Review: Recent Work on Hegel

Reviewed Work(s):

- *An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel.* by Errol E. Harris
- *Hegel's Development: Night Thoughts (Fena 1801-1806).* by H. S. Harris
- *Hegel.* by M. J. Inwood
- *Hegel's Concept of God.* by Quentin Lauer, S.J.
- *History and System: Hegel's Philosophy of History.* by Robert L. Perkins
- *Hegel: An Introduction.* by Raymond Plant
- *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Fena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6) with Commentary.* by Leo Rauch
- *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism.* by Michael Rosen

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BOOK REVIEWS

RECENT WORK ON HEGEL


Was Hegel the last great metaphysician or the first great philosophical fraud? The volume and quality of modern Hegel studies as witnessed by the books in hand suggest that for the moment at least this question has been quietly buried. No longer need works on Hegel be prefaced by an earnest account of his influence on hosts of writers or by a list of those "prejudiced misconceptions" (J. N. Findlay) which have excused generations of philosophers from tackling his texts. This is not to deny that special pleading might still not be required in order to draw Hegel's leading ideas into the competence of the working professional. The difficulty, not to say downright impenetrability, of whole pages of charmless text ensures that the Hegel scholar who would have a wide audience for his own work as much as for Hegel will address acutely problems of communication. That publisher's crock of gold, the "intelligent layman", may well be an optimistic fiction but Hegel scholars are well advised to construct a parochial equivalent, working out carefully a programme of philosophical transliteration.

It is important to see why this effort should be made. After all, one might take the view that, while Hegel's philosophy is basically straightforward, yet it requires for its exposition and study nothing less than a mastery and employment of his vocabulary, perhaps even his style. On this account penetration of his texts will be achieved by an internal culture of Hegel's idioms, aided perhaps by an understanding of the work of
his contemporary and ancient sources. Sooner or later, immersion will be complete and the penny will drop. The work of scholarship, of interpretation, development and criticism can begin.

It must be said that strong support for this style of interpretation can be gleaned from Hegel's own writings. Indeed, for one of the authors reviewed, Michael Rosen, a central element of Hegel's thought, dialectical proof, "is ineliminably experiential; it has a necessary first-hand character which means that it cannot be substituted for, resumed or criticized by ordinary, non-scientific discourse" (Rosen, p. 22). Interpretation eschews reconstruction, translation or re-expression, attempting rather to characterize the nature of the experience of thought as an answer to the question "what is rational experience like?" Interpretation has become the craft of educating one's experiential capacities and its success will depend on its helpfulness. The interpreter faces similar difficulties to those who make a living writing about wine. Can a characterisation consisting of incidental information (about soil-types, climate, forms of proprietorship), together with conceits serving to express the taste of the stuff, get me to discriminate successfully the vintages in hand? We can adjudicate the skill of the wine correspondent but if we have a suspicion that there is no such experience to be had, if as with Rosen we believe the possibility of Hegelian Science is "sheer Neo-Platonic fantasy", "nothing remains of intrinsic philosophical value" (Rosen p. 179), though there might be other cultural pay-offs. In this respect Rosen's attitude to Hegel's work is rather like my attitude to the Church of England. He recognises its historical and continuing influence, he is prepared, as occasion demands (e.g. in his examination of Adorno) to jump through some of the hoops; the pity is, he doesn't believe a word of it.

One could dispute Rosen's arguments but so long as one insists on the radical distinction between experience and its characterization, the interpreter is left in one of two equally unattractive positions - he is either locked into a personal dialogue with a Hegel-of-the-texts or he restricts his audience to just those he believes can share, hence follow, his duplication of Hegel's experience. This latter must be the fate of Lauer's Hegel's Concept of God. The style is heavily Hegelian with bright intervals. Lauer announces that "we must make the effort to come to grips with what Hegel says, in the way he says it" (p. 19, my italics). Language (by which I take it he means the sort of thing we usually speak, read and write) may be apt for "mere understanding" but needs to be fleshed out "in the more comprehensive realm of 'reason'. Meaning will "burst through the bonds of definition" as we struggle to share Hegel's experience. "Grammar as we know it may well be unable to handle what Hegel has to say" . . . and so it proves. In his Presidential Address to the Hegel Society of America, included in Perkins, Lauer advises us to read Hegel as a poet - "there is a special art of reading Hegel" (p. 5). I am not an initiate and confess that I found Lauer's condensation of e.g. Hegel's Logic of the Concept harder work than the original - to the point of frequent defeat. This was all the more annoying since Lauer's interpretative conclusions often seemed both interesting and correct.

Alternative approaches will suppose at the beginning of the enterprise that Hegel's philosophy contains discussions of man's conceptions of himself, of his relationships with God, his fellow men and their creations, and with nature, which are interesting and true or interesting and false and which require, through respect for their source,
solid yet communicable examination. In this respect Hegel is no different from any other major philosopher.

Accordingly I am most impressed by those authors who take seriously their charge of communicating clearly the sense of Hegel’s doctrines. (In this respect Rosen’s practice belies his methodological disclaimers. His presentation of his own interpretation and his discussion of alternatives is impeccably traditional in its commitment to clarity right up to the point — and here he becomes speechless — at which he concludes that the experience he is characterizing is unattainable). Special mention must be made of the second volume, Night Thoughts (Jena 1801–1806), of H. S. Harris’s intellectual biography of Hegel’s early career, Hegel’s Development. Before taking up his appointment in Jena, Hegel had been amassing, almost unwittingly, those philosophical resources which would enable him to comprehend the religious, political and historical dimensions of a properly human social existence. In Schelling’s new recruit, vigour, enthusiasm and ambition combined potently with a personal sense of technical philosophical virtuosity to produce work of dizzying unintelligibility. “If no one understood him at this stage, it was at least partly because he did not yet fully understand himself.” (p. xvi). H. S. Harris portrays the Jena years as a history of personal disentanglement during which formidable learning and a matchless capacity for speculation become ever more constructively employed. The manuscript sources of this period have been widely used by Lukács, Marcuse, Avineri and Plant amongst others. Now we see them not merely as extracts which witness a prodigious social perspicacity but as the materials of a rapidly developing system. Subsequently the material of this period will be pruned and gathered together in the Phenomenology of Spirit and as a System of Logic. I can think of no aspect of Hegel’s philosophy which will not be illumined by careful study of H. S. Harris’s work.

H. S. Harris himself has been instrumental in the translation of the philosophical works of the Jena years and this enterprise is continued in Rauch’s translation of the 1805/6 lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit. The translation is first-class, the commentary sound and detailed. With the same sources to hand as Harris, Rauch shows himself more cautious, less venturesome. In contrast to Rauch, H. S. Harris is positively brave. Witness his claim that “Hegel’s economic theory is a cooperative or syndicalist one” (p. 490) and his suggestion that Hegel probably “looked forward to a world in which labour-power would no longer be marketed” (p. 495). I suspect that it is easier to find in Hegel’s works statements which suggest that he ought to have reached these conclusions than positive interpretative support for them.

The Jena manuscripts were effectively used in the first edition of Plant’s Hegel to emphasize that much of the content of Hegel’s later philosophy could be traced in both substance and motivation to the social preoccupations of his earlier years. I recall my regret, on reading the first edition, that the book was so short. The overall argument, to the effect that Hegel’s philosophical system is best understood as a response to problems thrown up by our social and religious experience, required a closer engagement with central themes, of the System of Logic and the Encyclopaedia in particular, than was permitted by the format of the publication — a single-author study in a series concentrating on “Political Thinkers”. It is good to see the book (now called, explicitly, An Introduction) back in print but the main text is an exact reproduction of the earlier edition.
Two extra chapters are appended. The first carries further Plant’s discussion of those social and political institutions which Hegel believed could be legitimised through the sense of “identity”, of “belonging”, which they create, and foster. Although an excellent study it exacerbates the weakness noted above. The second additional chapter, a brief examination of the related notions of “Absolute Knowledge” and “the end of history”, most of which is published elsewhere, provides something of a remedy.

Readers of Hegel will frequently find that their studies duplicate Hegel’s experience. His initial preoccupation with our social, religious and artistic life is mirrored by our interest in the force and distinctiveness of his contributions to these topics. And as soon as the critical reader attends to Hegel’s grounding of these doctrines he must face up to the difficulties of the *Encyclopaedia*. Whilst the best modern commentators have all employed his more accessible doctrines concerning man’s relations to his God, his fellows, his natural surroundings and his creations to illuminate deeply puzzling metaphysical themes (I have in mind here Taylor’s discussion of the unity of identity and difference and Westphal’s account of the theory of the Concept (in Steinkraus and Schmitz (eds.) *Art and Logic in Hegel’s Philosophy*, Harvester 1980), the overall critical perspective gained thereby proves of little help to the student who would master the relentless detail.

Both Errol Harris and Inwood set out to guide readers through this difficult terrain. In their own ways both books are admirable. Errol Harris writes as a convinced Hegelian. Both the study of Hegel and independent examination of the metaphysics of science have convinced him of the basic truth of Hegel’s conception of the world as a concrete, self-realizing structure of spirit, a structure whose active logos may be revealed as a dialectic of process through a dialectic of reason. Inwood buys none of this. Where Errol Harris digs beneath the surface paradox to defend Hegel, Inwood adopts the practice implicit in much teaching and examining, believing that the content of Hegel’s writing is best exposed by sustained criticism – the interrogatory or adversary approach. Errol Harris’s interpretation begins with a denial that the dialectic is a sort of super-logic, a methodology employing laws of thought which are somehow deeper or more profound than modern formal logic. Indeed it is not a method of reasoning at all in the narrow sense of its constituting a canon of valid inference. It is best seen as the track of a thinker who insists from the beginning that the truth is the whole, who seeks to locate and integrate partial insights within a system; the development of which can be portrayed through a history of human culture (thought or spirit), the constitution of which can be presented through the unravelling of a collective metaphysics, and the spiritual dimension of which is revealed in the claim that the truth which philosophy has attained is God. Put bluntly, God is our historically conditioned, self-disclosing conceptual scheme. That God has not deceived himself or us is attested by the reality of that scheme in the basic structures of his creation.

If we can suppose something like this at the start of the enterprise of self-exploratory thought, its truth will be guaranteed by the perceived necessity of our success in total self-comprehension. Hegel’s ambition was outrageous in scope; Errol Harris’s success lies in his demonstration of the naturalness, not to say common-
sense, of the demand for wholeness and system together with his clarification of the
detail of Hegel’s practice. He never indulges in the tendency of some Hegelian
epigones to write de haut en bas, as though the practice of “Reason” requires that
intelligibility be aufgehoben along with the “mere Understanding” which ordinary
mortals seek.

There is no danger that Inwood might succumb to temptations of ineffability.
Hegel poses a real difficulty for the resolute expositor-critic – where to start? Inwood
forswears the traditional stand-him-up-knock-him-down approach, believing,
perhaps in general but most specifically with respect to Hegel because of his
obscurity and radical ambiguity, that even the barest preliminary account of Hegel’s
doctrines requires sustained cross-examination of the texts. Perhaps there are no
Hegelian fellow-travellers; perhaps all those who are prepared to go along with the
system finish up being ensnared by it. Inwood solidly resists seduction and so the
reader struggles with Inwood as he struggles with Hegel. Inwood’s most conspicuous
quality is sheer doggedness as he traces out a prolific array of alternative readings.
Since he finds ready support for most of them in the text, Hegel is shown to be
teasingly ambiguous. Inwood’s determination pays dividends with some of Hegel’s
most obscure arguments. His discussion of the transition from Logic to Nature in the
Encyclopaedia is a model of careful analysis. Here, as elsewhere, since it is not his
concern to make Hegel plausible he can test the strength of the most unlikely theses.

On the other hand, this sort of admirable thoroughness creates severe difficulties
of construction. The systematic nature of Hegel’s metaphysics forces one who would
investigate it in a problem-by-problem fashion to refer continually backwards and
forwards to other aspects of the study. Dozens of footnotes of the kind “cf. CH.IV 3”
become more of an irritation than a help but the book is so long and so dense as to
require them. I suspect, having become familiar with the book, that frequent refer-
ence to it will be rewarding, but the rewards will be hard won.

In contrast, Rosen’s book is an interpretative tour-de-force. Beginning with a worry
that would not have worried Hegel – the “post festum” paradox that criticism of
Hegel’s system requires the endorsement of the system from its point of completion,
Rosen seeks to characterize the experience of a thought which can invulnerably
generate its own systematic content. Such a characterization will need to satisfy a
specific list of requirements which in the end prove too tough for the experience to be
credible. We might have conceived of Logic as a transformation (“purification”) of
the contents of the Understanding (perceptions, first-shot abstractions of the cate-
gories of pre-Hegelian metaphysics) into elements of a complete Science, but this
would contravene the requirement that the discipline of Logic be rigorously a priori –
thought must generate its content independently of the experience of ordinary
consciousness. Taking this requirement together with several others – notably the
claim that the progress of the movement of Logic shall be determined rigorously ex
ante – Rosen claims that the Logic needs to be autonomously valid; it will severely
constrain any interpretation of its categories through an identification of their
embedded location in the world of nature or social institutions.

On this point, as on others, the standard response to Rosen’s challenging thesis
will be of the kind “Yes but . . .”. Quite independently, Inwood, although his account
of Hegelian Science largely supports Rosen’s line, mentions a nest of complicating features (Chapters I and VIII). Important passages in the texts seem to support e.g. the transformational approach, though they may with some effort be read in Rosen’s way (e.g. in the Encyclopaedia §22 Hegel suggests that perception etc. is changed (verändert) in thought). Moreover the texts, especially the Zusätze, are peppered with lengthy criticism, examples, analogies, contrasts, metaphors, all of them instruments to aid the elevation of conception to thought. If one of the chief flaws in the transformational account of the relation of conception to thought is the lack of a clear account of the procedures of transformation, this must apply, too, to that element of transformation in Rosen’s preferred generative approach, as when the thinker who has achieved knowledge autonomously recognises that his conceptions are transformed thereby. What are the marks of transformation as against, say, obliteration or endorsement?

Finally one must note that the drive for a rigorously purified and autonomous Logic can distort one’s reading of other texts. Rosen’s rejection of Charles Taylor’s expressivist interpretation embraces a further rejection of Taylor’s claim that Hegel’s authoritarianism is mediated by his acknowledgement of a principle of subjectivity which recognises “the value of what is personal”. “Subjectivity is first and foremost a general metaphysical principle of activity, not a private possession” (Rosen, pp. 132–3). Students of the Philosophy of Right (P.R.) should not be so swiftly stampeded. At P.R. §25 Hegel lists at least three ways in which will is manifested as subjective and these give rise at P.R. §119–20 to the right of intention (the right, based on privileged access, of the agent to reject imputations of actions which he did not intend) and later at P.R. §132 to the right of the subjective will – “that whatever it is to recognise as valid shall be seen by it as good”. Of course these principles of subjectivity are entirely formal in the absence of a realised State which will determine the Good as it prescribes citizens’ duties. But it would be wrong to suspect that a wholly authoritarian state can do this. Values of legal process, respect for private judgement and opinions, a measure of free speech, comprise liberal elements of the rational State and these are portrayed, explicitly, as expressions of subjective freedom (P.R. §§215, 224, 316–19). To be sure, these are not private possessions but they do attest the value of the personal within inter-personal institutions.

Let me conclude with a compliment to Rosen. Most of the monographs reviewed demonstrate that Hegel studies have advanced confidently out of a peculiar academic closet. It is no longer fashionable (and soon, one hopes, it will no longer be respectable) for philosophers to admit total ignorance of Hegel’s work. Rosen’s work witnesses one very good reason for sustaining the current interest in Hegel. Throughout his book he illustrates the constructive manner in which the study of Hegel can be employed to bridge the perplexing gap between the mainstreams of Anglo-American and Continental traditions of thought. He follows Charles Taylor in showing that the study of Hegel serves to widen our philosophical culture.

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