

Terry Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 272, € 45,00, ISBN 9780674971776

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“Is there anything to Hegel’s philosophy of history other than its ‘historical’ interest?” (p.3). Terry Pinkard’s *Does History Make Sense* claims that there is. With this claim Pinkard is challenging a long-running tradition of philosophers, historians and Hegelian interpreters who have considered Hegel’s philosophy of history the least appealing part of his work, or at times the quintessential illustration of all of its flaws.

The book is presented as “a Hegelian commentary on Hegel’s work” (p.4): it offers both an account of Hegel’s systematic notion of historicity (chapters 1, 2 and 5) and a step-by-step reading of Hegel’s *Lectures* (chapters 3 and 4). Its reach though, is far larger; the vocabulary and the references in the book hint at several possible interactions of Hegel’s philosophy with neo-pragmatism, contemporary philosophy of language and of action, which the author partly develops in the hefty notes section.

It would be impossible to analyze the totality of the claims condensed in the book within the length of a review. Thus, I will concentrate on Pinkard’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history, which is structured on three interconnected theses. I will first sketch out Pinkard’s argument and then I will present its development through the chapters of the book. I will finally try to highlight some difficulties, which in my opinion could be found in Pinkard’s reading.

In the first place, Pinkard insists on the importance of binding Hegel’s consideration of history with the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology*. This is in order to interpret the historical process as the most proper space where subjectivity could (eventually) meet its “final end” of “making sense of itself”, as it is exposed in the *Logic*.

Secondly, Pinkard suggests that the narrative proposed by Hegel in his *Lectures* is a retrospective reconstruction of the development of the specific form in which the “final end” of subjectivity was declined in Hegel’s own shape of life, namely, of the ideal of freedom as a founding value of European modernity. This leads to a twofold outcome. On the one hand, it

unveils a more specific notion of history, understood as the genealogic tracing of the conditions of one's present, in the light of its specific ideal of justice. On the other hand, it provides a "pattern" for other possible retrospective narratives made with references to other historical declinations of the ideal of justice in other shapes of life. It is on this exact point that, according to Pinkard, Hegel would have failed to meet the standard he himself set for the understanding of history, missing the "openness" it implied and only considering other cultures as the negative reversal of Europe's narrative.

Pinkard's third thesis is that Hegel's identification of freedom as the founding value of European modernity is indeed right. Improved specification of the notion of freedom through the contradictions it engenders is still the driving force of the development of the, now more and more globalized, European shape of life.

In the first chapter, Pinkard offers a distinct reading of the concluding category of the *Logic*, "Idea", with relation to Hegel's theory of recognition, reworking the interpretation of Hegel's account of human subjectivity presented in *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature and the Final Ends of Life*. Presupposing an "anti-processual" reading of the entire *Science of Logic* (p.3) as consisting of "three different kinds of logical structure" (p.13), Pinkard claims that the *Doctrine of the Concept* presents the structure of "human mindedness" as "apperceptive". Therefore the logical "Idea" provides the formal structure of the highest possible form of (human) intelligibility, corresponding to self-consciousness.

Human rationality is "apperceptive" (p.11) insofar as it entails awareness of one's standing as the immediate counterpart of awareness of objects. In this species-specific human feature is the very source of the space of reasons, or the "normative", "noumenal" understanding of the world, which first appears in opposition to the world's "phenomenal" image.

The logical "Idea" provides the structure of self-consciousness as that structure, which makes this twofold split intelligible and grounded in the unity of human subjectivity.

Pinkard combines his interpretation of the *Logic*'s "Idea" from *Hegel's Naturalism*, with his "classic" reading of the "Idea" as also presenting the defining role of the "space of reasons" in the rational activity of sense-making (as in "The Logic of Hegel's Logic").

It is namely the reference to the space of reasons in the structure of the *Logic*'s "Idea" that forbids the full formalization of human rationality in a "scheme" (the *Logic*) abstract from its "embodiment" (human rational life), which is where the space of reasons is only actual. This is Pinkard's reading of the Hegelian claim that "the universal particularizes itself" (p.18): the structure of the *Logic*'s "Idea" contains a placeholder, an empty space, for something which is better visible at the level of the *Phenomenology*.

The fundamental structure of human subjectivity shall be explained more fully within the framework of recognition, where self-consciousness is seen as entailing the mediation with the space of reasons of a concrete shape of life, in which human subjects are immersed.

In recognition, the completion of self-consciousness is described as the acknowledgement of the subject's "dyadic" nature (p.25), that is, of its standing only provided another subject's validation, as figuratively pictured in the servant's position within the master-servant dialectic.

The awareness of this mediated unity as constitutive of human subjectivity and of *all* possible roles within an inter-subjective setting is the condition for envisaging what Pinkard calls "eternal justice" (p.29). That of "eternal justice" is an ideal, which becomes visible only to those human consciousnesses that have become aware of their "dyadic" nature through recognition. The ideal of "eternal justice" consists in the aim of producing awareness of the dyadic structure of human subjectivity in all subjects within a given shape of life, and therefore to build an institutional order in which all members are dyadically defined, and equally considered (p.45).

Through the ideal of "eternal justice" the task for self-understanding defining human subjectivity achieves a properly historical dimension. The ideal of "eternal justice" "transcends" a shape of life's manifestation in time, and becomes an aim towards which, though not at all in a linear progressive way, human history is moving.

Therefore, even though it might very seldom be realized, "eternal justice" is the "infinite end" up to which progress in history could be measured (pp.29, 46).

The second chapter is dedicated to the definition of the notion of "infinite end", which is applied to the ideal of "eternal justice".

What defines an end as "infinite" is the impossibility of its

exhaustion in a finite gesture, even though this does not imply that such ends can never be realized. On the contrary, infinite ends are ends that are performed in their constant enactment, like the end of happiness or that of justice (p.41).

The “infinite end” specific of history is the realization of “eternal justice”, which would be what Hegel meant by “reconciliation” (p.43).

Pinkard argues that Hegel identifies the (universal) notion of “reconciliation” with the (particular) end of freedom, but misses the distinction between the (universal) logic of history as realization of the infinite end of “eternal justice”, and the (specific) genealogic necessity, which characterizes the history of modern Europe with reference to its particularized infinite end of “freedom”.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer an exposition of Hegel’s historical narrative, adding a careful reconstruction of prejudices and illusions at work in Hegel’s account, providing them with historical context and yet not justification. Hegel’s orientalism is seen as determining the depiction of China and Persia as caricatures of the weaknesses of Europeans, and the presentation of India as a “world of fantasy” which could not make sense of itself. Hegel’s classicism is detected at the root of his identification of Greece as the (true) beginning of history, as well as for his identification of freedom as the “final end” of history as a whole. Finally, the myth of the *Germanen*, as the aboriginal people of modern Europe is deconstructed as the biggest ingenuousness in Hegel’s narrative.

In Chapter 5 the book’s main theses are recollected, with a special focus on the redetermination of Hegel’s claim for necessity in history, as well as on the viability of Hegel’s historical narrative of European modernity.

Does History Make Sense? is a book of historical and philosophical relevance. It competently draws attention to an almost ‘taboo’ topic in contemporary Hegelian research and it confronts the pivot of criticism against neo-pragmatist Hegelian interpretations, which are often said to be unable to make sense of *Geist*’s historical development, despite the fact that the latter is the core presupposition of their deflationary interpretation of Spirit (see Robert Stern in “Why Hegel Now (Again) and in What Form?”).

It would not make sense to formulate “exegetical” remarks on a book openly devoted to saving the “Hegelian spirit” without

succumbing to the “Hegelian letter”. Still, Pinkard’s assessment of Hegel’s philosophy of history is dependent on a distinct interpretation of the *Science of Logic* and on a peculiar methodology, which, while having other authoritative advocates (such as Robert Pippin), could be considered problematic. While Pinkard’s reading of the *Logic* identifies the subjectivity thereby discussed with human subjectivity and the structure of self-consciousness, his methodology does not reckon with the preliminary character of the *Phenomenology*, using it to clarify systematic aspects. Taken independently of their adherence to the “Hegelian letter”, I think that these aspects are responsible for some tensions in Pinkard’s own interpretation. Namely, Pinkard’s understanding of reconciliation with reference to the *Phenomenology* is elusive on how exactly the “split” preceding reconciliation and the decadence of a reconciled form are produced, making his account of historical movement as a whole uncertain.

Furthermore, in the commendable effort of avoiding classic criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of history as an exclusionary tale (p.1), Pinkard offers an assessment of it as a retrospective genealogy, dependent on one’s cultural and present ideal of justice. Even though this encourages some form of “pluralism”, it engenders a mass of “narratives”, which are by definition separated one from the other. How far this separation can go is unclear if we accept Pinkard’s blurring of the line between the “constitutive” and the “normative” elements of the “Idea” (p.18) with reference to the primacy of recognition over the *Logic*. Further, the specific ideal of freedom and the general one of reconciliation do not appear as different as Pinkard would like them to be, when their respective definitions in the book are confronted. In addition to this, even though it is the possibility of other ideals of justice what should have relativized the western ideal of “freedom”, Pinkard seems unable to name one example of these other ideals. This might lead to the suspicion that Pinkard’s suggested “openness” of Hegel’s conception of history might fail its aim of liberating Hegel’s view from the charge of Eurocentrism. It would instead result in the flipside of the “totalizing” Western ideal of freedom, which has been criticized in deconstructionist readings such as Derrida’s (see Rorty, Richard “Rationality and Cultural Difference”).

Finally, it is unclear if any form of objectivity in history could be claimed on Pinkard’s account of history as a retrospective

genealogy of specific “ideals of justice”. This is a problem, which was explored by historiographical research on the role of collective memory and which, according to Angelica Nuzzo, Hegel had in his phenomenological conception of history. However, he overcame it in his later theory of historicity, where this is understood as a process of transformation, ruled by the logical structures of judgment and contradiction, rather than by “phenomenological” justice. By doing so, Hegel avoided the perspectivism of self-consciousness, which still characterized his conception of history in the *Phenomenology* (see *History, Memory and Justice in Hegel*, not referenced by Pinkard). This reading would provide a convincing structure for the historical movement as a whole, with reference to scission and reconciliation, would advocate for some form of objectivity in historical narrative, and would allow for a different assessment of Hegel’s notion of freedom with relation to history, making it a systematic concept, therefore distinct from its culturally-defined, “liberal” and “European” counterpart.

All this seem yet to come at the cost of adopting a “processual” reading of Hegel’s philosophy, which Pinkard rejects (p.3).

Bibliography

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