Book Review | *Inference and the Metaphysics of Reason: An Onto-Epistemological Critique*

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The objective of the book is to elucidate the problem of inference that sets up (creates) the human world in acts of “positing”. It turns against the analytic philosophy of language which, on the one side, puts at the centre of its interest judgments and propositions, while on the other side defends realism in the guise of direct referentialism. Stambovsky’s problem is not “how does language hook onto reality?” but how do we know the world: “How Knowledge is of Being.” The author defines his discipline as “onto-epistemology.”

**Theory**

To remind the reader, today positing is conceived of as “a foundational activity and accomplishment that springs out from the autonomy and spontaneity of the subject, which is always backed by the intention-validity of the will.” (Leinkauf 1995, column 697) Stambovsky’s main position is that the willful act of knowing is an act of being. The mind creates the world in the sense that human reflection is the maker of human reality. A good part of it is the activity of conceptual formation. Apparently, this is an anthropological position and a typical case of anti-realism. The subject of thinking is a product of an “absolute positing” which “put[s] the subject to thought” (p. 42). Exactly in this sense does Stambovsky claim that positing is identical with being.

The author defines “inferring” as “an actualization of reflective intelligence” (p. 214). Inference is not just immediate judgment but a product of self-reflective process that is ipso facto an act of constructing. It is a “living” practice and is also not something passive but
active. “‘Fact’ for the reason of the act of inference, is any ‘what’—any thing-in-itself—as it is for us.” (p. 280)

Sources

Stambovsky refers to Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas as philosophers who first explored the concept of “positing” in the form of “thetic”. The concept itself was introduced by Kant in his pre-critical writings as Setzung, and is especially clearly formulated in this passage of CPR: “I find that a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception.” (B 141, Cambridge Edition translation) Exactly this position made epistemology “first philosophy” and led to “post-Kantian epistemological hegemony” in philosophy (p. 26). Importantly enough, Kant spoke about absolute and relative positing. Relative positing is the choice of the premises; absolute positing is the reached conclusion, or inference (p. 280).

The problem with Kant is, finds the author, that he is inconsequential in his inferentialism. To be more exact, Kant continues to defend formal logic of inference that has nothing to do with his “conceptual logic” of positing. In this way Kant “relativizes the absolute moment of Position.” (p. 282) This explains why the author sees Hegel’s logic of inferential reflection closer to his approach. He himself declares that, “if not tagged Kantian or neo-Kantian, this work is likely to impel certain readers to class it as Hegelian.” (p. 14) Here is Stambovsky’s interpretation of Hegel’s positing in a nutshell: Human mind realizes itself by putting (positing) elements of the external world into its attention (“thematizing” them) so that the elements become “objects”. In this way the Geist (the author often leaves this German term without translation) presents what the author calls, following Karl Rahner, the “being that is with itself” (Beisichseiende des Seins). (p. 256) Especially important is that this act of positing is discursive (“reflective”) which means that it is not an instant judging but an act of articulate inference that having mediating moments and takes place in time.

Stambovsky only cannot accept Hegel’s metaphysic of concepts. In particular, he makes a case against Hegel’s teleological logic. For the author, logic has purely formal, not theological, character. On this point he is closer to Aquinas than to Hegel.

Developments of the Concept of “Positing” After Kant and Hegel

The book is situated in a wide historical–philosophical context. Special attention is dedicated to the logic of the German philosopher Hermann Lotze and the Oxford thinker Bernard Bosanquet. “They were no less modern than the immediately succeeding generations of neo-realists, naturalists, logicists, logical positivists, and linguistic
philosophers.” (p. 25) Bosanquet, in particular, constantly insisted on replacing “the immediate judgment” with “inferential judgment”. (p. 285)

Unfortunately, the author failed to notice that exactly Lotze introduced the conception of positing propositions—as we shall see in a moment, Stambovsky is critical of it—by placing judgment at the center of logic; the judgment asserts, or posits, its content. (cf. Milkov 2002, 2010) Importantly enough, this conception directly, and strongly, influenced Frege who transformed Lotze’s propositional positing into a conception of a radical “affirmation” (Bejahung) of propositions. That is also why Frege’s theory of truth is without facts, and without material objects. What counts is that our mind judges and affirms (posits) a proposition as true or rejects it as false. In such cases the judging mind applies her “will for truth”.

The author deplores the fact that in the last 100 years, instead of systematic ontology in the sense of Kant and Hegel, variety of analytic epistemologies and analytic metaphysics was suggested. Leading figures of analytic epistemology are criticized: Rudolf Carnap, Gilbert Harman, Robert Brandom, and Michael Williams, among them. For Stambovsky, the problem with Brandom’s inferentialism is that it is essentially propositional doctrine. (pp. 98 f.) In this way he commits “fallacy of ontological inversion” which “prioritizes propositional over existential—relative over absolute—Position.” (p. 100) Interestingly enough, Brandom himself reveals that he discovered the problem of inferentialism following Michael Dummett’s writings on Frege (Brandom 2010, p. 161). Our analysis above has shown, however, that Frege adopted the conception of propositional positing from one of Stambovsky’s favorites, Hermann Lotze. All this speaks against Stambovsky’s thesis that analytic epistemologists alone are responsible for abandoning the paradise of the Hegelian style epistemology.

Furthermore, Stambovsky claims that philosophers of science like Moritz Schlick and Hans Reichenbach introduced predicative (relative) positing and neglect the existential (absolute) one. This, of course, is true. But we must not forget that Schlick and Reichenbach defended the practice of positing, fighting such radical representationalists like Ernst Mach. Schlick, in particular, claimed that the object-constructing relation is that of conventional coordination of our perceptions with particular scientific system. This position led to “a new kind of empiricism, one that negotiates a careful path between a crudely reductive Machian positivism and the excesses of Kantian apriorism.” (Howard 1994, p. 47)
Style

The book is wide ranging, discussing dozens of philosophers, also referring to works of science and imaginative literature. Especially helpful are the “Summaries” that follow every chapter, the extensive Conclusion of the book and the detailed Index. This makes the task of understanding the book’s message, and so to profit from its reading, an easy one—even if, as it is the case with the author of this review, the reader does not share the author’s position. Stambovsky also widely refers to French and German texts and fairly accurately at that. I found only one minor mistake in the German texts: on p. 284 either “of” or “der” is to be deleted.

References


