

On Stephen Houlgate's *Hegel on Being*

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Stephen Houlgate's long-awaited two volumes on Hegel's Logic of Being offer a thorough presentation and a detailed reconstruction of the Doctrine of Being, which constitutes the first part of the first division of Hegel's *Science of Logic* (appeared in 1812 in the first edition; revised in the second edition of 1832 published after Hegel's death). The first volume takes on the logic of Quality and the transition to Quantity while the second volume addresses the logic of Quantity and Measure leading up to the transition to Essence. Along with the Doctrine of Essence, the Doctrine of Being occupies the first main division of Hegel's *Logic* or Objective Logic, which is followed by the Subjective Logic, or Doctrine of the Concept, as its second main division. Within Hegel's philosophical system, the *Logic* is followed by the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the three main parts of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (appeared in the three editions of 1817, 1827, 1830). Chronologically, but also systematically (at least in a qualified way),¹ the *Logic* is preceded by the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This brief sketch may help us locate the object of Houlgate's volumes within Hegel's philosophy as a whole.

Houlgate's new work on the Logic of Being represents the culmination of his engagement with the first, foundational part of Hegel's system of philosophy—an engagement that started at the latest with his work for the 2006 book, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic*. Within the time span of roughly two decades (but it is actually longer than this), in the Anglo-American world, we have moved from a situation in which each and every study on Hegel's *Logic* was usually prefaced by remarks deploring the lack of scholarly attention offered to this part of Hegel's system—but also, even more importantly, by the need to justify the conviction that attention had in fact to be paid to it—to a blooming interest in Hegel's *Logic*. References to the *Logic* can now be abundantly found even in essays concerned with other parts of the system and with other topics from Hegel's philosophy (nature, spirit, ethics, politics, history, among others). In the past, such references would have sounded misguided and certainly would have strengthened neither the interest in those more 'concrete' topics of Hegelian philosophy nor the cogency of the interpreter's argument. Nowadays, by contrast, philosophy students are increasingly tackling Hegel's challenging book with the help of a new English translation (di Giovanni 2010),² conferences on the *Logic* generally draw good participation and

produce animated scholarly debates, while important monographs on different issues and aspects of this work have been published in recent years.

Against the backdrop of this changing landscape in Anglo-American Hegel studies, there is no doubt that Houlgate's work has played a central role in focusing scholarly interest on the *Logic*; and there is also no doubt that the present volumes will greatly contribute from now on to inform and re-orient the approach to it.³ Indeed, these volumes are an invaluable pedagogical tool to be used in undergraduate and graduate courses on Hegel's *Logic*; they offer an unprecedented *summa* of past and present controversies and debates around it; and in short, they are a reference that no serious reader and interpreter of the text of the *Logic*—and of Hegel's system more broadly—can afford to bypass and to not seriously confront.

Houlgate's aim in these two volumes is to follow and carefully explain the internal development of the logical argument of the Doctrine of Being in its entirety but also in painstaking detail, leaving no conceptual stone unturned, as it were. Precision of detail and clarity of exposition are crucial to Houlgate's approach to the text of the first division of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Broader and much debated issues (the *Logic*'s relation to metaphysics and to Kant's critique, for example) are addressed to the extent that they are functional to the internal development of the logical argument, not as isolated issues in their own right. Now, in setting out my task of presenting and discussing these two volumes—but also seizing the opportunity to directly address the author himself—one of my first perplexities concerns how to precisely qualify or classify Houlgate's book with regard to its scholarly aim and *genre*. Is this a commentary on the Doctrine of Being; a faithful and detailed reconstruction of its arguments; a close reading of Hegel's text; a 'miniaturistic' immersive interpretation of it (as I have heard one other reader suggest)? To be sure, these are not hard alternatives and may well all describe Houlgate's latest work. For, ultimately, they all point to a certain interpretive approach to Hegel's text. In the discussion that follows, I am interested in expanding on this general question. It may seem a minor or indeed a tangential question. It is, certainly, a question of form—a form, however, that implying, in good Hegelian fashion, its own (adequate) content, may in fact be the best entry point in these volumes. At stake herein is not simply a question of *genre* in the philosophical literature. What interests me is rather the issue of the interpretive 'method' to be mobilized when at the centre is a book as peculiar as Hegel's *Science of Logic*—and peculiar, first and foremost, precisely on the ground of its stated 'method'. In other words, *what* is the interpreter to do, today, with Hegel's book? *Why* did Houlgate choose to do what he did with it and not something else? I will certainly not presume to answer this question—I intend, rather, to pose this question to the author himself. In what follows, however, I shall argue for the relevance of the question and its implications in the aftermath of Houlgate's recent publication.

I have decided to discuss Houlgate's work within the framework of this broadly 'methodological' question for several reasons.⁴ For one thing, I believe it is important to address the overarching breadth of the entire work or the overarching aim of its project, and not just take up particular issues, dwell on particular passages, or point to circumscribed agreements and disagreements. One of the crucial merits of Houlgate's book—but also one of its distinctive features in relation to the recent literature in the field—is precisely its willingness to take on the Doctrine of Being in its *entirety* but also to refrain as much as possible from approaching Hegel's text from a particular, pre-determined interpretive angle. For another thing, the centrality and peculiarity of the dialectic-speculative method that Hegel employs and thematizes in the *Logic* is evidenced by the fact that such method does, in point of fact, affect both the way in which the interpreter has to be positioned *vis à vis* Hegel's text, and the way in which the interpretation has to orient and shape itself with regard to the text. In other words, our interpretive strategies toward Hegel's *Logic* are always already influenced and even constrained by the *Logic's* method—they presuppose it, as it were, whether they want to or not. In this regard, then, I am interested in the relationship between the method of Hegel's *Logic* and the interpreter's method in reading and presenting its text. When Houlgate explains, 'The method of the logic is the way in which the logician is to think' (I: 63) one may ask whether he is referring to the logician Hegel, to the reader, or to the interpreter of the *Logic*. Finally, one of the reasons I decided to draw to the centre the aforementioned question is that I have pondered it myself in writing my latest book on Hegel's *Science of Logic* (Nuzzo 2018). Initially, I myself contemplated an option not too distant from the one actually embraced by Houlgate in these volumes. And yet, although the thought of writing a sort of commentary on or a step-by-step textual reconstruction of the *Science of Logic* was the first idea for my book, I have ended up following a path that may rightly be considered the exact opposite of it. What does this apparently radical divergence say with regard to (the reading of) Hegel's *Logic* on the one hand, and to Houlgate's volumes on the other? Ultimately, the question I pose to Houlgate is the question I posed to myself in writing my book.

In what follows, along these lines, I want to offer a few reflections on the meaning and the implications of a book on Hegel's *Logic* such as Houlgate's for our reading of Hegel's text today.

I. Reading Hegel's *Logic*: the method of the *Logic* and the method of our interpretation of the *Logic*

Houlgate is well aware that the peculiar nature of Hegel's *Logic*—the dialectic-speculative character of its method (I: 88), its relation to metaphysics (ancient,

modern and specifically pre-Kantian, and Kantian—I: 7ff., 107ff.), its systematic function with regard to Hegel's philosophy as a whole but also, more particularly, to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (I: 119ff.), and the significance that history (the history of logic and metaphysics, and the history of philosophy—I: 102–4) plays in it but also after it—requires the interpreter to do extensive work in framing Hegel's book, clarifying from an 'external' perspective, as it were, what Hegel's *Logic* properly is and what it is about.⁵ Most of Houlgate's interpretive work, however, is done from within an 'internal' perspective in which the development of Hegel's categories is faithfully followed step by step in its dynamic unfolding.⁶ The interpretive perspective remains 'internal' even when the historical constellation of Hegel's argument is addressed and brought to bear on the movement of the categories. It remains internal because the 'we' of the reader-interpreter (to borrow the expression and the standpoint guiding the development not of the *Science of Logic* but of the *Phenomenology*) is brought close to Hegel's text—possibly made internal to it. And yet, its closeness to the text notwithstanding, Houlgate's reading is not properly 'immanent' in the Hegelian sense (and in the sense in which the logical categories are said to be immanently self-determining).⁷ Much of the pedagogical value of Houlgate's interpretive work as well as, more generally, the unmatched clarity and accessibility of his reconstruction of Hegel's argument are due precisely to the fact that his perspective is *our* perspective, i.e., the perspective of the (necessarily external) reader of the *Logic*—a reader cognizant of the history of philosophy, aware of the logical and philosophical implications of the language used to articulate the movement of the categories; a reader, though, always and necessarily located in a different historical present, hence animated by different (historical, epistemological, practical, linguistic) presuppositions. This characterization of the interpreting 'we' is important for the understanding of how Houlgate brings to life the implications and the demands that Hegel's logical method poses to the reader—today's reader—of the *Logic* in its first division, the Doctrine of Being. In fact, while the (immanent) beginning of the *Logic* is, famously, 'presuppositionless' (I: 47–58—although it has itself its own historical and linguistic presuppositions, see I: 102–7), we readers and interpreters are not—we cannot be.

In addressing Hegel's preliminary conception of the method at work in the *Logic*, Houlgate dwells on the issue of thought's 'passivity' (I: chapter 4, 59–64). We must allow our thinking, in its 'passive' stance, to take in the movement of the categories (*'Gang der Sache selbst'*: *SL*: 33/*LS*: 39)⁸ without interfering in such movement by externally bringing in our presuppositions, reflections, assumptions, mental and linguistic associations, and the like (I: 86f.). As Hegel puts it, we have to 'simply take up what is there before us', and this, at the very beginning of the logical movement, is 'pure being' as such (*SL*: 47/*LS*: 58). In so doing, Houlgate clarifies with Hegel, we are 'letting' 'thought follow its own course' (*EL*: §24). In this way, philosophical thinking proceeds analytically by simply (and passively) taking up its

own object and letting its immanent dialectic display itself of its own accord (*EL*: §238A). Even though thought's passivity is itself an activity (at the very least, it is the act of refraining from intervention), there is an additional, this time genuinely active side to the method as well, i.e., a form of activity that thinking mobilizes as it thinks—in and with—the *Logic*. The method is both the method that we *passively follow* in thinking and the method that we *actively employ* in the speculative logic. In this latter respect, in Houlgate's formulation, the method 'consists in *rendering explicit* what is implicit in categories (as well as holding at bay any external thoughts about the latter)' (I: 76; also 89, *et passim*).

I want to take issue with this latter characterization of the method—that is, with the notion that the logical method, for Hegel, is (merely) a 'making explicit' of what is already 'implicit'. If it were so, the entire logical movement would be all already entailed—or indeed 'performed', as it were—in the very beginning ('pure being'); the logical development would amount to the merely analytical unfolding of a sustained tautology; and there would be no synthetic moment to the method, which directly contradicts what Hegel posits in the last chapter of his work by claiming that the 'absolute method' is both, and at the same time, synthetic and analytic. Indeed, if all logical determinations were already 'implicitly' contained in the logic's beginning and only awaiting to be 'made explicit', 'pure being' would be indistinguishable from Schelling's Absolute, which, again, famously contradicts Hegel's stated position.⁹ Presently, however, I do not want to dwell on this point of disagreement with Houlgate (I have done so repeatedly in many conference exchanges during the years). I want, instead, to draw attention to an implication of such characterization (and the language of the implicit-explicit) this time *for the interpreter's own method*. I suggest that perhaps the procedure of 'making explicit' what is already 'implicit' and already there, i.e., in the text, is an accurate description of the *interpreter's method*—i.e., of the method and the task that Houlgate takes upon himself to perform in these two volumes. Is this how we should read Hegel's *Science of Logic* then, by attempting to 'make explicit' (i.e., to explain, clarify, paraphrase, translate into a different philosophical language) what is taken as already 'implicitly' there—as implicit but not clear enough (to us?) in Hegel's text and in his categories—without adding anything from our own perspective? If this is case, it is the interpreter that ought to proceed in a merely *analytical* way, without bringing in external presuppositions, interests, and aims.¹⁰ The 'presuppositionless' standpoint of the *Logic* becomes, in this way, the requirement of a presuppositionless standpoint proper of the interpreter who is committed to looking for nothing else in the text but for what is implicitly contained in it. Leaving aside the question of whether this is even possible (at least in a strict sense), my question concerns whether and to what extent this can be deemed useful to today's reader of the *Logic*.

On the different view that I propose, the *Logic's* movement does not unfold in the self-contained linearity of an implicit-explicit trajectory. Such linearity is

constitutively (i.e., not accidentally and not due to a mistake in the conduct of thinking) interrupted and complicated, first and foremost, by the fact that the dialectic-speculative method, in the moment of the advancement (*Fortgang*), proceeds in a fundamentally *synthetic* way. The interference within the implicit-explicit line is due not only to the intervention of an external reflection and judgment, not only to our imposing an external standpoint and alien presuppositions from without the movement (the *Logic* requires ‘restraint’ or *Enthaltensamkeit* from us in this regard—I: 85ff.). It is, instead, somehow constitutive of what the logical movement properly is. The immanent advance of the logical process is *fundamentally synthetic*. My suggestion, then, is that Hegel’s text poses in this regard the following challenge to the interpreter, namely, to always point *beyond* the text’s explanation; beyond the analytical moment of the making-explicit, to use Houlgate’s formulation; to always add a synthetically new element to the reading. Is this not, though, a crucial objection to the very possibility of a commentary or an explanation of the *Logic* that is nothing more than a commentary or an internal explanation? Is this not a fundamental objection to—or, at the very least, a fundamental restriction of—the requirement of passivity and restraint that we ought to enact in reading the *Logic*? Or is it instead, perhaps, a dialectical implication of that very restraint and passivity? My suggestion, in short, is that Hegel’s *Logic* properly requires us interpreters to approach it by adding to the analytic explanatory perspective a synthetic moment of wilful critical appropriation.

II. Interpreting Hegel’s *Logic*: faithful readings and unfaithful appropriations

One may argue that to be a commentary or a step-by-step explanation of the text is not all there is to Houlgate’s volumes. Indeed, he recognizes that the required practice of restraint, the passivity of thinking, and the gesture of leaving out our presuppositions do not mean ‘abandoning one’s *critical* perspective altogether’. There is a ‘critical’ dimension to the interpretation and reading of the *Logic* that is importantly reclaimed. However, as Houlgate spells out that critical dimension, it does not seem to amount to more than the act of holding Hegel accountable to the consistency of his own requirement of immanence—read as the unwavering abiding to the implicit-explicit line of argument. This is critique, on Houlgate’s explanation:

one still needs to consider whether *Hegel’s* derivation of the categories is as immanent as he claims it is. One does this, however, by examining each category closely, spelling out what it makes necessary and determining whether Hegel holds himself strictly

to it, not by invoking what Aristotle or Kant may have said about the matter. (I: 85)

In this way, the critical dimension of the interpretation is reclaimed but also, at the same time, drastically limited in its aim. We must test *Hegel's* own argument against the demand of immanence, making sure that Hegel does, at every step, stick to his own proclaimed method; and we do so, in turn, by keeping our own reading utterly 'internal' (if not immanent), free of external presuppositions and interferences. 'Our task as readers of the *Logic* is thus to exercise such restraint ourselves and to check that Hegel meets his own demand and does the same' (I: 86). But now I ask: is this all there is to the *critical* standpoint of the interpretation? I believe that we, as readers, *need* more. I believe that Hegel *wants* us to ask more from his *Logic*. This, I suggest, is the demand of the *synthetic*, progressive moment of the logical method. Ultimately, this is a *critical* demand in a stronger sense than the one proposed by Houlgate. Synthetically, critique must lead us beyond the internal dimension of the text. This, however, is not the product of an 'external', i.e., ultimately arbitrary intervention. It is instead, dialectically, the immanent demand that the method itself imposes on us. It is interesting that Houlgate's discarded alternative to his limited notion of critique (as a test of internal methodological consistency) is reference to the past history of philosophy—his example is the appeal to Aristotle and Kant (in order to counter or indeed 'criticize' Hegel's position). There is no mention, though, of the possibility of a contemporary philosophical—but, I want to add, also broader non-philosophical—perspective as the perspective that may guide a critical stance toward Hegel's text. In this perspective, which may be theoretical as much as practical and even political, Hegel's argument would be evaluated according to more substantial criteria than mere internal methodological coherence. These criteria will have to be carefully formulated on the basis of the interpreter-reader's interests and, more broadly, on the basis of the different historical framework within which our interpretation is unavoidably placed. All this, I suggest, cannot be simply reduced to external, subjective presuppositions that must be checked out at the threshold of the *Logic*.¹¹

Let me then, at this point, present my question again: is Houlgate working in the tradition of philosophical textual commentaries? This is a tradition that, as far as Hegel's *Logic* is concerned (both the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopaedia Logic*), goes back, in the last century, to works such as Eugène Fleischmann's 1968 *La science universelle – Ou la Logique de Hegel*, Bernhard Lakebrink's *Kommentar zu Hegels Logik in seiner Enzyklopädie von 1830* (published in 1979 on Being and Essence; in 1985 on the Logic of the Concept), and more recently David G. Carlson's 2007 *A Commentary to Hegel's Science of Logic*, and the 2018 collective volume edited by Michael Quante and Nadine Mooren *Kommentar zu Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik*.¹² Were it not for these latter, more recent works, I would be tempted to

call the commentary an ‘untimely’ scholarly form. And in good Nietzschean fashion, anything *unzeitgemäß* may reveal, albeit indirectly, something about our own time—about our needs, interests and ambitions in approaching a philosophical text. Thus, I wonder whether and what the publication of Houlgate’s volumes and his way of reading the *Logic* says about ourselves and our time—of what we allow ourselves to look for (or, alternatively, do not allow ourselves to look for) in Hegel’s text, of what demands we put on it and why. For, the point I have been making so far is that as much as we are asked to refrain from putting our demands on the text (the conditions of ‘passivity’ and ‘restraint’), we unavoidably do so. This is the presupposition of our very act of engaging with the text. Passivity is itself a form of activity.

As I mentioned above, the idea of offering a step-by-step reconstruction of the *Logic* was one of the first seeds of my work on this part of Hegel’s system. It was an idea rooted in my Italian historicist education; it was the idea of a task that I took for granted had to be performed when the interpretation of philosophical texts is at stake. Then I rebelled against this idea as I started to consider it insufficient to account for the wealth of possible uses that Hegel’s *Logic* carried with itself for the contemporary reader. Importantly, that rebellion was also based on my historicist—indeed neo-Hegelian—formation.¹³ If the philosophical text, just as our reading of it, is rooted in its own time and reflects and expresses (the needs of) its own time, as Hegel claims, then it belongs to our interpretive task to aim at internally explaining the text’s argument but also, somehow, to ‘betray’ the text by pushing its argument in our direction beyond its immanent unfolding. Our method, to reiterate, should be synthetic and analytic at once just as Hegel’s method is. At issue, then, is not simply to immanently and analytically disclose the unfolding of Hegel’s logical argument step by step—i.e., the task of ‘making explicit’ what is ‘implicitly’ already there. Just as importantly, the question also concerns what we can do with Hegel’s logical argument and with the *Logic*’s categories under the conditions of the present world, within today’s different intellectual, historical, political constraints. Why, if at all, does Hegel’s *Logic* speak to us today? Or, alternatively, how can the interpreter show the reader that Hegel’s *Logic* ought to speak to us today? I do not believe that the internal reconstruction of the text, although certainly necessary, is *sufficient* to address *these* questions. Now, once the framework of these questions is taken into account, it becomes clear that the *critical* dimension of the interpretation of the text consists in bringing to the fore the critical value of Hegel’s dialectic-speculative logic for the philosophical comprehension of our own present. It is this latter concern that has found its way to the centre of my book on Hegel’s *Logic*.

I want to conclude, briefly, with an example.¹⁴ At stake is the last step of the Doctrine of Being leading to the transition to Essence, namely, the moment or the category of ‘Absolute Indifference’—*absolute Indifferenz*. Here is a general point

often made by those who resist and challenge the cogency of Hegel's dialectic-speculative logic precisely *as a logic*. On what grounds can Hegel maintain that 'indifference' is a *logical category* or belongs to the logical discipline as such?¹⁵ For, no historical logic before Hegel contemplates a 'category' with this heading. As Houlgate remarks, along with many interpreters, at the beginning of his analysis, with the title *Indifferenz* Hegel refers to Friedrich Schelling's metaphysical position (II: 337). Now, while the historical justification of Hegel's use may be satisfied with this reference, and while the internal reconstruction of the logical argument may bring to the fore the connection between *Gleichgültigkeit* and *Indifferenz* at play in the conclusive movement of Measure, there is a constellation of meaning that the interpreter is tempted to synthetically mobilize in reading this part of the *Logic*. This is a practical, even moral constellation—a constellation in which the concept of freedom is at the centre. Is this just an external assumption or association, which under the requirement of thought's passivity and restraint we ought to ignore, keep in check, and by no means allow to infiltrate our immanent reading of the text? Or is it rather, instead, a fruitful hint that helps us disclose new dimensions of Hegel's logical argument—a hint that putting the immanent, internal reading in perspective helps us shed light both on other uses of the category in Hegel's philosophy of nature and spirit, and on its implications for our understanding of human action and freedom more generally? The claim that I have explored at length in my book is that only by embracing those broader assumptions do we become capable of understanding Hegel's logical argument by linking it to its fruitfulness in the explanation of the world around us.

So here is my conclusion. It may be that despite the ambitious arc of its analysis, Houlgate's volumes are not ambitious enough in their critical breadth—and critical, I insist, not so much with regard to Hegel but with regard to our own intellectual and historical *milieu*. But then, perhaps, this critical reticence or the unwillingness to embrace a more substantial notion of critique is itself just a sign of our times.

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Notes

¹ In a sense, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* leads up to the standpoint of the *Logic*, namely, to the position of 'absolute knowing'. In another sense, though, the logic is 'presuppositionless' in its beginning (see I: 47ff., 119–27, but also 101–7 for 'the presuppositions of Hegel's presuppositionless logic').

² This is the translation that Houlgate uses, amends and engages with throughout the book.

³ Houlgate begins his ‘Preface’ with the customary remark concerning the neglect that Hegel’s *Logic* has received in the scholarship. This remark, I suggest, is no longer needed (I: xi). Houlgate cites Karl Popper (1966) and Allen Wood (1990) as examples of scornful and disparaging positions on the *Logic*. These are, however, old works by now.

⁴ ‘Methodological’ at least in so far as it concerns ‘how to’ approach Hegel’s *Logic*.

⁵ See, for example I: Part One; but also the ‘Excursus’ on Kant’s antinomies in I: Part Three; and the ‘Excursus’ on mathematics, calculus, and Frege in II: Part One.

⁶ This distinction between external and internal explains why the discussion of Kant’s antinomies or Frege on number, for example, takes place in an ‘Excursus’.

⁷ See I: 62 for a clarification of Hegelian immanence.

⁸ Abbreviations:

EL Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

SL Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

LS Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. H.-J. Gawoll (Hamburg: Meiner, 1999).

⁹ See Houlgate’s brief account of the beginning from the perspective of the *Logic*’s end (I: 97, where the ‘implicit’-‘explicit’ language emerges again).

¹⁰ This is the requirement ‘to distinguish between what *we* might say about a category [...] and what belongs to the category itself’. Hence, our task ‘is to render explicit what is implicit only in what a category is explicitly’ (I: 77).

¹¹ Clearly, much work needs to be done to formulate such criteria. Allow me, for this, to refer to Nuzzo 2018.

¹² Houlgate cites the latter works but not the older two. It is true that all these works are ‘commentaries’ conceived under different methodological conditions; and it is also true that many other valuable commentaries of particular chapters of the *Logic* have appeared (such as Pechmann 1980 on the category of measure).

¹³ I want to point to another important reference here, that is, to the tradition of philosophical hermeneutic—not only Gadamer’s but also the early Vattimo (1980, 1983). I want to thank Elena Ficara for pointing out these references.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion see Nuzzo 2018: 275–85.

¹⁵ The same, famously, is asked with regard to many determinations of the Doctrine of the Concept such as Life, Mechanism, Chemism.

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