

Review

Nahum Brown, *Hegel's Actuality Chapter of the Science of Logic: A Commentary*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-4985-6056-6 (hbk). Pp. xxvii+97.

Hegel scholars have often noted that among Hegel's vast corpus, his *Science of Logic* is the most impenetrable. Within that *Science of Logic*, the *Logic of Essence* is often taken to involve the most complex and controversial arguments. Hegel himself calls the Logic of Essence the 'most difficult' part of the logic (*The Encyclopaedia Logic*, henceforth *EL*: §114Z). And within the *Logic of Essence*, the chapter on 'Actuality'—spanning just over ten pages, in which Hegel gives a quite abstract (intended here to mean bare of concrete details, not in the sense of 'abstract' Hegel invokes in the logic) account of the modal concepts of necessity, possibility, actuality and contingency—involves some of Hegel's most controversial or difficult to understand theses. Indeed, this section of the logic, comprising fewer than 15 pages, builds up to one of Hegel's most controversial theses: that contingency is necessary. It is no surprise then that Hegel himself remarks that the concept of necessity, which is the central concept of this chapter, is difficult to understand (*EL*: §147). For this reason, to provide a detailed schematic of the moves Hegel makes there, is itself a major accomplishment. Even if the reader is not convinced by Brown's account of this chapter, his book provides the reader with a clear schematic of Hegel's argumentation that can or should be used to orient further discussion in the growing literature.

Two of the virtues of Brown's reading are: (i) Brown offers 'local arguments' of the passages in question. What this means is that he attempts to reconstruct the argumentation employed in the passages he is commenting on. By contrast, many of the extant accounts of this section of the logic (e.g., by Dieter Henrich, Jay Lampert, John Burbidge, Stephen Houlgate, George di Giovanni et al.) often start by attempting to find the conclusion Hegel takes himself to have reached and then attempting to place that conclusion into Hegel's broader system. Local argumentation, when it is appealed to, is mainly used to buttress the way in which the local conclusion fits into the broader system.

I call this aspect of Brown's reading a virtue, but it might be objected that Hegel's system is inextricably holist, meaning that it is extremely difficult or impossible to understand the positions and argumentation advanced *except* insofar as it is positioned in Hegel's broader system. I do not, however, think this is in tension

with Brown's stated goals. Brown's reading avoids taking a stand on exactly how the many concepts employed in this chapter are to be fully understood. Rather, Brown's commentary shows the structure of argument Hegel uses. If those arguments are compelling given our intuitions about the concepts deployed (e.g., necessity, actuality, etc.), so much the better, but to gain a full understanding of the chapter—something I do not take Brown to have claimed to have done—we might nonetheless need to fit it into Hegel's broader system.

The second virtue (ii) is that Brown breaks Hegel's argument up into 27 premises (and many conclusions and sub-conclusions along the way), explaining how these are used to build up to the conclusion of the chapter: 'that absolute necessity and contingency are the same' (77, 90). This is a virtue because it renders crystal clear the main points that Hegel uses to advance his own thought. It may be objected that Hegel's thought is often dynamic in a way that requires 'non-linear, para-rational' methods of analysis, such that earlier statements might only be understood in light of conclusions reached later on. While Brown's method of exegesis would seem to clash with many other commentators, I don't think this is an objection that Brown needs to worry about. After all, his goal is to show how these statements are used to build arguments in the local contexts in which they appear without regard to how they figure in the entire logic. If the meaning of these statements can only be appreciated in light of later statements (perhaps even outside the actuality chapter) that has no bearing on the way that Brown makes use of them. After all, even Hegel could not avoid the use of sentences written in a linear order when he composed the logic.

Brown's commentary is divided into three chapters which correspond to Hegel's own threefold division of the actuality chapter covering (i) formal, (ii) real, and (iii) absolute modality (i.e. actuality, possibility and necessity). In the first chapter, Brown argues that Hegel begins from two 'self-evident' premises (xxiii). These are that what is actual is existence, and that what is actual is possible. Brown takes Hegel, like Aristotle, to understand actuality as prior to possibility and existence. While actuality entails both, it cannot *be* both since possibility is not existence. If something is possible it may be and it may not be. But this bare, formal notion of possibility generates a contradiction. Since possibility is reflected actuality and actuality cannot contain such a contradiction, it must be resolved somehow. Brown argues that Hegel posits the notion of contingency, wherein contingency is an actualized possibility that also posits how it could have been. Thus maintaining the possibility of actuality while distinguishing that something which is actual *might have been* otherwise (its possible ground could have led to non-being). But this just serves to highlight what the previous problem was: contingency has no ground since we cannot account for why something is actual. The problem is our notion of formal modality, in particular formal necessity (wherein possibility and actuality coincide). We need a notion of necessity (and modality) which is

not formal, i.e. under which we understand the possibility of an actuality according to the grounds which lead, necessarily, to its actualization. In this way, actuality can distinguish its own possibility to be from its possibility to not be.

This new notion of modality and necessity is called real modality and necessity, which is the topic of Brown's chapter two and of the second division of Hegel's actuality chapter in the *Science of Logic*. Brown takes the second leg of Hegel's argument to depart from the conclusion of the first (in his premises 14 and 15): 'Real actuality results from the necessary form that actualization takes to actualize possibility' (27), and 'Real actuality is real possibility' (31). Instead of understanding possibility and actuality, formally, we understand possibility as those conditions which lead to actualization. The problem is that so understood, possibility cannot be otherwise. Possibility coincides with actuality and so even with real necessity, we arrive at the same problem we faced in the previous chapter: the coincidence of possibility and actuality. Once again, Brown sees Hegel as bringing contingency in to solve the problem (55–58, premise 22). Even though real possibility must become really actual, that something was really possible is a contingent matter. In order to understand actuality as coming from contingency, we need a new notion of modality: absolute modality.

The topic of Brown's last chapter and the final pages of Hegel's actuality chapter is absolute modality. Brown starts from the premise that:

'Absolute actuality is an actuality of the entire process once all of the conditions are present. It is the unity of contingency and necessity' (61).

Absolute actuality contains within it all possibilities, i.e. of something's coming to be and failing to come to be. But that it did come to be shows that that actuality contains necessity; that it might not have, that it contains contingency. Thus within absolute actuality, necessity is contingent and contingency is necessary. Unlike traditional readings, which understand Hegel as merely arguing that the category of contingency is necessary (i.e. must be included in the system), Brown understands Hegel to be arguing that absolute necessity and contingency are the same: 'But the reading I propose is more robustly dialectical. Absolute necessity turns out to be, in the most genuine sense, absolute contingency' (79). Every actualization of a possibility follows from the necessity of the conditions of its possibility, but those conditions fail to exhaust that actualization (otherwise possibility and actuality would be the same, which, we learned in the section on formal modality—and Brown's chapter one—they are not) thus there must remain an element of contingency. But that contingency is not merely a category that we need alongside necessity. Rather, we must understand necessity and contingency together. That something actually is contains both its necessarily being the thing that it is (its

essence) but also its potential to be otherwise and to fail to be what it essentially is; that is, it contains necessarily contingency.

In summary, Brown offers a novel, exacting overview of Hegel's chapter on actuality that ought to have an orienting effect on the literature on this section of Hegel's logic. Anyone studying Hegel's thought, especially his modal thought, would benefit greatly from taking seriously Brown's commentary. I can only offer two minor criticisms (or annoyances, in actuality) in closing: (i) Brown advertises the book as a commentary and the form of the book seems to suggest we will get a line-by-line commentary on the chapter (after all it spans just over ten pages). But there are frequently sentences or paragraphs of Hegel's text that are missing entirely from Brown's commentary. Further, the premises are not in the order in which they appear in the text. This is fine, insofar as Brown aims to reconstruct Hegel's argumentation, but is somewhat confusing for the reader who thinks she is getting a line-by-line commentary (the premises appear in the following order in Hegel's text: 1–4, 6, 5, 7–17, 19, 20, 18, 21–25, 27, 26). (ii) We do not get a full account of the significance of Hegel's view. While I laud Brown's attention to local argumentation, I wish that he had instead written a much longer manuscript that provided the reader with both an account of Hegel's local argumentation as well as Brown's views on the significance of that argumentation as it fits into Hegel's larger system, but I suppose that just means we will have to eagerly await Brown's sequel.

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