

The Thinking of Abstraction

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Resumo: Trendelenburg critica em seus *Logische Untersuchungen* e em dois panfletos publicados sob o título *Die logische Frage in Hegels System* a idéia de um automovimento das categorias no idealismo especulativo. Tal automovimento é considerado como uma hipóstase das categorias. A lógica de Hegel seria, então, uma abstração dogmática, que teria esquecido a origem gramatical das categorias. Pretende-se demonstrar neste artigo que Trendelenburg erra em relação ao alvo em sua crítica, e que, em vez de ser uma abstração, a lógica de Hegel é mais um pensamento das abstrações que usamos de uma forma inconsciente em nossos discursos científicos sobre o mundo.

Palavras-chave: Hegel, Trendelenburg, Lógica, Abstração, Linguagem

Abstract: In his *Logical Investigations* and the two pamphlets published under the title “The Logical Question in Hegel’s System”, Trendelenburg criticizes the idea of a self-movement of logical categories in speculative idealism. Such a self-movement is considered to be a hypostasis of the categories. Thus, Hegel’s logic is a dogmatic abstraction which has forgotten the grammatical origin of categories. We aim to show in this article that Trendelenburg’s criticism misses the point and that Hegel’s logic is not so much an abstraction as a “thinking” of the abstractions that we use in an unconscious way in our scientific discourses about the world.

Keywords: Hegel, Trendelenburg, Logic, Abstraction, Language

If we ask ourselves the question of whether Hegel’s logic possesses in itself meaning, the answer is not obvious. On the one hand, many logicians think – like Lukasiewicz – that Hegel’s logic has no logical value. On the other hand, many metaphysicians think that Hegel fails to do justice to the nature of the absolute. Heidegger, for example, speaks about a metaphysics of subjectivity which has forgotten the question of Being. In this case, Hegel’s logic appears wrong, but is useful by showing what we should avoid to do. Various judgments against Hegel are, however, sometimes even more devastating. For some thinkers, Hegel’s logic is simply viewed as a waste of time. We can find such a judgment in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of Bolzano.¹

This extreme criticism is of peculiar interest because it is close to the that offered

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¹ “Schade doch um so viele talentvolle Männer, welche Zeit und Kräfte mit einer so unsichern Art des Philosophierens (die eher den Namen des Faselns verdienen mag) vergeuden, während sie wohl nicht unfähig wären, gefiele es ihnen erst, den Regeln einer gesunden Logik zu folgen, und vornehmlich jeden Gedanken zu einem deutlichen Bewußtseyn zu erheben, und in gemeinfaßliche Worte zu kleiden, das Gebiet der menschlichen Erkenntnisse noch mit gar mancher sicheren und fruchtbaren Wahrheit zu bereichern.” BOLZANO, 1837, § 718, p. 656.

by common sense. Intuitively, it seems to us more more worthwhile to love someone or to care about ecology² than to think about the logical structure of reality. Indeed, Hegel's logic appears so useless to us because, at first sight, it has the air of being detached from our interests. It gives the impression of being a monstrous metaphysical abstraction. If we are system-lovers, then maybe we can find something like an old-fashioned beauty in that logic, and that's it. But what is really at stake in Hegel's logic? Hegel's ambition was never to make an abstract system:

“In my scientific development, which started from [the] subordinate needs of men, I was inevitably driven toward science and the ideal [of] my youth had to take the form of reflection and thus at once of a system. I now ask myself, while I am still occupied with it, what return to intervention in the life of men can be found (letter to Schelling, november 2d 1800).”³

If we decide to trust Hegel a little bit, we have to see how he tries to realize this project in his system. In other words: What is the concreteness of Hegel's logic? And why does it seem to be abstract?

We would like to give an answer to both of these questions by discussing Trendelenburg's criticism of Hegel. In his *Logische Untersuchungen* and the two pamphlets published under the title “Die logische Frage in Hegels System”, Trendelenburg criticizes the idea of a self-movement of logical categories in speculative idealism. Such a self-movement is considered to be a hypostasis of categories. Hegel's logic is thus nothing more than a dogmatic abstraction which has forgotten the grammatical origin of categories.

Let us jump directly into Trendelenburg. This philosopher considers the logical question to be the main question which concerns Hegel.⁴ For Trendelenburg Hegel's system depends upon the *Logic*, but this rests on nothing. In other words, Hegel's logic, which is the ground of the whole enterprise of his idealistic philosophy, is abstract.

Trendelenburg criticizes the idea of a knowledge without connection with reality.

² Ecology is not direct at stake in Hegel's System. It is however interesting to remark that some thinkers, such as Wendell Kisner, have developed an ecologist theory within Hegel's System.

³ HEGEL, *The Letters*, p. 64, HEGEL, *Briefe I*, pp. 59-60.

⁴ “Die Grundfrage des Systems ist die logische Frage, da die dialektische Methode des reinen Denkens

In Hegel, *Logic* begins with Being, that is to say, pure abstraction.⁵ But the act of performing an abstraction of something presupposes having something from which we can abstract in the first place.⁶

In this way, the presuppositionless character of pure knowing leads to the impossibility of thinking.⁷ According to Trendelenburg, Hegel thinks abstract categories without reflecting on the activity of abstraction which is at work in the production of abstract categories, and because he makes of this failure a law of thinking, he brings the activity of thinking to a paradox. That is why Trendelenburg suggests that we substitute the Hegelian movement of pure categories by a movement which is grounded on the subject, that is to say, by the movement of intuition.⁸ In actuality, for Trendelenburg, the movement of pure knowing is only the abstraction of the movement of intuition, a movement which is always presupposed.⁹

Insofar as he tries to hide the movement of intuition, which is always presupposed, Hegel makes – following Trendelenburg's criticism – the movement of pure thinking into something arbitrary and unthinkable.¹⁰

Consequently, the absence of presupposition, the absence of connection with reality, or, in other words, the very idea of a pure movement makes knowledge impossible. The pure movement of thoughts cannot be expressed. Because it has nothing to do with intuition, it has nothing to do with thinking and communication. The

die absolute sein soll.” *LF*, p. 3.

⁵ “Das reine Seyn macht den Anfang (...) Dieses reine Seyn ist nun die reine *Abstraction*.” *GW* 20, pp. 122-123. (trad. *Enc. I*, §§ 86-7).

⁶ “Denn um zu abstrahieren, muss etwas vorausgesetzt sein, von dem man abstrahiert. Das reine Sein als die reine Abstraktion ist daher nur zu verstehen, inwiefern das Denken schon die Welt in sich besass und sich aus derselben in sich allein zurückzog.” *LU*, p. 37.

⁷ “Wer streng genug ist, die voraussetzungslose Dialektik des reinen Denkens bei ihrem Worte zu halten, wer wirklich versuchte, voraussetzungslos und rein zu verfahren, der sieht bald, dass sie unbeweglich stehen bleibt und ihre Producte todtgeboren sind.” *LF*, p. 13.

⁸ “Sie [die Bewegung] war nicht die Bewegung des reinen Denkens, sondern die Bewegung der Anschauung, geometrische Bewegung, die in dem Raume der Vorstellung die Gestalten entwirft. Diese räumliche Bewegung erschien als die Voraussetzung der voraussetzungslosen Logik.” *LF*, p. 14.

⁹ “Hegel’s Logik behauptete, dass sie sich im Gegensatze gegen alle Anschauung und selbst im Gegensatze gegen das geometrische Bild im Elemente des reinen Gedankens bewege und voraussetzungslos aus diesem allein einen lückenlosen immanenten Zusammenhang der metaphysischen Begriffe erzeuge. Dagegen wurde im Allgemeinen und bis ins Einzelne hinein gezeigt, dass die voraussetzungslose Logik allenthalben das Princip und die allgemeine Thätigkeit der Anschauung voraussetze und dadurch ein Bild heimlich besitze, dass sie öffentlich verachte.” *LF*, p. 48.

¹⁰ “Der einfache Schluss lautete dahin, dass die dialektische Methode darum in sich unmöglich sei, weil ihre Mittel es sind.” *LF*, p. 48.

so-called pure movement of thoughts is just an infinite succession of non-reflected thoughts.

Is Hegel's logic a pure hypostasis?

We have just shown that Trendelenburg considers the presuppositionless character of Hegel's logic to be nothing but a dogmatic abstraction. The task in front of us now is to distance ourselves from his critique in order to see if another interpretation of the logic of Hegel is possible.

The three syllogisms at the end of the *Encyclopedia* is a good starting point to show that there is a misunderstanding in Trendelenburg's critique. These syllogisms represent logic as a moment which is always articulated with nature and spirit. Logic certainly does not depend upon any external objectivity, but it is in constant relation to it. Neither is it reducible to a subjective abstraction.

In fact, Hegel's logic tries to redefine the very categories of objectivity and subjectivity. For Hegel, the subjectivity of the logic is not the forgetting of an external world, but a way to consider objectivity as subjectivity. Subjectivity is no more opposed to objectivity: it is the achievement of the objective determination of thinking.

Far from being an abstraction, Hegel's logic is more a rethinking of abstraction. As shown by Lu De Vos (2007), Hegel's concept of "abstract" is something radically new. It is not the result of a process of abstraction, but that which is still undetermined.

As the process of determination of concept, Hegel's logic is in fact *anti-abstract*. It defines truth in terms of a "becoming concrete" (De Vos, 2007a), that is to say, as the self-determination of the concept. Such a semantical theory is new and contrasts with the theory of truth as an external correspondence to an object or as a passive coherentism. Truth is for Hegel a self-correspondence which lies in the coherent activity of self-determination.

Trendelenburg and a rehabilitated Hegel

We could here even speak about a transformation of metaphysics. Can such a position be compared with Trendelenburg's "Philosophia fundamentalis"?

Our rehabilitated Hegel actually seems close to Trendelenburg. The latter's position lies between two schools: the school of Herbarth and the school of *caricatural* Hegel. While the first has no content, the second only has an arbitrary content. Against Herbart's formalism, Trendelenburg tries to rethink a connection between logic and metaphysics. Such a connection is not dogmatic as it is the case in *his* Hegel because it could be derived from the grammar of language. We would like to show however that Hegel endorses the relation between language and logic, which is specific and essential to Trendelenburg's attempt to link form and content within a new kind of logic.

Hegel knows that there is a connection between logic and language. In the opening words of the second edition of the *Science of Logic*, he says that rules guiding mental thought operations can already be found in language. However, the aim of Hegel's logic is not to provide a deduction of the mental regulations from a given language. It is rather to make a normative "metacritics" of the linguistic construction of truth. Following Bubner and Stekeler-Weithofer, we interpret the *Science of Logic* as a kind of metacritics. But this one is not - like the one developed by Herder - an explanation (ex-plicatio) of the categories from the fact of language. The logic is rather the conceptual determination of the language of a scientific discourse through the development of the connections between notions as they are in themselves. Usual representations, because they are "well-known", are not known at all. Hegel's logic is less an abstraction than a "thinking" of the abstractions that we use in an unconscious way in our scientific discourses about the world.

Before we conclude our paper, we would like to describe the main elements of the relation between language and logic as articulated by Hegel.

Language and logical categories in Hegel

Trendelenburg thinks that he avoids the so-called hypostasis of Hegelian categories by showing a relation between categories and language. According to Trendelenburg, grammar provides us with a way of thinking the categories of meaning. We are not completely lost in our quest in finding the logic of meaning, for language guides us.

First of all, we should to repeat once again that Hegel knows that there are relations between categories and language. Language contains without a doubt the form

of thoughts¹¹, since it is by means of names that we think.¹² But language must be criticized in order to liberate the thoughts which are contained in it.¹³ The logical value of semantics depends upon the movement of criticism and determination. Taken as something immediately given, names have no meaning. Well-known representations have to be criticized to liberate meaning, that is, they take on their logical signification only as a result of a movement of determination.¹⁴

Semantics only has logical value if the movements of judgement and syllogism are working in it. That is why Hegel thinks that grammar can be considered as an introductory model to his logic. As a matter of fact, grammar does make it possible to distance ourselves from various kinds of immediate semantical confusion and even makes it possible to think the idea of «relation».

But grammatical relations are nevertheless not pure. They still contain contingencies. On the one hand, grammar is historically grounded and changes according to cultural development; on the other hand, there are many exceptions within any given grammar. Far from being identical, grammar and logic can be understood in the terms of a dialectical relation. It's by returning to the grammar of the ancient Greeks that we are able to reflect upon our own grammar and to understand, in a preliminary fashion, the logical relations which are implicitly contained in language. Grammar can be an introduction to logic, but it must first be reflected upon in order to liberate its logical content. To put things bluntly: language remains finite for Hegel, but – through reflection - opens itself up to the infinity of logic. This act of reflection is not only the result – as it is often the case in analytic philosophy – of the observation of linguistic propositions. Here Hegel must be clearly distinguished from Trendelenburg. The Hegelian reflection of language or, rather, the Hegelian reflection in language is not the logic of a given language, but the movement of the self-determination of categories inside language. It's not purely analytical, for it integrates the idea of synthesis. In Hegel, dialectics is explicitly both analytical and synthetic.

If we say that it is by means of the names that we think, following J. Simon we

¹¹ “Die Denkformen sind zunächst in der Sprache des Menschen herausgesetzt und niedergelegt.” GW 21, p.10.

¹² “Es ist in Namen, daß wir denken”, GW 20, § 462.

¹³ “Die Sprache muß, wie sie nach außen verhält, im Bewußtsein selbst verhalten”. GW 6, p. 294.

¹⁴ “... zusammen mit seinem Werden ...” GW 9, p. 10.

have to ask ourselves what is presupposed with the presupposition of language.¹⁵ To say that language is the presupposition of logic¹⁶ implies determining what is language for Hegel. But, for Hegel, language – taken as constitutive to thinking – cannot be reduced to a set of signs, a set of predicative judgements. It is the element of a speculative discourse in which the categories of meaning are articulated through syllogisms.

By relating the logic to the linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*) of a discursive reflection rather than to a predicative language, the Hegelian concept of language is perhaps richer than the one developed by Trendelenburg, who is unable to integrate the transcendental synthesis of a subject in his description of a unity between categories and grammar.

Is it enough to consider, as Augusto Vera, that the day on which Trendelenburg has decided to judge Hegel and to overcome his philosophy through his *philosophia fundamentalis* was only a bad day?¹⁷

It is an open question. I would like to conclude by repeating that Hegel's logic is not so much an abstraction as it is a thinking of abstraction. This thinking of abstraction is not only grounded on an analysis of given propositions – as by Aristotle or Trendelenburg – but also tries to include the idea of Kantian judgement within a syllogism, which is dialectical (both analytical and synthetic) and shows how the subjective determination of things becomes – by virtue of the movement of logical determination – an objective determination of thinking into the language that we use.

¹⁵ “Es gilt also zu fragen, was mit der Voraussetzung der Sprache vorausgesetzt ist, d.h. es muß nach dem Wesen der Sprache gefragt werden, wie Hegel es versteht. Das Wesen der Sprache sieht Hegel in einem entscheidenden Zusammenhang seines Systems in deren Zeichencharakter.” SIMON, 1966, pp. 172-173.

¹⁶ “Die Sprache ist also nicht die Voraussetzung, sondern die absolute Voraussetzung der ‘Logik’ Hegels.” SIMON, 1966, p. 177.

¹⁷ VERA, 2010, p. 246.

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