

## BOOK REVIEW

### KARIN DE BOER. ON HEGEL: THE SWAY OF THE NEGATIVE

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**Karin de Boer. *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xi + 266 pages.**

*On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* offers an original perspective on Hegel's philosophy, a useful critique of modernity, and an inspiring call to attend to the precariousness of the human condition. The book provides precise and novel analyses of Hegel's texts, including his perhaps most formidable work the *Science of Logic* – which has only recently been rediscovered as a major focus for scholarly discussion – as well as lesser known yet pivotal essays from his Jena period. De Boer presents impressively clear explications of Hegelian ideas and a fresh perspective on Hegel's thought.

De Boer applies Hegel's method of embracing a philosophical doctrine and pushing its strength to where it meets its limit to Hegel's own philosophy. She chooses his conception of negativity – certainly the main source of his philosophical power – as the focus of her critical engagement. Distinguishing three forms of negativity in Hegel: 1) abstract or external negativity, 2) absolute or internal negativity, and 3) tragic negativity, she argues that while Hegel means to control abstract negativity by subjugating it, as it were, to absolute negativity, he remains unable to completely “disentangle” absolute from abstract negativity. The result is a tragic conflict between these two first forms of negativity. Tragic negativity produces collisions that are symmetrical and therefore “do not necessarily yield their synthesis” (102). De Boer contends that Hegel's conception of ‘contradiction’ in the *Doctrine of Essence* is of one piece with his discussions of Greek tragedy and expertly develops this subtext of Hegelian logic. Perhaps even more importantly, she locates the logic of tragic entanglement in Hegel's early Essay on Natural Law. *The Sway of the Negative*, thus,

does not lead Hegel's philosophy beyond itself, to a philosophy other than Hegelian, but unearths, as it were, and radicalizes an alternative principle that the author finds within the Hegelian text, albeit as abandoned. A particularly original aspect of De Boer's critique of Hegelian absolute negativity comes to the fore when she convincingly shows that, for all his disdain of clean-cut oppositions, Hegel needs neat disentanglement as the first step of his integrationist operations.

De Boer offers a two-fold critique of modernity deploring the modern taste for dichotomies and the ill-conceived and often disastrous optimism. Neither part of her critique of modernity is exactly unheard of. But de Boer's combination of a tragic vision with a commitment to Hegelian philosophy is quite original. Radicalizing the "tragic strand" of Hegel's philosophy allows de Boer to critique modern optimism including Hegel's own. She agrees with Hegel's critique of clean-cut oppositions, but calls on thinkers to endure entanglement rather than dialectically resolve conflicts. In fact, the most important contribution of this book is the "logic of entanglement" that it develops via meticulous explications of Hegelian texts. With the final chapter, de Boer opens the lens widely to discuss the political, social, and historical relevance of this logic of entanglement, especially in the context of intercultural conflicts.

While her double strategy is really quite exciting it makes it hard to identify her stance vis-à-vis Hegel. More consistency in the way the author describes her method would be desirable. Is it a faithful explication of Hegel? Is it a critique of Hegel? Is it a Hegelian overcoming of Hegel? Is it a transformation of Hegel? A radicalizing of Hegel? A radicalizing of a specific aspect of Hegel's philosophy? The author contends both that Hegel defines the tragic as symmetrical and that he establishes an asymmetry in the tragic conflict between archaic and rational justice. At times, de Boer formulates clear critiques of Hegel's disregard for symmetrical collisions and tragic negativity (for example: "As I see it, speculative science – in accordance with the prevailing tendency of philosophy as such – recoils from this tragic negativity" (126)), at other times she argues that tragic negativity constitutes "the very heart" of his philosophical method (180). Then again, she adopts the strategy of amplifying certain minor strands in Hegel's philosophy (for example: "to radicalize Hegel's apparent hesitation as to the capacity of modernity to resolve its inherent conflicts" (8)). These different strategies should be more explicitly related to one another.

This said, the book makes a significant contribution to the new generation in Hegel scholarship that emphasizes the non-totalizing and fragile as well as transformative and future-oriented character of Hegel's thought (see Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Restlessness of the Negative*, Catherine Malabou's *The Future of Hegel*, and Rebecca Comay's *Mourning Sickness*). De Boer combines two appeals: thought need

endure what she calls entanglement and affirm what she calls tragic negativity. Tragic negativity engenders symmetrical collisions and the necessary contingency of their resolution foregrounds the finitude (or limit) of dialectical synthesis. The “logic of entanglement” accounts for the utter precariousness of human life.

With her argument that the relevance of tragic negativity extends beyond a consideration of Greek culture, de Boer joins the emerging interest in recovering the tragic world view, evident in such different scholarly interventions as Christoph Menke’s philosophical and literary research (*Tragödie im Sittlichen* and *Tragic Play*), William Connolly’s current work in political theory (*Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* and *A World of Becoming*), and some of Judith Butler’s latest work (*Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*). To be sure, the style of this book speaks more to a philosophical audience and the strength of de Boer’s scholarship lies in her philosophical explications, but de Boer’s exploration of a modern tragic sensibility will be met with great interest even beyond the field of Hegel scholarship. This is a book not only for students and scholars of Hegel but also for philosophers, literary critics, and political theorists who explore a contemporary tragic worldview.

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