (*Bestimmtheit*) or distinctness. It is this alone, therefore, that turns the essence into something other than immediacy. The conception of essence as what is other than immediacy is thus not just an error, but is generated by an intrinsic feature of the very concept of essence itself: namely, that the essence is quite simply *not* immediate being. The source of the immediacy initially conferred on essence is thus the simplicity of that little word "not".[23]

To recapitulate: so far the essence of being has been contrasted with the immediacy of being — the essence of being has been understood *not* to be immediacy, but to be *something else* (namely, non-immediacy), and immediate being itself has been understood to be *something other* than the essence of things (namely, what is inessential). According to Hegel, however, in

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conceiving of immediacy and the essence in this way we are overlooking something very important: immediacy cannot actually *be* something distinct from, or other than, the essence of things, because what there is in essence is *all* that there truly is. The concept of essence thus requires us to revise the idea that immediacy is real but inessential, and to conceive of it in a new way.

The concept of essence, we recall, is the concept of the true character of immediacy *itself*; it arose when we discovered that immediacy is not simple immediacy after all, but is in truth non-immediacy. Hence the opening sentence of Hegel's doctrine of essence: "the truth of *being* is *essence*".[24] In truth, therefore, there is nothing to "immediacy" *but* non-immediacy. But that means that *there is in fact no simply immediate being*. Immediacy thus cannot be understood to *be* something separate from the essence of things — to be inessential being — because it cannot have any *being* of its own at all. Yet, as we have seen, we may not simply dispense with the idea of immediacy altogether: the doctrine of being shows all being to be immediate and shows that we must encounter immediacy in so far as we encounter anything at all. How can these two conflicting claims be reconciled? The answer, in Hegel's view, is this: the simple immediacy which things exhibit, in so far as they are anything at all, but which in truth is not really there, must be understood to be an *illusion*. To be is to be immediate; but immediacy is in truth not immediacy after all. In essence, therefore, there is no immediacy. The immediacy which we encounter — indeed the whole sphere of being described in the doctrine of being — can thus only be what there *seems* to be. The second important effect of conceiving the essence of things to be non-immediacy is, consequently, to reduce the immediacy of things to mere seeming immediacy, to mere *Schein*. Focussing our attention on the essence of things does not just render immediate being inessential, it renders it utterly illusory.

III

Hegel's analysis of the concept of essence might appear at first sight to have little to do with the traditional understanding of that concept. No mention has yet been made of the difference between essence and existence, and nothing has been said about the unchanging character of the essence of things. The suspicion inevitably arises, therefore, that Hegel is not actually talking about the accepted concept of essence at all. Yet I believe that, despite his unusual language, Hegel is indeed explaining what is meant by the word "essence". If he initially neglects some of the features normally associated with the concept of "essence", that is because he does not wish simply to take such features for granted at the outset, but prefers to build up his conception of essence from scratch. In Hegel's view, we should not just assume that the essence of things "endures" or that it is identical with "form" and so on, but should seek to discover whether such claims are true, starting from the *least* that the essence of things can possibly be.

As we have seen, the least that the essence can be is the *negation* of immediacy. This may strike some as a strange way to begin. But it surely overlaps with our deepest intuitions about "essence". For all Hegel is claiming is that thinking about the essence of things is at least thinking about what is *not* immediately given to us. "When we say ... that all things have an essence", Hegel writes, "what we mean is that they are *not* truly what they *immediately* show

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themselves to be (*daß sie wahrhaft* nicht *das sind, als was sie sich* unmittelbar *erweisen*)".[25] To deny this minimal claim is surely to reject the very idea of essence altogether.

Hegel's further claims about essence are also considerably less remote from our normal understanding than his abstract account might lead one to believe. We often think of the essence of things as being something apart from their inessential qualities. We might say, for example, that what is important or essential about a person is his kindness, and that his occasional moments of unkindness towards us are really inessential or immaterial. Furthermore, we also recognize that, once we understand the essence of something to be what it *truly* is, we have to consider the immediate characteristics of the thing, that are at variance with that essence, to be what the thing merely *seems* to be. I might see someone in the street and find him rather ferocious. I might then come to recognize that he is not really ferocious at all, but that he is in truth very friendly. In the light of this thought that the man is actually a friendly person, I cannot but think that the ferocity, which I still see in him, is merely apparent.

Now, in the example I have just given, the man's apparent ferocity is contrasted with his true friendliness. It is not enough, however, simply to *contrast* his true and apparent character in this way: for the man *himself* seems to be ferocious. Since the man himself is, as it were, sheer friendliness, it must be his friendliness that appears to be ferocity. The man's seeming ferocity cannot simply be set over against his essential friendliness, therefore, because it is nothing but that which his essential friendliness itself seems to be. Or, to put it more abstractly, even though the essence of things differs from what things seem to be, it can only be their essence or true being itself that seems to be other than it is. In Hegel's words, seeming is thus nothing but the "*seeming of essence itself*" (*der Schein des Wesens selbst*).[26] In the terms of Hegel's own analysis, we recall, what is illusory is simple immediacy. For Hegel, therefore, it is the essence itself — non-immediacy as such — that seems to be immediate being. If we think about it, this has to be the case: for if non-immediacy proves to be the truth of immediacy, then only non-immediacy can *seem* to be such immediacy in the first place.

We have seen that the concept of essence reduces immediacy to mere illusion. What we have now to recognize is that the concept of essence does not just negate and dissolve a sphere of immediacy that lies outside it. It negates a sphere of immediacy that is actually generated by essence and non-immediacy itself. We now need to consider precisely how non-immediacy can itself seem to be immediate being.

Note that the issue here is not how the essence can appear to have an immediacy of its own *over against* immediate being. That has already been explained: the essence appears to have that immediacy because it is initially understood as the simple negation of being. What Hegel now wishes to explain is how the essence can itself seem to be that very immediate being *from which* it is initially distinguished — how the essence can appear in the guise of simple immediate being *itself*. This appearance of immediacy on the part of essence clearly cannot stem from its being taken as the simple negation of being. Indeed, Hegel insists that it can only arise from the new form that essence is conceived to have once it is understood to reduce immediate being to mere illusion. According to Hegel, then, when the essence is understood to reduce being to mere illusion, it is *thereby* conceived as that which itself appears in the form of such

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illusory being. To appreciate why the essence itself appears to be immediate being, we thus need to consider how the concept of essence changes as it sets itself in relation, not just to what is inessential, but to what is illusory.

Hegel's new conception of essence is, however, not an easy one to comprehend: for he argues that essence has now to be understood as sheer *negativity* — as double negation, self-negating negation, negation that is *not* just simple negation. Essence itself seems to be simple immediate being, therefore, because essence is negativity. It is at this point that the "opprobrious weight" of the negatives, referred to by Pippin, is felt most acutely by readers of Hegel's text. Indeed, some — like Schopenhauer — may be tempted to think that Hegel is deliberately indulging in mind-befuddling word-play, or that he has taken leave of his philosophical senses altogether (assuming that he had any to begin with). It is important to recognize, however, that Hegel's new conception of essence is not the product of sinister intent or of madness. He is driven to conceive of essence as sheer negativity because he takes seriously what is implied by the concept of essence itself.

We know that the essence has initially to be conceived as the negation of immediacy, because the least that the essence can be is what is *not* immediately given; and we know that conceiving of essence in this way turns it into something separate from immediate being, into that being which is essential rather than inessential. It is also clear, however, that the essence cannot actually be something separate from immediacy, because it is the true character of immediate being *itself*: essence is the sheer non-immediacy that immediacy *itself* is in truth. This idea requires us to recognize that there is in fact nothing to "immediacy itself" except non-immediacy. That means that there is no simple *immediacy* as such; and that in turn means that the immediacy we encounter must be an illusion. The idea that essence, or non-immediacy, is the true character of immediacy itself does not eliminate the very idea of immediacy, but renders all immediacy merely apparent.

Note now how the concept of essence has been altered in the process. If the essence, or non-immediacy, is the *truth* of immediacy, then it is not simply something separate from, or other than, immediacy; it is not simply the direct and immediate *negation* of immediacy. That is merely what essence initially seems to be. Essence remains the negation of immediacy, in so far as it is still defined as *non*-immediacy; but it has now to be conceived as the negation of immediacy that is *not* just immediacy's *negation* but immediacy's truth. In other words, the essence has now to be understood as the negation of simple negation or as "absolute negativity".[27] The very logic of the concept of essence itself, therefore, forces us to conceive of essence as negativity.

The manifold complexities of Hegel's concept of negativity have been explored with great clarity, subtlety and precise attention to detail by Dieter Henrich in his exemplary essay, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion". My concern here is not to present a similarly detailed account for the English-speaking reader. It is simply to highlight those features of negativity that are relevant to the specific task at hand: that of demonstrating that Hegel has a non-foundational concept of essence. It is to these that we now turn.

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The most obvious thing to note about negativity is that it is much more radically non-immediate and negative than simple negation. Simple negation, for Hegel, is simply that: negation. It has an immediacy of its own and so, for that reason, can be understood to *be* something different from immediacy itself.[28] Negativity, on the other hand, lacks such simple immediacy. It is not simple, immediate negation, but self-*negating* negation — negation that recoils back upon itself and undermines the immediacy of simply *being* negation.

Yet Hegel argues that, paradoxically, such negativity itself takes the form of immediate being. This is due, not merely (as Nietzsche might argue) to the constraints of our language, but to a structural feature of negativity as such. Negativity takes the form of immediacy, in Hegel's view, because, as self-negating negation, it is purely *self-relating* negation. As such, it is wholly self-sufficient and is not mediated by anything else. It stands alone; it is, as Hegel puts it, "equal" only to itself. Consequently, it is *immediately* itself: it is simply what *it* is. "Negativity", Hegel writes, "is negativity *per se*; it is its relation to itself and is thus in itself immediacy".[29] Immediacy was initially conferred on essence because essence was taken to be the simple *negation* of immediate being. Essence now takes the form of immediate being as such because, as negativity, it is purely self-relating, purely *itself*.

Or, at least, that is how it appears. In truth, negativity cannot simply *be* what it is — cannot simply be *itself* — because it is self-*negating* negation or "negative self-relation". That is to say, it is the explicit activity of negating any simple immediacy that it appears to have. The "immediacy" exhibited by negativity thus cannot be real *immediacy*, but can only be an "effect" generated by self-negating (and so self-relating) negation. Simple "immediacy", in other words, can only be an illusion projected by negativity: "the immediacy is not simply affirmative (*seiend*), but is the purely mediated or reflected immediacy that is illusory being".[30] We have seen that the essence initially *seems* to be something other than immediate being. Now we see that the essence *seems* to be that very immediate being itself.

Our ordinary intuition tells us that what there seems to be must be an illusion projected by what there is *in truth*. If a person is, as it were, nothing but friendliness, then his apparent ferocity must be a projection of his friendliness itself. Seeming can only be the seeming of essence. Hegel makes the same point by drawing attention to the inherently negative character of the essence. Essence must be understood as sheer negativity, because it is the negation of immediacy that is *not* just immediacy's simple negation. As sheer negativity (or as the "second negation" of being), it is the utter dissolution of all simple immediacy: it reduces all immediacy to mere illusion and even negates the immediacy that initially attaches to essence itself as simple negation. Yet, as self-relating negation, sheer negativity exhibits an apparent simple immediacy of its own. This immediacy is merely *apparent*, however, because it is merely an illusory effect generated by self-*negating* negation. Essence as negativity thus seems — but only *seems* — to be simple immediate being. Consequently, simple immediacy is the illusion projected by essence itself; or, as Hegel puts it, seeming is the "*seeming of essence itself*".[31]

The simple immediacy of being — which is described in detail in the doctrine of being — hereby suffers a third reduction. First, it was reduced to what is merely inessential. Then it was reduced to what is merely illusory. Now it has been reduced even further to an illusion

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projected by the essence itself. It is essence — and essence alone — that seems to be simple immediate being. It can only be essence, therefore, that creates the impression that there is a realm of simple immediacy made up of things with specific qualities and magnitude. Such immediate being thus really is nothing in itself, because it is merely the result of an unwitting trick played on us by essential negativity.

According to Hegel, however, the concept of essence implies a further — fourth — reduction of immediacy. This involves the elimination of the very distinction between essence and its own seeming. At the point we have now reached, essence is understood to generate the illusion of being simple immediacy itself (and so to generate the illusion of *there being* a realm of such immediacy). In conceiving of such apparent immediacy as mere illusion, however, we are still distinguishing between the essence itself and the illusion it projects: we are still understanding the essence *not* to be the simple immediacy that it *seems* to be. Hegel's next — and most radical — suggestion is that even this distinction is undermined by the sheer negativity and non-immediacy of essence. Hegel's reasoning here is clear. If we understand essence to be distinct from what it itself seems to be, then we continue to confer a simple immediacy on to essence: we posit the essence as being pure and simple negativity rather than (illusory) immediacy, and so give essence itself its own immediate identity over against what it merely seems to be. But in so doing, we fail to think essence as negativity and *non-immediacy*. As Hegel writes:

> In the sphere of essence, we have first essence opposed to the unessential, then essence opposed to illusory being … . But both the unessential and illusory being, and also the difference of essence from them, derive solely from the fact that essence is at first taken as an *immediate* (*als ein* unmittelbares), not as it is in itself.[32]

In truth, as we know, essence only *seems* to be simple immediacy — whether it is understood as the "simple" negation of being or as purely "self-relating" negation. The conclusion we must draw, therefore, is that essence only seems to have an immediacy of its own beyond the simple immediacy it seems to be. This is the strikingly Nietzschean implication of Hegel's analysis of essence: the thought of essence as distinct from, or as underlying, what it seems to be, is itself merely the thought of what essence *seems to be*. Or, to put it another way, the idea that the essence of things can be distinguished from the illusion of immediacy that essence projects, is itself one of the illusions that essence projects.

In truth essence is not something underlying what it seems to be; it is not *that which* seems. It has no immediacy of its own that is distinct from its seeming. But if that is the case, then essence can be nothing but seeming as such. This, indeed, is the conclusion that Hegel finally comes to: essence, in truth, is nothing but *the very process of seeming*, "the seeming of itself in itself" (*das Scheinen seiner in sich selbst*).[33] In essence, then, there is no simple immediacy, and there is no essence or foundation underlying the appearance of immediacy, either. All there is, is the process of seeming itself — the process whereby sheer negativity first seems to be immediacy, then seems to be distinct from its own seeming immediacy, and finally

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dissolves this distinction and reveals itself to be nothing but seeming as such.[34] In the terms of the example we gave earlier, if we say that the man is essentially friendly, but all we encounter directly is ferocity, then we must conclude that his "friendliness" is in fact nothing but seeming to be ferocity.

The importance of Hegel's abstract analysis of essence should now be clear. For, on the one hand, Hegel has shown that the essence of things cannot be something *other than* or *underlying* what is inessential or what appears. Essence does not constitute the *foundation* of real or apparent being, because to think of it that way is to confer on it a simple immediacy which it cannot actually have. Yet, on the other hand, Hegel has explained why people might believe that the essence does constitute such a foundation: because the essence is precisely the process of *seeming* to be such a foundation. It is the process of seeming to be simple immediacy and of seeming to underlie any immediacy it seems to have.

Foundationalists and anti-foundationalists disagree about whether there is actually an underlying ground to things or not. But they agree that the term "essence" means, amongst other things, just such an underlying ground. Hegel's distinctive contribution to the debate between these two groups is to argue that the term "essence" does *not* mean such an underlying ground, but that — for essential reasons — it does seem to. From Hegel's point of view, therefore, foundationalists and anti-foundationalists are both taken in by the same illusion — an illusion projected, not merely by our own thought or language, but by essential negativity itself.

IV

So far we have conceived of the essence as negating all immediacy and reducing it to mere illusion. Essence negates immediacy to such a degree that it cannot even be thought as being *that which* seems to be immediate, but must be understood as the mere process of seeming as such, the process of negativity. Hegel argues, however, that the concept of essence does not negate *all* immediacy whatsoever. This is because, as the process of sheer seeming, essence has an immediacy of its own that is irreducible. Essence, after all, *is* the process of sheer seeming; it *is* sheer negativity. The previous immediacy exhibited by negativity proved to be illusory because it belied essence's inherently self-*negating* character: it invested negativity with a simple, immediate identity which, as sheer self-negation, it could not have (see pp. 27-8 above). The new immediacy exhibited by negativity, to which Hegel now draws attention, is different from this. It does not belie essence's self-negating character, but, on the contrary, is the immediacy negativity must have in so far as it is nothing but negativity, nothing but sheer seeming to be. Such immediacy is, Hegel says, the "immediacy that *is* as pure mediation or absolute negativity".[35] This immediacy is real, because essence cannot be anything less than sheer negativity and seeming.

At this point in the analysis, we begin to see that the essence does not just negate and reduce immediacy, but is itself *constitutive* of immediate being. There is immediate being after all, therefore, because of the very nature of essence itself; negativity does not simply render all immediate being illusory, but actually makes immediate being necessary. Negativity, in other words, is now understood to be the true character or essence of real, *irreducible* immediacy.

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Later in the *Logic* Hegel will show that the immediacy constituted by negativity is to be understood as identity, existence, actuality and, ultimately, self-determining reason or the "Idea". It is here at the end of the section on "seeming", however, that the profound reversal in our conception of the essence of things occurs: for it is here that we first see the essence play a positive — indeed, generative — role, rather than a purely negative one. Here, in other words, we first see negativity negate itself into positivity.[36]

But how can negativity constitute irreducible immediacy, if, as we have seen, it also reduces immediacy to mere illusion? Hegel's answer is clear. What proved to be illusory, and is still to be regarded as illusory, is *sheer* or *simple* immediacy. There is no *simple* immediacy, because, as we saw at the end of the doctrine of being, all such "immediacy" is in truth mediated. The simple immediacy that consists in simply *being* what something is, is thus a mere illusion — an illusion projected by negativity itself. But we have now learned that this does not render immediacy as such illusory, because there is such a thing as *mediated immediacy* — immediacy that is constituted, and so mediated, by negativity. Indeed, according to Hegel, that is all there can actually be. "There is nothing", he says, "nothing in heaven or in nature or mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation".[37] As we have just noted, such mediated immediacy will prove to be identity, existence, actuality and, eventually, the Idea. The self-identical, existing, actual Idea is thus *in truth* all that there is, for Hegel.

Yet this sharp contrast between simple and mediated immediacy actually needs qualification. For it becomes clear during the further course of the doctrine of essence that simple immediacy is itself a necessary "moment" or aspect of mediated immediacy.[38] In other words, every existing or actual thing is itself *something* with *these* specific qualities and *this* specific magnitude. In so far as simple immediacy is understood to be part of mediated immediacy, and so to be mediated itself in its very simplicity, such immediacy is thus not illusory after all. It is only an illusion, in so far as it is taken by itself and conceived in complete abstraction from mediation as *utterly* simple immediacy. Up to now simple immediacy has been taken by itself in just this way. Consequently, it has been undermined, and eventually reduced to mere appearance, by the recognition that it is the product of mediation. In the further course of the doctrine of essence, however, simple immediacy will be restored to reality by being conceived as a moment of, and as a form of, mediated immediacy.

For Hegel, therefore, this pen does not just *seem* to be something of its own and to be quite separate from this piece of paper. The pen *is* something in its own right and it *is* quite separate from this piece of paper. Each is simply what it is and, in an obvious sense, is not created, produced or "mediated" by the other. Each is thus simply *immediate*. But to say this is to tell only one part of the story: for it omits any reference to the negativity — in the shape of difference and form — which constitutes them *as* separate things, and it ignores the ways in which their character is determined by other things around them (for example, by the people that use them or by the temperature and humidity of the air). To think of each thing as simply being what it is, is thus not wrong, but it is severely to underdetermine them.

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To recapitulate: the illusion is not that things are simply immediate, but that they simply are what they are *and nothing more* — that being is nothing but simple immediacy. It is this *utterly simple* immediacy that has been the subject of the successive reductions or negations we have traced during the course of this essay. The truth that emerges through Hegel's analysis is that things are indeed simply what they are, but that that is not all there is to be said about them — because such simple immediacy is merely one aspect of their *constituted, mediated* immediacy and existence.

With the idea that negativity is itself constitutive of all true immediacy, Hegel breaks definitively with dualism and foundationalism. He proves that the essence of things does not underlie being as its foundation, but is immanent in being, indeed is identical with being itself. Later in the *Logic* Hegel will show that negativity has to be understood as difference, form and, eventually, reason. In no case, however, does the ontological status of negativity change: it is always to be understood as constitutive of being itself. The ultimate message of Hegel's *Logic* is thus not that all being has a rational or dialectical *foundation*, but that being is itself rational and dialectical.

In the doctrine of the Concept — the third part of the *Logic* — Hegel provides his fullest account of the structure of constituted, rational being. There being is understood to consist in mechanical, chemical, organic, cognitive and practical processes. In the remaining parts of the doctrine of essence — which fall between the section which we have examined and the doctrine of the Concept — Hegel considers more general conceptions of constituted being, such as existence and actuality. But he also highlights the various ways in which negativity continues to appear to be something *underlying* being itself (for example, when it determines itself to be the *ground* of all being or the *substance* of things). Such an appearance is nothing but an illusion, in Hegel's view, and is shown to be such by closer analysis of what it is to be the "ground" or "substance" of things.[39] Nevertheless, it is an illusion that is necessarily projected by essential negativity itself. In my view, the lasting significance of Hegel's whole doctrine of essence lies above all in this insight: that we are seduced into looking for the hidden ground of things, not just by the grammar of our language and the structure of our thought, but by the very nature of the world itself.[40]

Among those who succumb most readily to the seductive wiles of the world are some who charge Hegel himself with foundationalism. Deleuze, for example, rejects what he takes to be Hegel's view that there is a fundamental identity to things; but he himself maintains that "all identities are ... produced as an optical 'effect' by the more *profound* game of difference and repetition".[41] Similarly, Marx criticizes Hegel's alleged contention that history is governed by an underlying absolute; yet he himself claims that "the sum total of ... relations of production constitutes ... the real *foundation*, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness".[42] Granted, the foundations to which Deleuze and Marx refer do not exhibit the identity, unity, and invariance commonly associated with the metaphysical concept of essence or ground; but they are nevertheless conceived as *underlying* what we encounter in some way. They are thus the products of a way of thinking that

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has been taken in by — rather than seen through — the illusion generated by the very nature of things.

Hegel's position, by contrast, is radically anti-foundationalist. He seeks to understand not what (allegedly) "grounds", "underlies" or "conditions" being, but what being *itself* is in truth. He is, in other words, an ontological rather than a (quasi-)transcendental thinker: one who looks to determine what is constitutive of being as such, rather than what is "presupposed" by being, what "makes objects possible", or what "grants" being, as it were, "from behind". This, I believe, is what ultimately distinguishes Hegel from his German Idealist predecessors, such as Kant, Fichte and Schelling, and from many of his successors, such as Marx, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. None of these philosophers can be regarded as a straightforward, metaphysical foundationalist; indeed, as I indicated earlier, many are avowed anti-foundationalists. Any comparison of their thought with that of Hegel would thus have to pay very careful and subtle attention to the different ways in which they submit metaphysical foundationalism — the belief in a unified, identifiable, enduring ground of things — to critique or deconstruction. Nevertheless, such a comparative study would, I believe, show that they remain seduced by the illusion that immediacy points back to "something" (or, rather, to some *non*-thing) more "fundamental" than immediacy itself, and that, consequently, their thought falls short of Hegel's radical anti-foundationalism.

Hegel's doctrine of essence is by no means easy to follow. Even Hegel admits that it is the "most difficult" part of the *Logic*.[43] To my mind, however, the doctrine of essence is essential reading for those who wish to understand Hegel properly. For it is here that we see why Hegel cannot be the philosopher of legend — the one for whom everything that occurs is but the appearance of an underlying, all-controlling absolute. It is also here that we discover why Hegel might nevertheless *seem* to be that legendary figure. In addition, the doctrine of essence provides a particularly fine example of Hegel at work subtly unfolding the sometimes surprising implications of concepts we thought we already understood — a "method" he follows throughout his philosophy. Taking these three things together, it is tempting to say that it is in the doctrine of essence that we encounter the very *essence* of Hegel himself.

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. W. Kaufmann, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §§556-8, 567. See also, Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 80-1.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §§89, 92, 97.

3 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 361, 367.

4 For a defence of the view that Nietzsche does not understand the will to power to be the "underlying essence" of things, but rather their inner "pathos", see Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 66-7.

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5 Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 420.

6 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 46-7, my italics.

7 Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 287, 299-300, my italics.

8 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §515. See Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, p. 37.

9 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K.M Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970) [*Theorie Werkausgabe*, Vol. 3], p. 28; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 14.

10 G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 2 Vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969) [*Theorie Werkausgabe*, Vols. 5, 6], **2**: 246; *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989), p. 577.

11 Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism. The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 213.

12 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, 2 Vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), **1**: xxiv.

13 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **1**: 68-9, 82, 116-18, 131; *Science of Logic*, pp. 69-70, 82, 109-11, 122. See also Dieter Henrich, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung", in *Die Wissenschaft der Logik und die Logik der Reflexion*, ed. D. Henrich (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1978) [*Hegel-Studien*, Beiheft 18], p. 246.

14 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **1**: 134; *Science of Logic*, p. 124: "the determination is, as such, open to relationship to other".

15 G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (1830). Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970) [*Theorie Werkausgabe*, Vol. 8], pp. 225-7 [§108 and Addition]); *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.F. Suchting and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 171-2.

16 Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (1830). Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 229 [§111]); *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 173.

17 For a more detailed discussion of the transition from the doctrine of being to the doctrine of essence in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, see J. Biard *et al.*, eds. *Introduction à la lecture de La Science de la Logique de Hegel. I. L'Etre* (Paris: Aubier, 1981), pp. 280-91.

18 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 17; *Science of Logic*, p. 393.

19 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 18; *Science of Logic*, p. 394 (translation emended).

20 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 18; *Science of Logic*, p. 394.

21 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 18; *Science of Logic*, p. 394.

22 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 19; *Science of Logic*, p. 395.

23 See Henrich, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung", p. 236.

24 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 13; *Science of Logic*, p. 389.

25 Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (1830). Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 232 [§112 Addition]; *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 176, my italics.

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26 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 22; *Science of Logic*, p. 398 (translation emended).
27 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 19, 21; *Science of Logic*, pp. 395, 397.
28 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **1**: 118; *Science of Logic*, p. 111.
29 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 22; *Science of Logic*, p. 398.
30 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 22; *Science of Logic*, p. 397.
31 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 22; *Science of Logic*, p. 398 (translation emended).
32 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 23; *Science of Logic*, p. 399 (translation emended).
33 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 23; *Science of Logic*, p. 398 (translation emended).
34 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 22; *Science of Logic*, p. 398. For Henrich's subtle analysis of this process, see "Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung", pp. 256-60.
35 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 23; *Science of Logic*, p. 399.
36 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 25; *Science of Logic*, p. 400.
37 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **1**: 66; *Science of Logic*, p. 68.
38 See, for example, Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 202; *Science of Logic*, p. 542 (on "*immediate, unreflected* actuality"). For Hegel, therefore, the world of nature and history, which is the unfolding of reason or the Idea, must include a moment of irreducible, immediate *contingency*. On this, see Dieter Henrich, "Hegels Theorie über den Zufall", in Dieter Henrich, *Hegel im Kontext*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), pp. 157-86, and Stephen Houlgate, "Necessity and Contingency in Hegel's *Science of Logic*", *The Owl of Minerva* 27, 1 (Fall 1995): 37-49.
39 Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, **2**: 122-3, 220; *Science of Logic*, pp. 477-8, 556.
40 This might well be one significant difference between Hegel and Wittgenstein and one significant similarity between Hegel and Nietzsche.
41 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. xix, my italics.
42 Marx, *Selected Writings*, p. 389, my italics.
43 Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (1830). Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 236 [§114]; *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 179.

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