

Rocío Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2015, pp. 208, € 35.19, ISBN 9780226280110

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Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility is a subtle and careful commentary to Hegel's *Science of Logic* from a non-metaphysical perspective, combining Robert Pippin's and Terry Pinkard's theory of normativity, Robert Brandom's inferentialism, and Pippin's modernism, although with an element of internal critique, which connects it to deconstructionist interpretations of Hegel, such as the one suggested by Derrida.

Zambrana accepts Pippin's interpretation of the *Logic* as the formalization of intersubjective and historical practices and norms, which in their turn constitute the fundamental structures of reason. Yet she claims that this reading leads to an understanding of determinacy which carries two consequences, one of them exceeding Pippin's interpretation. While it is true that, as Pippin claims, a formal assessment of determinacy is in this reading dependent on its historical context, of which it is a reflection and to which it always-already refers; it is also true that it can still establish an ahistorical claim, one regarding the necessary historicity of all determinations, and the way a form of intelligibility historically structures itself in different determinations. The *Logic* would hence stand at a higher level of abstraction compared to normative determinations, as the presentation of its general structure and the study of its relationship to the form of intelligibility which renders it possible. At a higher level, that is, than the dynamics of recognition, contrary not only to Pippin's but also to Brandom's reading.

According to Zambrana, the conflation of these two levels by non-metaphysical interpreters leads them to "hypostatize" and "infinite" *Geist*, perceiving it as a structure which is universally valid, as happens in Brandom's formalization of the structures of recognition, or as a structure which can be internally pacified once and for all, as it takes place in modernity according to Pippin. This aspect brings these readings close to the main critical target of the book: interpretations, which do not consider the *Logic* as an exposition of historical

and social structures of intelligibility, but rather as a presentation of the one and eternal fundamental structure of being. These are what Zambrana calls “ontological” accounts of Hegel, accounts for which Houlgate is representative. Even though they do it in very different terms, both strands according to Zambrana disown the central role of negativity and otherness in Hegel’s philosophy, either relapsing in a pre-Kantian conception of reason, as in Houlgate, or absolutizing *Geist*, as in non-metaphysical interpretations.

Zambrana reads the *Logic* as a combination of a theory of determinacy (Doctrine of Being and Essence) and a theory of normative authority (Doctrine of the Concept): both are dedicated to a progressive reduction of ontological and epistemological accounts of the problem of determinacy, showing the need to understand it as a matter of normativity, while the third part is dedicated to the interdependence between normative determinations and forms of intelligibility, as well as to the structure through which a given form of intelligibility is established.

Zambrana’s reading of the *Logic* has consequences for the interpretation of Hegel’s whole system and for idealism, as well as for the understanding of his “modernism”. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to cover the many complex arguments of the book within the length of a review. I will therefore concentrate on the main argument, i.e. the commentary on the *Logic*.

In chapter 1, Zambrana claims that the role of negativity in the *Logic* can only be thoroughly understood when it is connected to the notion of synthesis. Defining synthesis in terms of negativity, Hegel affirmed the irreducibility of division and excluded the need for transcendental apperception as a non-synthetic unity, as in Kant (p.25).

Chapter 2 reconstructs Hegel’s indebtedness to Fichte. In Fichte, as later in Hegel, synthesis is no longer a matter of subsumption, but rather a matter of determination within a whole, which in its turn is only visible in light of the process of its own determination. In this sense, synthesis is defined in terms of negativity: opposites are not mutually exclusive and distinct from another, but parts of the self-determining process of a whole through a relationship of reciprocal negation.

In chapter 3, Zambrana describes the development of Hegel’s philosophy from *Faith and Knowledge* to the *Science of Logic*

as a movement from a conception of synthesis as an epistemic problem that requires ontological foundation, to a normative perspective which considers synthesis as a matter internal to reason, or *Geist*, itself. The decisive step in this direction was taken in the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel got rid of Fichte's residual subjectivism, conceiving of synthesis independently of apperception, and rather as an activity of negation and judgment, which exceeds the individual subject.

Large parts of chapter 3 are dedicated to an interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, that is treated both as an anticipation of many fundamental insights of the *Logic*, and as its main reference: the determination, whose structure and conditions are the object of the *Logic*, is nothing but the determination that occurs within *Geist*, though considered at two different levels of abstraction and formality. Zambrana claims that there is indeed a parallel between the movement of internalization and externalization, which constitutes the manifestation of *Geist*, in *Erinnerung* and in conceptual history, and the movement of internalization and externalization, which characterizes *Wirklichkeit* and the Idea.

Chapter 4 is an interpretation of the first two chapters of the first section of the Doctrine of Being in light of the critique of bad infinity and as the first and less accomplished attempt to understand the structure of determination as mediation, which is the object of the whole *Logic*. The superiority of normative and "socio-historical" readings of the *Logic* is here defended through the claim that ontological interpretations, such as Houlgate's, maintain a form of the dualism of finite and infinite which Hegel debunks in the Doctrine of Being. This is because they would still posit the eternity of *logos* over against "the demise of finite natural or *geistige* things" (p.57), as the very root of the finite's rationality. In these readings, true infinity still means understanding the finite in relation to a hypostatized infinite in the figure of being's coming-to-self and rationality, which would include the finite only instrumentally. Interpreting infinity as nothing but the iterability of the finite, rather than as a process exceeding and encompassing the finite itself, Zambrana suggests seeing true infinity as a simple "metalogical advancement", which allows a consistent and non-dualistic understanding of finitude rather than an ontological "foundation" of it. In the chapter Zambrana also criticizes Houlgate's concentration of the *Logic*'s presuppositionlessness, which she claims does not disqualify the possibility of assuming

division or plurality as the *Logic*'s starting point as categorically as Houlgate holds. Zambrana does not offer an alternative reading of the passages on the *Logic*'s presuppositionlessness, but she argues that even Houlgate himself acknowledges, yet without admitting it, a form of "presupposition" to the *Logic* in using *Geist* as a reference to make sense of the categories of the *Logic* (p.57). It remains unclear whether Zambrana's criticism of Houlgate should be taken as a position that also claims the inevitability of a form of presupposition (i.e. the activity of *Geist* and its historical manifestation in social and political structures) in the *Logic* or not.

Zambrana's reading has two corollaries.

Firstly, her perspective allows an exaltation of the role of finitude in Hegel's philosophy, implying a relationship of the infinite to the finite, which makes infinite itself precarious and ambivalent, as "nothing but the mediated or reflexive character of the finite" (p.67). Secondly, the dialectic of true infinity consists in nothing but the interplay between socio-historical forms of intelligibility and all kinds of finite determinations, or claims, as the condition of actuality of these forms (p.67). This reflexive structure will first be understood in terms of external reflection in the Doctrine of Essence, and finally in terms of internal reflection in the Doctrine of the Concept.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the Doctrine of Essence. The sections on reflection and foundation are interpreted as *reductiones* of dualism, in which Hegel demonstrates that determination is not the product of the interaction of two entities, opposing one to the other, and the prior to the determinate, but rather a process, which defines the determinate as nothing but "the entirety of (its, A/N) present conditions" (p.76). This is Zambrana's peculiar definition of determination as actualization (*Wirklichkeit*). Zambrana interprets actualization as the affirmation of the inescapability of exteriority, rather than as its overcoming. In this sense, determination consists of recollection of a determinate's conditions, meaning the recollection of its *external* conditions. The non-metaphysical advantage of this proposal is clear, since on this reading it is not that something (i.e. being itself, as in "ontological" readings) *produces* its own articulation, but it is rather that something can be defined in light of the constraints which make it what it is. Yet, this perspective would still be non-dualistic, insofar as the individuation of the individual itself and of its conditions only

happen after the fact, in a movement which makes the two aspects inseparable. Precisely in this sense, Zambrana defines actualization as “recollection out of existent conditions” (p.77). The chapters on actuality and absolute relation are then read as the explication of just this relationship. Finally, this is defined in terms of freedom, that no longer means the liberation from necessity, but rather a full development of necessity, now understood as interdependence between a whole and its recollected parts within the process of their reciprocal determination. In an excursus on the *Philosophy of Right*, Zambrana adds that the *Logic* is referred to as “concrete norms, practices and institutions”, as the “minimum unit of analysis for an assessment of the idea of freedom” (p.84), implying that the process of determination, which the *Logic* describes as “freedom” is only actual in its concrete articulation through norms, and that norms stand only in relation to the idea of freedom, of which they are a specification: the relationship between a determined whole and its recollected conditions coincides then with the interplay between a normative authoritative principle, what Zambrana calls a “form of intelligibility”, and the concrete norms it determines. Whereas in the Concept this relationship is understood in terms of freedom, the “form of intelligibility”, which is specific of modernity, in the Idea it is comprehended formally, avoiding the reference to any specific historical context and at a higher level, determining also the structure through which a normative principle is established as authoritative. Here, the problem of presuppositionlessness raised in chapter 4 returns more urgently in sight, but remains unaddressed.

Chapter 6 contains an interpretation of the section on subjectivity through a reworking of Brandom’s reading of syllogism as based on relationships of exclusion and in a polemic with Béatrice Longuenesse. It is not in judgment, but in the syllogism that, according to Zambrana, the maximal exaltation of division as constitutive of the concept is shown, because it is there that form is assessed as “absolute negativity”: the collapse of the extremes in the middle term in the disjunctive syllogism defines objectivity as the self-mediating process of determination characteristic of concrete reality, while also determining form as nothing more than the system of relations structuring objectivity. From this, Zambrana directly moves in chapter 7 to a consideration of the third section (The Idea),

focusing in particular on the notions of personality and method that refers to the Absolute Idea. According to Zambrana, Hegel wanted to explain the structure that binds institutions, practices and norms to one form of intelligibility through the metaphor of personality: as personality, the Idea is the determination of the normative order of the world at one historical moment through the definition of the normative authoritative principle which orients it. There are two antecedents to this, made explicit in the chapter on the Idea of Cognition. Firstly, normative determination is dependent on the establishment of normative authority, in its turn produced by reason in the activity of “negotiating” the “gap between cognition and the given”, which the practical and the theoretical idea have shown as insurmountable but negotiable, though the combination of a practical and a theoretical approach (p.120, p.122). Secondly, personality does not imply a personalistic reading of the Idea, insofar as the establishment of normative authority is embedded in the process of “binding”, which also produces normative determination: just as a norm is established directly by the acceptance of agents, a principle of normative authority is established by its being accepted as a reference for normative determination. Just the fact that the authoritative principle can be determined only after a recollection of its own determinations, and therefore that it cannot be transparent to agents and norms that subscribe it, render it precarious and ambivalent, that is, not only open to “historical revision” but also to “normative reversal” (p.122). Method is for the Idea a form of absolute knowledge (p.123), a self-conscious and reflexive understanding of the Idea’s own activity as the establishment of normative authority. This assessment is critical: the normative role of this very understanding, as well as its dependence on its own historical conditions as its constraint, is thereby determined.

Hegel’s Theory of Intelligibility is a very accurate and insightful book. It is erudite, thought-provoking and certainly an inescapable reference for all future readings of the *Science of Logic*, no matter their angle. Yet some aspects of it are controversial. On a general note, the book seems still to presuppose a form of dualism, which Zambrana’s “post-Kantian” insistence on the sensibility/intellect dualism might have caused her to overlook: a dualism between thought (the normative dimension) and world. This point applies to the

traditionally non-metaphysical presupposition of a distinction between the normative and the “physically” real, reflected in Zambrana’s at times enigmatic use of “ontological” in a sharp opposition to the “normative”, which is though that is left implicit. This point also applies to the insistence on the “externality” of content or on “finitude” and “otherness” with relation to absolute form, which also remains a bit enigmatic. This aspect might also be connected to the rather elusive treatment of the *Logic*’s presuppositionlessness offered in chapter 4. It is in fact unclear in what sense one could think of the *Logic*’s presuppositionlessness in such a way that it stays coherent with the consideration of “forms of intelligibility” and normative structures as the *Logic*’s “main reference”.

Although Zambrana’s solution of considering the Idea as the normative establishment of both subjectivity (as normative authority) and objectivity (as a system of norms, which in its turn judges practices of determination in general) is compelling, I am unsure if it would be enough to overcome the mind-world dualism, as Hegel meant to do.

More reviews of this volume

Stephen Houlgate, *Review*, “Journal of the History of Philosophy”, vol. 55 n. 1 January 2017 pp.172-173.

Paul Redding, *Review*, “Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: an Electronic Journal”: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/hegels-theory-of-intelligibility/>