Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. Each circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through its limits and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy resembles a circle of circles. (Hegel 1830)

The Logic is made up of three sections: The science of Being, the science of Essence and the science of the Notion. The structure of the Logic is important if we are to understand the process of finding the starting point for a science, and how that differs from the development of the science itself. It is also important if we are to understand Hegel’s conception of subjectivity. Let’s start with Being.

The science of Being is ontology, which normally means the study of the various kinds of thing which can exist and the nature of existence. Instead of building a dualistic theory about mind and matter, essences and appearances, and so on, Hegel replaced ontology with Logic, making a critique of the concept of Being the first section of the Logic.

For Hegel, the Logic arose as the truth of manifest spirit, the pure essentialities of “The Phenomenology” (1969: 28). For the Logic he needs a concept which presupposes nothing outside of itself, a concept which imports no content from outside, rests upon no axioms, which can form a starting point for philosophy. To achieve this he conducted a logical critique of the concept of Being, dialectically unfolding the contents of the concept of Being out of itself. In this way philosophy can make its own beginning.

All Hegel’s major works have the same structure: the simple concept or notion which marks the unconditioned starting point for the given science, arises as the truth of another science which has burst through its own limits. He then uses the method, the model for which is given in the Logic, to elaborate what is implicit in the given concept; he develops “the peculiar internal development of the thing itself” (1952).

In the case of “The Philosophy of Nature” (1970), he begins from the concept of space, and claims to unfold the science of Nature through critique of the concept of space. The truth of Nature is Spirit, which
appears in the form of Soul, that is, consciousness to the extent of the awareness of a living human creature which rests on its physiological nature as a human organism. This makes the starting point of the Subjective Spirit, and so on. This is how Hegel conceived of philosophy as a ‘circle of circles’: each science is self-enclosed, being the disclosure of the content of a single concept which forms its starting point; but the sciences taken all together constitute ‘philosophy’, and must make its own beginning, its own conditions of existence.

In the Science of Being, the First Book of the Logic, the Concept is still just ‘in itself’. For Immanuel Kant, ‘in itself’ meant what the thing is independently of and prior to our knowledge of it. We are talking about shapes of consciousness, so we mean the concept under conditions where the shape of consciousness has not yet unfolded and become conscious of itself. The ‘yet’ implies that should the shape of consciousness which is ‘in itself’ develop further, then it may become self-conscious. But it is not yet self-conscious.

So we have something possibly contradictory here: a shape of consciousness which is not consciousness of itself, but may become so. So this is an observer perspective, because if we are talking about a shape of consciousness which is not self-conscious, then the only terms we have in order to describe it are observer terms.

But what does it amount to? It is an idea or a form of social practice or a project which cannot yet even be described as emergent. People are acting in a certain way, but they are not conscious of acting in any such particular way. So we have for example, people who have been kicked off their land and have found a living by selling their labor by the hour, but they still think of themselves as farmers who have fallen on hard times, and have no concept of themselves as proletarians, for example.

So this is what Being is, and Hegel demonstrated this by a critique of the concept of Being.

If there is to be some thing amidst the infinite coming and going, the chaos of existence, the simplest actual thing that can be is a Quality, something that persists amidst change. And if we ask what it is that changes while the quality remains what it is, then this is Quantity. But a thing cannot indefinitely undergo quantitative change and remain still what it is, retain the same quality; at some point, a quantitative change amounts to a change in Quality, and this Quantitative change which amounts to a Qualitative change. A certain quantity of qualitative change cannot help but be recognized and recognize itself as something and in that crosses the limits of the science of Being.