

Review

Giorgi Lebanidze. *Hegel's Transcendental Ontology*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2018. ISBN 9781498561341 (e-book). ISBN 9781498561334 (pbk). Pp. 150 90.00 \$.

Giorgi Lebanidze's *Hegel's Transcendental Ontology* is squarely located in the now-traditional debate in Hegel scholarship between the so-called 'metaphysical' and 'non-metaphysical' interpretations of Hegel's theoretical philosophy. Lebanidze's principal aim is to establish a 'middle way' between what, in his interpretation of the debate, are two radically opposed views: (i) recent interpretations of Hegel's metaphysics, such as Robert Stern's and Brady Bowman's, which according to Lebanidze pair Hegel's philosophy with traditional metaphysics while negating its continuity with Kant's, and (ii) competing readings of Hegel, such as—in Lebanidze's somewhat peculiar reading of them—Robert Pippin's and Robert Brandom's, which insist on the Hegel–Kant connection, at the cost of refusing to acknowledge an ontological commitment to Hegel's work and concentrating only on its epistemological and semantic implications. Before providing an overview of the book's six thematic chapters, I would like to make some general (but still informative) remarks.

Lebanidze's main thesis is that Hegel—especially in the 'subjective logic', which constitutes the final part of the *Science of Logic*—did not just aim at illustrating his epistemological and semantical perspective, but rather wanted to present a thorough and sound ontological theory. According to Lebanidze, this particular type of theory was intended by Hegel as a radicalization and a completion of the Copernican revolution rooted in Kant's claim that concepts are the 'forms' of objects. Specifically, Lebanidze contends that Hegel's ontological commitments are best evidenced in the *Logic's* discussions of Concept and of Syllogism. As such, the subjective logic is the *locus* for Hegel's full ontological position.

The book draws consistently from both Pippin's and Brandom's interpretations, while insisting and emphasizing the ontological implications which Pippin and Brandom either underplayed or failed to see entirely. First, much like Pippin, Lebanidze sees in the *Logic's* discussion of Concept the Hegelian version of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. In other words, in this part of the *Logic*, Hegel is deemed to offer his version of Kant's claim that the 'I think' must accompany all representations—which Lebanidze takes to mean that self-reference serves as a necessary condition for the formation of concepts, so that

every concept is holistically interconnected to the others in a unitary whole. Second, much like Brandom, Lebanidze locates in the Syllogism section (and in the Disjunctive Syllogism section in particular)—the Hegelian model for the practice of determining the normative authority and the conceptual content of empirical concepts. Contrary to Pippin and Brandom, or at least to his reading of their work, Lebanidze insists on the need to reading both the Concept and the Syllogism as parts of an ontological theory, according to which conceptual content cannot be separated by the concepts through which we make sense of it.

More specifically, Lebanidze argues that Hegel is proposing an ontology in which empirical concepts—or the concepts which are used to typically identify objects and properties in perceptual experience—obtain their meaning and their content through intersubjective practices and activities in which they are applied and used. These practices define their meaning while at the same time testing, expanding and potentially modifying it with relation to other concepts and new experience.

Lebanidze takes universality to be the most fundamental logical moment of the Concept, on which all other logical moments depend. Since concepts depend according to him on intersubjective practices for their meaning and validation, as well as for their content, these practices could be considered the most fundamental component in the formation of concepts. For these reasons, Lebanidze claims that these practices are represented by Hegel's notion of universality.

They therefore represent the most fundamental logical moment of the Concept, on which all other logical moments depend. The other logical moments are 'particularity', identified by Lebanidze as the set of empirical concepts currently in use; and 'individuality', which is the conceptual content defined in the dialectical combination of universality and particularity.

Furthermore, Lebanidze holds that the practices which constitute universality follow specific rules, which determine the relationship between concepts and the determination of their content. Lebanidze finds these expressed in Hegel's discussion of the determinations of reflection in the Doctrine of Essence (Book II of the *Logic*). According to Lebanidze, here the discussion of identity, difference and contradiction shows how the acquisition of conceptual content and determination of empirical concepts at the same time produces and presupposes a holistic, unitary and interconnected whole, which Lebanidze compares, although somewhat implicitly, to a Kuhnian paradigm. This also resembles the traditional definition of a conceptual scheme.

The book continues by contending that Hegel's ontology—revealed by the practices concerning universality—also establishes the process of determination of empirical concepts with the constitution of their conceptual content—by which Lebanidze means something like their material reference. In other words, according to Lebanidze, Hegel seems to hold a form of Kantian-flavoured

anti-realism, in which concepts are ‘forms’ of objects and in which the intersubjective practices and norms which govern the formation and the application of concepts also constitute and shape the reality we experience and describe. This position should not be mistaken by a textbook Berkeleyan mentalism; rather, it is an especially radical version of epistemic internalism, in which our perception of the world is influenced and tied to the concepts we use to describe it and changes along with them.

Whereas the set of empirical concepts is identified by particularity, this interaction between concepts and their content (or between mind and world, so that the latter cannot ever be fundamentally separated from the former) is, according to Lebanidze, described by the logical moment of individuality. Individuality, in other words, expresses the dialectical interconnection of particularity (empirical concepts) with universality (practices of definition and use of concepts, which constitute ‘actuality’, or reality as we experience and make sense of it): while conceptual content requires the use of empirical concepts to be determined, empirical concepts presuppose the continual, as I would like to call it, “coming to terms with reality” through the making sense of new experiences. Universality is, therefore, used as a test of the current concepts’ normative authority. Individuality, as the dialectical unity of universality and particularity, shows that reality is constituted and cognisable only thanks to this double movement of content-determination and concept-validation. This is the most central contention of Hegel’s transcendental ontology.

While the fundamental aspects of Hegel’s ontological theory are expressed in the Book III of the *Logic* (the Doctrine of the Concept), Lebanidze claims that it is in the Syllogism section, and especially in the discussion of the Disjunctive Syllogism, where Hegel fully articulates his ontological position. For Lebanidze, the Disjunctive Syllogism makes explicit both the relationship which ties the different logical moments of the Concept together, as well as the deep interconnectedness and inseparability of the different logical moments. In what follows, I would now like to provide a very brief overview of Lebanidze’s six chapters.

In the first chapter, Lebanidze focuses on the *Encyclopaedia Logic’s* *Vorbegriff*. He claims that Hegel’s critique of metaphysics aims at dismissing its dualistic presupposition of a dependence of the mind from a mind-independent world, comparing it to Wilfrid Sellars’s critique of Myth of the Given. Lebanidze then proposes that while Hegel aims to distance his own position both from Kant’s position and from empiricism, Hegel’s praises Kant’s transcendentalism as containing the seeds for overcoming empiricism’s commitments to strict dualisms and to a correspondence theory of truth. In the second chapter, Lebanidze presents an analysis of the Determinations of Reflection as the fundamental functions of the definition of empirical concepts and of their conceptual content. He also traces these functions back to the Kantian concepts of comparison presented in the

Amphiboly section of the Transcendental Dialectic. Lebanidze's third and fourth chapters are dedicated to an interpretation of Hegel's discussion of the Concept, presenting it as a radicalization and a continuation of Kant's Transcendental Deduction—read in strongly conceptualist terms. The two concluding chapters are dedicated to an analysis of the Syllogism section, which is presented as a discussion of different ontological models—ranging from the least adequate to the most adequate. Through a confutation of alternative ontological models, Hegel proves the validity and the soundness of his own ontological model (represented by the Disjunctive syllogism) as the best possible theory, free of the shortcomings of the preceding models.

Hegel's Transcendental Ontology is a very well-written and well-informed book, which manages to deliver its theses with great clarity and without excessive technicism. More than that, even though following in the footsteps of an influential line of Hegel scholarship, namely the transcendental and anti-realist reading of Hegel, Lebanidze manages to provide a significant contribution to the debate. In my opinion, this is due, not so much to articulating Hegel's ontological commitments of Hegel's philosophy, but rather to Lebanidze's close examination of the *Vorbestimmung*. This particular scholarly strategy is not usually taken up by commentators such as Pippin and Brandom.

Nevertheless, I think, for the following reasons, Lebanidze's analysis ultimately suffers from its brevity. First, Lebanidze does not consider Hegel's notion of 'Objective Thought', which should be the core element of the *Vorbestimmung*'s discussion. I think this impairs significantly Lebanidze's analysis of the Essentialities, of the Concept and of the Syllogism, insofar as it deprives them of their natural context.

Second, and more importantly, I would argue that it is very hard to properly make sense of Hegel's notion of Objective Thought in the context of a reading of the *Science of Logic* as a theory of the determination of empirical concepts and their conceptual content. This is ultimately why Objective Thought is usually ignored by the transcendental and anti-realist school of thought.

Third, closer attention to the discussion of both the First and the Second position of thought risks complicating the picture painted by Lebanidze. On the one hand, such closer attention would have showed how Hegel remained sympathetic to traditional metaphysics' ambitions, while crucially criticising its methods and ontological construals of, for example, the relationship between finitude and infinity. On the other, such closer attention would have shown that Hegel's radicalisation of Kant's notion of apperception implied its realisation in a logic which would have also been an exposition of the unconditioned and of the thing-in-itself, rather than its simple dismissal. Both these aspects suggest that the *Logic* should not be read as a mere inquiry in the constitution of conceptual content in internalist terms, but rather as a discussion of logical structures as proper ontological structures.

Fourth, *Hegel's Transcendental Ontology* fails to sufficiently resolve the weaknesses common to Pippin's and Brandom's readings of Hegel. It defends a form of internalism in which the externality of the world is not overcome, but it is rather dismissed as unknowable in our always-already conceptualised experience.

Fifth, the book inherits Brandom's misguided and reductive reading of Hegel's notion of negativity and contradiction exclusively in terms of determinate negation and material incompatibility. Correctly read, Hegel's conception of absolute negativity might have provided the tools for an overcoming of the mind-world or subject-object divide in a much more ambitious way than the partial one entailed by radical internalism. To clarify, my critical remarks here hang, though, on a different orientation regarding the best reading of Hegel. As such, these critical remarks might reasonably be considered *qua* philosophical inclination, rather than *qua* a matter of interpretative value.

Overall, I think that Lebanidze's book is a compelling and challenging contribution to the debate in Hegel scholarship, and that, because of its clarity and its originality, Lebanidze's monograph will make an interesting read for both specialists in this particular debate, as well as for students and Hegel enthusiasts in general.

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