

Review

Chong-Fuk Lau 刘创馥, *A New Interpretation of Hegel* 黑格尔新释. Beijing北京: The Commercial Press 商务印书馆, 2019. ISBN 978-7-100-17075-8 (pbk). Pp. 281. 36.00 ¥.

Chong-Fuk Lau's *A New Interpretation of Hegel* takes an innovative approach, whose novelty lies in its clear-cut rejection of the popular view of Hegel that exists in Chinese academia and even beyond. In this review, both Lau's own interpretation as well as how it is placed within the Chinese Hegel reception will be addressed and discussed.

The traditional view in Chinese academia sees Hegel's philosophy as a highly ambitious metaphysical system that seeks to grasp all ultimate truths from a God's eye perspective. Those who hold this view believe that if Hegel was able to apprehend absolute knowledge, as he claims to have done, then the development of history, culture and philosophy would all end there. Such a view would make his philosophy mutually exclusive with other philosophies—whether regarding the traditions before Hegel or those developed two centuries after him—and this would lead to a closed nature which in turn demands to be criticized as it contradicts our existing historical developments. While some scholars acknowledge a degree of openness in Hegel's thought, this seems to be limited to his early writings and consequently tends to be located in Hegel's early works, such as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. They therefore regard the treatises of the mature period of Hegel's theory, such as the *Science of Logic* and *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, as obsolete. This view enables the Hegelian philosophical system to accommodate the evolving progress of human civilization by abandoning its completeness. Lau's interpretation of Hegel is directed against both positions. He argues on the one hand that the first view fails to understand the progress, openness and critical spirit of Hegel's philosophy, yet he also opposes the second view's approach of breaking up the Hegelian system into pieces. Lau's theoretical goal, however, is to read Hegel's philosophy as an essentially open and complete system. Lau asserts that Hegel's ambition was in fact remarkably modest; he was simply proposing a systematic philosophical work of thought or project, or even a methodological attitude, which was oriented towards all times and histories. In this sense, Hegel's philosophy is systematic and open. To support this reading, Lau must undertake a comprehensive reassessment of the entire theoretical architecture of Hegel's system.

Lau approaches this aim by embedding the character of Hegel's thinking and his philosophical position into a discussion of Hegel's own criticism of different theoretical opponents. In the process, Lau avoids reading Hegel in terms of traditional metaphysics, but sees his thought as a further development of Kantian critical philosophy, a development that transforms a critique of pure reason into a historically oriented rational critique. Lau's work organizes and justifies this way of interpreting Hegel step by step over seven chapters, before Lau's overall approach is situated within Chinese Hegelian studies.

In the first chapter, 'Hegel and his Philosophy', Lau briefly introduces Hegel's life and writings, outlining the structure of his philosophical system and explaining the focus of his own interpretation, which is to read Hegel's philosophy as a complete, rigorous and open system, using the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* as its theoretical framework and the *Science of Logic* as its systematic foundation.

The second chapter, 'Critical Philosophy and Speculative Philosophy', formally begins to analyse the character of Hegel's philosophy. The book now concentrates on Lau's unique reinterpretation of Hegel's philosophy, showing that Hegel's philosophy was formulated and carried out from the very beginning as a philosophy of openness and systematicity. This chapter is therefore also the main focus of the monograph. Lau begins with Hegel's critique of Kant's philosophy (36). Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* sets an insurmountable limit to human reason and human understanding is given certainty only due to its finite nature. At the same time, reason's quest for infinity can only be interpreted as a normative demand, which in turn leads to the invalidation of reason and the unknowability of the infinite. Against this, Hegel points out that Kant and his successors assumed a false concept of 'infinity' (49) and were misled into dealing with an unsolvable problem. For Kant, infinity is the 'non-finite', and Hegel sees such an infinity as nothing more than an empty other, in which infinity is bounded by finitude, and thus remains essentially a finite particular. Hegel refers to this notion of infinity as 'bad infinity'.

Lau argues that from Hegel's analysis it is already clear that finitude and infinity cannot be understood in this antithetical relation (51). Infinity and finitude are not at all at the same categorical level because the finite is precisely the object of infinite thought and reflection. The 'true infinity', therefore, is the transcendental activity itself that constantly clarifies the boundaries of the finite, and not—as Kant argues—the idea that can never be reached (52). Lau names such a true infinity a 'meta-category' or 'second-order category' (53). Based on this reinterpretation of infinity, Hegel reinterprets Kant's distinction between reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*), seeing reason as the negation, sublation and transcendence of understanding. While the characteristic of understanding is to make fixed distinctions and judgements, the purpose of reason as the 'negation' of understanding is to transcend the original one-sidedness of understanding and to grasp the

dialectical relation of the unity of opposites between finites (55). True infinity is in fact a process of constant self-criticism and self-reflection, and the way of thinking in which reason seeks true infinity is what Hegel called 'speculation' (57).

Lau argues that the common misunderstanding of Hegel's speculative philosophy stems from the opposing framework of the infinite and the finite, and thus understands 'speculation' in the sense of the antithesis of 'understanding' (58). In his quest for true infinity, Hegel uses the finite as the object of reflection. Likewise, in criticizing Kant's philosophy of understanding, he recognizes that understanding is an inevitable and indispensable part of speculation. Hegel's 'speculation' is therefore not a mystical way of thinking, but rather a radical reflection of thought on its own finitude, a 'thinking of thinking', and a meta-reflection (58). In light of this, Lau argues that Hegel's approach to metaphysics is not an attempt to re-establish a metaphysically 'true world' after Kant's critical philosophy. If Kant was replacing metaphysics with a theory of cognition, Hegel went one step further and replaced metaphysics completely with logic (60). This is how we can understand Hegel's philosophy of speculation as a 'logical metaphysics' combining logic and metaphysics and as speculative philosophy in the sense that it deals with the conceptual system on which thought and existence are jointly based. Despite Hegel's own criticism of Kant, this interpretation puts Hegel's philosophy still in line with Kant's rationalist principles and the idea of Kant's transcendental philosophy.

After this discussion of the complex relationship between Kant's and Hegel's philosophy, Lau moves to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's characterization of Hegel's philosophy as 'negative philosophy', criticizing it as having only a 'purely logical character' and as being essentially 'insubstantial' (9). Lau argues that Schelling's assertion is in line with his above explanation that Hegel's philosophical system can indeed be regarded as a 'negative philosophy', except that this is not a weakness but a consequence of developing Kant's critical philosophy (10). Because speculation only specifies the limits of each finite thing it can dispense with the finitude of all finite things. Therefore, it is speculative philosophy that truly implements the principles and ideas of rational criticism and which constitutes a truly open and dynamic system (59). Hegelian concepts such as 'absolute knowledge' and 'infinite truth' seem to indicate the closed nature of Hegel's system, but Lau argues that this is only because readers fail to comprehend their meaning from the perspective of 'true infinity' and 'speculative philosophy'.

In the following chapters, Lau continues to analyse Hegel's philosophical ideas from different perspectives and addresses some of the theoretical difficulties that his interpretation has to face. Hegel's philosophy challenges the presuppositions of traditional philosophy by reinterpreting some common philosophical concepts such as 'infinity', 'reason' and 'speculation'. The question whether the Hegelian system can itself be free from all presuppositions is addressed in

Chapter 3 ('Philosophical System and Theoretical presupposition'). By analysing Hegel's critique of philosophical foundationalism since Descartes, Lau elucidates his extreme holism (77) that leads Hegel to a reversal of traditional conceptions of truth as well as his unique idea of a 'presuppositionless' beginning (81) of his system. However, by rejecting traditional conceptions of truth as linked to the form of propositions and judgements as one-sided, the problem of the best form in which to express philosophical ideas arises. This is the question Lau addresses in Chapter 4 ('Critique of Judgement and Speculative Proposition'), where he clarifies Hegel's view of the 'movement of the proposition' by criticizing the dominant interpretation of the form of judgements or propositions. Even though Chapters 3 and 4 discuss different issues, they both make the core ideas presented in Chapter 2 more understandable and accessible.

With the philosophical ideas gradually clarified, Lau begins his explanation of Hegel's later works in Chapter 5 ('Science of Logic and Theory of Categories'). Here, Lau interprets Hegel's theory of categories as a dynamic conception that focuses not on the categories themselves but on the use and evolution of specific categories, namely, how to transform one category into another. Lau argues that the *Science of Logic* aims to reveal the development of the history of philosophy in the same way as the concrete manifestations of movement of the concept. This is why Hegel shifts Kant's 'critique of pure reason' to a 'historical critique of reason'. Whereas Kant incorporated the absolute into reason by examining the conditions of reason, Hegel's philosophy can be said to have incorporated the absolute into historicity and the whole logic can be read as the result of a set of historical reflections (172). He argues that Hegel's logic bequeathed to future generations a sense of philosophical reflection in the face of time and history, and the philosophical work that is eternally and constantly to be relaunched (182). This reading does not contradict Hegel's position, which calls for the grasp of absolute knowledge and the possession of absolute truth. If a philosophical system can be called 'absolute knowledge', it does not mean that it never needs to be modified, but that it has to be able to grasp the historical and cultural conditions in which it is located and to integrate an awareness of and reflection on history into the system by understanding its own historicity (180). It is for this reason that the final chapter of the *Science of Logic* is the 'Absolute Idea', which serves as the end of the system, without any additional substance, but rather as a 'methodology' (181). Hegel's *Logic* is therefore, according to Lau, a philosophical way of thinking and method that is both systematic and open.

Hegel's *Realphilosophie* is the subject of discussion in Chapter 6 ('Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Spirit'). Here, one interesting consequence of Lau's interpretation becomes visible as he argues that if his interpretation of the *Science of Logic* as an open system that constantly updates and develops is sound, it is not difficult to understand why Hegel's philosophy of nature might seem outdated

(184), as it is subject to redevelopment due to advances in knowledge in different fields. Lau's discussion therefore focuses on Hegel's philosophy of spirit, which has often been criticized as political conservatism and optimism because of the faith in reason it displays. However, according to Lau, who is drawing on Donald Davidson's 'principle of charity', Hegel actually draws on the concept of freedom to analyse the world of the human spirit and to understand the progress of history. Therefore, this 'great faith in reason' (212) is the basis for our understanding and evaluation of nature and history and not a sign of overarching optimism.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, 'Hegel and Contemporary Philosophy', discusses Hegel's influence on subsequent generations. Lau selects only two of the most prominent groups of contemporary philosophy for a general discussion, namely phenomenology and analytic philosophy. By discussing these two groups of philosophy, which have had a profound influence within the 20th century, Lau demonstrates the reasons of the so-called 'Hegelian Renaissance' and the modernity and vitality of Hegel's philosophy to this day.

Thus we can see that Lau agrees with the integrity of the Hegelian system, but at the same time he argues that this complete system can also be open and evolving, and this argument is achieved by interpreting the Hegelian system as a speculative philosophy of meta-reflection in pursuit of 'true infinity'. This view is illuminating for Chinese Hegelian studies. For a long time after 1949, as Wang Shuren argues, Chinese scholarship did not focus on the study of Hegel's philosophy itself, but rather on the evaluation of Hegel's philosophy by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and V. I. Lenin. Marx's assertion that Hegel's philosophy was a speculative creation theory was further misinterpreted as a doctrine of creation in a theological sense. This misunderstanding of Hegel's metaphysics subliminally became the prevailing understanding among the general public and professional scholars of non-Hegelian studies. By reinterpreting the metaphysical concepts of 'infinity', 'reason' and 'speculation' in Hegel's philosophy, Lau clearly stresses their difference from the mainstream interpretation of Hegel in China. He argues that Hegel's metaphysical ambitions are in fact very modest, and aims to 'demystify' Hegel by interpreting his theoretical system as a meta-reflection, thus releasing the vitality of his doctrine.

This interpretation also challenges the long-standing criticism of Hegel's philosophy as a highly closed and exclusive system. Reflecting on the question raised by Chinese academics in the early 1980s, for example, Deng Xiaomang in 'Kant or Hegel' says that one of the major advantages of Kant's philosophy over Hegel's lies in its openness and inclusiveness. According to Deng, this is only matched by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which inherited Kant's *a priori* ideas, which, as principles, govern his philosophy to analyse all finite things. In *a priori* philosophy, nothing finite is completely negated because it simply places everything finite in a reasonable position from the *a priori* principle. Kant also leaves empty

places for things that cannot be rationally comprehended, such as the unknowable thing-in-itself and intellectual intuition. On the other hand, Deng argues that Hegel's philosophy does not recognize the thing-in-itself. This is the closure and exclusivity of Hegel's system. Even though Hegel likewise believed that all philosophies in history are retained in the system of philosophy as a whole and have their proper role, all philosophies can only be interpreted in the way Hegel's philosophy is interpreted, and not otherwise.

In response to Deng's argument, Lau would first argue that Hegel, like Husserl, actually inherited the idea of Kantian philosophy. According to Lau's line of argument the traditional mainstream interpretation misunderstands Hegel because it fails to fully understand the influence of Kant on Hegel. Hegel never denied the basic spirit of Kant's critical philosophy, but only argued that Kant did not bring the principles of criticism into full play. As we saw in the discussion of Chapter 2, Lau argued that by introducing the concept of true infinity, Hegel on the one hand transcends the limits of Kant's philosophy and further advances the scope of Kant's *a priori* system, while on the other hand maintains the character of *a priori* philosophy. Thus Hegel not only further implements the systematic nature of rationalism, but at the same time can also inherit the openness of Kantian *a priori* philosophy. Secondly, we need to consider that all doctrines, even the unknowable thing-in-itself recognized by Kant, have been integrated into Hegel's philosophical system, so are there any interpretations or ideas that need to be accommodated that are excluded by Hegel's philosophy? And which is more inclusive and open, an interpretation that accommodates all interpretations, or an interpretation that allows other interpretations to be outside of it?

On the whole, Lau's work is well-researched and well-reasoned in terms of exposition. Whether or not it can really dispel the widespread criticism and suspicion of Hegel's philosophy, at least it has succeeded in opening up new horizons for Chinese Hegel studies.

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