

Mario Dal Pra  
*Dialettica hegeliana ed epistemologia analitica*  
Morcelliana, Brescia 2015, pp. 188

*Dialettica hegeliana ed epistemologia analitica* [Hegelian Dialectic and Analytic Epistemology] is the re-edition of the lecture notes for a course held by Mario Dal Pra at Milan State University in 1977. The book stands out for its constant effort to keep together historical rigour in the interpretation of classic authors and theoretical reflection on contemporary philosophical problems. The issue at stake is the possibility to conceive of Hegelian dialectic as a sophisticated version of empiricism, and therefore as less “idealistic” than it is ordinarily done. On the one hand, Dal Pra fully accepts the ‘epistemological critique of dialectic’: when it is regarded as a realist metaphysical doctrine, dialectic lacks not only verifiability, but also the minimum empirical underpinnings. On the other hand, if dialectic is no longer a universal ontological structure, but it is re-interpreted as a “particular heuristic tool”, then it proves itself as capable of meeting the requirements of a modern theory of knowledge and it provides a useful integration of the philosophy of science.

The entire book revolves around the crucial distinction between analytic and synthetic knowledge. Analytic knowledge is based upon the recognition of “data” that pre-exist the act of knowledge. On the contrary, synthetic knowledge entails a “creative” aspect and, to a certain extent, a conceptual “construction” of its object, free from the necessity of empirical confirmation or falsification.

In the first part (chapters 2-4), Dal Pra reconstructs the different formulations and nuances the distinction assumes in the thought of Hume, Kant and Hegel, with particular regard to the question as to whether the analytic/synthetic distinction is able to cover all possible forms of human knowledge. A brief but penetrating survey of Humean and Kantian theses explores the different paths of their criticism about the possibility of metaphysics and the limits of knowledge. Moreover, it allows to point out the radical divergence of Hegel’s thought, which appears to be resolutely more confident about the possibility to attain to a rationally constructed organic totality of elements connected by necessary logical bonds.

In the second part (chapters 5-6), the author inquires into the validity and applicability of both the analytic/synthetic distinction and the dialectic in the light of the epistemological debate of the 20th century.

As for the first issue, having set the general features of the two kinds of knowledge, Dal Pra examines different accounts of their function in mathematics, natural and social sciences, as well as in the various theories of the relation between thought and action. The author deals particularly with Quine's critique of the consistence of analyticity and with Stephen Barker's remarks on the ambiguity of the definition of a-priori and a-posteriori knowledge. Furthermore, Dal Pra examines, in the wake of Barker's account, the advances of mathematical knowledge in the 20th century, which apparently confirm the separation between the domain of factual knowledge and that of mathematical knowledge. Particular attention is also devoted to the different accounts on the role of induction set forth by Reichenbach and Hempel. Whereas Reichenbach regards observation and inductive reasoning as a fundamental requisite for the formulation of scientific laws, Hempel reclaims the essential role of hypothesis as well as the active contribution of the scientist in its formulation. For these reasons, Hempel should be included – along with Giulio Preti's re-appraisal of Husserl's theory of 'regional ontologies' – among the theorists who reclaim 'transcendental themes' (p. 125).

As regards dialectical knowledge, Dal Pra maintains that it cannot act as a set of scientific laws (since it is a purely rational construction), nor can it be confined in a merely logical realm (since its "realist" intention to describe concrete phenomena). For the same reasons, dialectic can neither be a factual knowledge (for it would require a certain degree of induction and could only attain to a statistic validity, while it claims to be an account of the totality of facts and totality cannot be expressed statistically), nor a formal knowledge (for it would be analytic, while it claims to be synthetic).

This 'formal' critique of dialectic is conducted beside the more traditional one, which focuses on its metaphysical character. Within dialectical metaphysics, the role of scientific explanation is illegitimately carried out by the extension of elementary analogies drawn from limited fields of human experience (be it religious, artistic or historical). Thus, dialectic only produces unverifiable pseudo-descriptions of the real structure of the world.

However, despite deeming the dialectic – in its traditional formulation – to be incoherent and untenable, Dal Pra offers a selective re-evaluation of it. If the rationalistic and pseudo-scientific features are to be recognized and rejected, the prominent role of *experience* in Hegel's work must be acknowledged too. While a philosophically and rationally predetermined philosophy of history is the obsolete residual of Hegelianism, a "renovated" dialectic proves to

be particularly fruitful within the context of a philosophy of historical methodology. On the one hand, as William Dray points out, Hegel's way to proceed manifests a genuine empirical intention. On the other hand, looking at the parallel between the Hegelian notion of process – a series of events that bear the twofold property of being successive and constituting the moments of a whole – and Nagel's idea of genetic explanation, Dal Pra reckons that epistemological reflection can draw useful, though limited, suggestions from the dialectical method. Only in such a redesigned framework, the thought of the German philosopher can be emancipated from its 'mystic shell' and reconciled with rational philosophical discussion.

Miriam Aiello  
miriam.aiello@uniroma3.it,  
Università di Roma 3