

Review

Jacob McNulty, *Hegel's Logic and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-316-51256-2. Pp. xxi + 264. £75/\$99.00.

Jacob McNulty's excellent new work on Hegel's Logic is framed in terms of a basic dilemma that attends any attempt to justify the laws and materials of formal logic that he calls the logocentric predicament. The problem is that since our ordinary modes of justification presuppose these laws and materials it would appear that any justification of logic will necessarily be circular—it will need to rely on the very laws and materials it is trying to justify. The only alternative to embracing this circularity would appear to be simple complacency: just ignoring the demand and taking the validity of logic as a brute fact.

Although Kant famously takes the latter course, McNulty shows that some of his most important successors see his complacency about the laws of logic as of a piece with the main deficiency of the Kantian programme. They think that Kant's philosophy should not take anything for granted, including general logic. To remedy this deficiency, they contend that the entire critical philosophy needs to be re-grounded in a foundational first principle. Two strategies for how this might be done quickly emerged. Karl Reinhold's proposal was to start with a provisional claim, one taken as a hypothesis, and then use that to arrive at a more fundamental truth that would vindicate the hypothesis with which we began. Johann Gottlieb Fichte's alternative was to begin with a principle that was certain or indubitable, the fact that 'I am I', and then derive everything else from that first principle.

But for McNulty's Hegel neither of these strategies is fully successful. Reinhold fails to reckon with the basic fact that if his results depend on his original hypothesis being true, then they cannot be used to justify that hypothesis. Fichte fails to realize that he has not actually escaped circularity; throughout his derivation of the categories he surreptitiously relies on general logic. Hegel recognizes that if we are to offer a truly independent, non-circular justification of logic, we will need to show that ordinary logic is not actually constitutive of thought, that there is a higher form of thinking, 'speculative logic', that does not itself presuppose any of the laws and materials of ordinary logic and from which those laws and materials can be derived. This would be a logic of reason (*Vernunft*) as opposed to the logic of the understanding (*Verstand*).

One might worry that by renouncing the ordinary logic of the understanding we are not likely to discover some higher form of thinking so much as a ‘hitherto unknown type of madness’, as Gottlob Frege famously put it in *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic: Exposition of the System* (Berkeley 1982: 14). But one of the signal achievements of McNulty’s book is how it addresses this problem head-on. He shows that once you take Hegel’s commitment to provide a genuinely independent justification of logic seriously, you can offer a principled explanation for many of the strange constraints Hegel puts on his own procedure and account for some of his distinctive methodological innovations. McNulty shows (convincingly, I think) that Hegel’s Logic avoids an uncritical reliance on ordinary logic by being non-judgemental, non-inferential, insensitive to logical contradictions and unconcerned with truth-preservation in the ordinary sense. This is perhaps the most path-breaking aspect of McNulty’s reading; his detailed account of this proto-logical form of thinking is both illuminating and exegetically persuasive. McNulty also claims that Hegel’s Logic does not even presuppose that thinking involves concepts, universals or thought-determinations of any particular kind—that when these terms are used by Hegel in the Logic, they should be understood as ‘under erasure’. Although there is something right about this last claim, I think McNulty goes a little further here than is warranted, for reasons I will return to in a moment.

On McNulty’s reconstruction, Hegel’s Logic pursues a basically Fichtean argumentative strategy—he attempts to deduce all of the categories of reason, including the laws and materials of ordinary logic—from a single first principle. But he adopts a different first principle than Fichte, the notion of being, which is chosen because it has two crucial features: it is both conceptually primitive and necessarily instantiated or non-empty. ‘The opening of Hegel’s logic’ McNulty says, ‘is simply the opening of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* purged of the vocabulary of epistemology and psychology and rendered in the more austere idiom of ontology’ (99).

Of course, this is just the beginning; McNulty is clear that Hegel’s starting point in the Logic is also ‘uniquely insecure’. Being is quickly shown to ‘fail to encompass the whole of what is’ (97). So the deficiency in Hegel’s starting point, the deficiency of being, is not that it fails to be instantiated but only that it is not all-encompassing: there are other categories that it needs to be supplemented with in order to characterize the whole of what is. The argument of the Logic consists in a dialectical unfolding of all of the other determinations of reason that are implicit in being, and because Hegel began with a necessarily instantiated concept like being, he can rest assured that anything that proves implicit in being will also necessarily exist. McNulty suggests that this amounts to a new and improved version of the traditional ontological argument for the existence of God.

If McNulty is right about all of this, if we eventually arrive at (some of) the basic laws and materials of ordinary, non-speculative logic in the course of the argument of the *Logic*, we can conclude that we have successfully grounded ordinary logic in metaphysics or ontology, since we have shown that those laws and materials are necessary aspects of any attempt to think Being (166). There are two sections in the *Logic* that are particularly important for making this argument: the Doctrine of Essence and the first part of the Doctrine of the Concept.

In the Doctrine of Essence, McNulty shows how we derive the five laws recognized by the formal logic of Hegel's day: the laws of identity, diversity, non-contradiction, excluded middle and sufficient ground. This shows that those laws of logic do not need to be taken for granted, because it can be shown that they are implied by the very nature of reality. But in addition to deriving these laws, Hegel is also able to show the limits of each of these determinations; we see they necessarily give rise to certain paradoxes of self-reference, particularly when they are used in metaphysical or philosophical contexts.

Hegel's primary discussion of ordinary formal logic occurs, however, in the third part of the *Logic*, the Doctrine of the Concept. This is where Hegel treats the basic machinery of logic: concept, judgment and syllogism. McNulty argues that Hegel's primary ambition in this section is not to mount an argument for some kind of inferentialist position—a claim still common in the literature—but to deduce the necessity of these categories. Again, McNulty shows great sensitivity to some of the peculiarities of Hegel's way of treating this matter, like his peculiar insistence that judgments (syllogisms) do not contain multiple concepts, but just reconfigurations of a single concept, the Concept (232). This marks the final overcoming of the logocentric predicament. It shows us how Hegel gives us a kind of justification of the basic presuppositions of ordinary logic that Kant did not think it was possible, and that Fichte failed, to execute.

But there is a worry that looms over McNulty's reconstruction of this argument, one that he broaches briefly both in opening and closing pages of the book (xi, 247–48). McNulty's account depends on a certain way of reading the structure of the *Science of Logic* such that the beginning of the book provides an ontological foundation or grounding for the logical material which is treated later in the book. But as McNulty acknowledges, Hegel often emphasizes a dependence relationship that goes in the opposite direction: he says the beginning of the work is grounded in the result rather than vice versa. Indeed, Hegel sometimes characterizes this as the *Logic* involving a 'retrogressive grounding', or a 'retreat into the ground' (*Science of Logic*, Cambridge 2010: 48). McNulty is aware of such passages but he wants to insist that whatever the precise nature of the earlier-on-later dependency relation, it should not be read as undermining the clear later-on-earlier dependence that is evident in every forward step in the *Logic*. It is only this latter dependence relation,

the Fichte-style foundationalist argument, that is important for McNulty's claims about the grounding of logic in ontology.

The question of how we might integrate these two dependence relations in a single account is, of course, complicated, and it is impossible to even frame it properly in a mere book review. But I do not think McNulty fully recognizes the threat that the earlier-on-later dependence relationship poses to his argument. McNulty is right that Hegel explicitly rejects one version of this—the version represented by Reinhold's attempt to start with a hypothesis that is subsequently vindicated—but Hegel also says that Reinhold was right to recognize that we cannot simply start with a true principle, since that would amount to an unjustified presupposition. The most natural way to understand Hegel's claims that the beginning of the Logic is grounded in its conclusion is to think of the argument as having some of the features of a *reductio ad absurdum*. It begins with a category that initially appears to have independent determinacy, to be 'true' in Hegel's peculiar sense, but which, in the course of the argument, is shown to depend on some other category for its determinacy or truth. (I should note that if this is the right way to understand Hegel's procedure, as a critique of categories, then Hegel must treat being, essence, etc., as thought-determinations or categories from the very beginning of the Logic, contrary to McNulty's suggestion that his use of these terms should be understood as 'under erasure'.)

On this rival reading, the first category, being, is certainly conceptually primitive—it does not presuppose any other category and is itself presupposed by all the others—but it is not necessarily instantiated, as McNulty claims. Just the opposite: in attempting to think the category of being on its own, we find that we have not successfully thought of any object at all. The first category thus gives us nothing determinate to build on and so cannot serve as an ontological foundation on which logic might eventually be placed. To be sure, this category is not dispensed with—it will be included as a moment in every subsequent category—but a moment is very different from a foundation, however 'insecure'. The argument of the Logic, so construed, is a regress from the conceptually primitive, from the category of being, to the true ground of determinacy, the absolute idea. The end depends on the beginning only in the sense that we cannot understand the absolute idea except as the result of the negation of all of the previous categories, but the absolute idea is what has true primacy. If so, this would mean that Hegel is not simply replacing Fichte's first principle with a better one, he is overturning the entire structure of Fichte's argument so that philosophy does not *begin* with the true principle of all reality but *concludes* with it.

As one might expect, McNulty has ways of accommodating much of the evidence that points in this direction without giving up his preferred framing. I suspect that what drives his resistance to this alternative approach is a worry that this way of reading the Logic would undercut its ontological or metaphysical ambitions

and would fail to offer us a way of escaping the logocentric predicament. He associates this way of reading the Logic with its anti-metaphysical variants, views according to which the Logic moves from a naïve ontological standpoint to a sophisticated post-Kantian emphasis on subjectivity as the source of all determinacy. But I think there are other options here, and that for purposes of grounding ordinary logic in ontology, it would be just as well, and arguably more consistent with Hegel's statements about the argumentative structure of the Logic, to have the ontological foundation of Hegel's system emerge at the end of the Logic rather than at the beginning.

However one might feel about this issue of grounding, McNulty's framing of the Logic in terms of the logocentric predicament is genuinely illuminating and original. It sheds new light on some of the striking peculiarities of Hegel's methodology in the Logic and it brings out an aspect of Hegel's argument that is impressively unprecedented, ambitious, and underappreciated, and it offers a multitude of valuable insights and digressions along the way. We are in the midst of a kind of renaissance of work on Hegel's metaphysics and this will take its place among the very best contributions to the genre.

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