
Karl Rosenkranz's 'Life of Hegel' 1/24 - Discovering the book and Osmo's introduction

An abridged and commented translation into English

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(The article below is reproduced at hegel.net with the kind permission of its author, Stephen Cowley¹. It first appeared 2009/2010 on the hegel.net Hegel mailing list² and was then first published 2011 as article with the pictures below on his blog 'Hegelian News & Reviews'³)

This is a summary of the preface and first eleven chapters of Karl Rosenkranz⁴'s Life of Hegel (1844), the first biography of the German philosopher Hegel. Rosenkranz was a Calvinist and Professor in Königsberg in East Prussia who had access to Hegel's papers through his family.

Discovering the book and Osmo's introduction (Stephen Cowley)

On looking up Hegel literature recently, I discovered that "Hegels Leben", the first biography of Hegel (1844)⁵, by Karl Rosenkranz (1805-79)⁶, was recently translated into French by Pierre Osmo (*Vie de Hegel*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004). The second, by Rudolf Haym also appeared in the same year (also Gallimard). Osmo's translation has 731 pages, appendices by Marheineke, Foerster and Hotho, Rosenkranz's Reply to Haym (1858) and an index of names. It was put into Italian shortly before that. It is interesting that the Latin languages are still ahead of English in this respect, perhaps because of the proximity of these countries to Germany and cultural interactions within Europe.

I've now had a chance to look through the introduction by Osmo. I find that Rosenkranz was not actually a direct pupil of Hegel, though he associated with him and his family quite closely in Berlin in his early years and was taught by Leopold von Henning, Hinrichs and Hotho, who were students of Hegel. However, he went on to teach in Königsberg (a successor to Kant and contemporary of Herbart) and said this gave him a sense of distance in writing about Hegel, who had lived in Berlin. He had the co-operation of Hegel's family and different levels of co-operation from other people in writing his biography.

By background, Rosenkranz was a Calvinist (that is, Reformed church, as opposed to Lutheran). The general line he takes was influenced by Marheineke, who edited Hegel's Lectures on Religion - in other words, he contradicts the Left Hegelian line (of D Strauss, Feuerbach, etc) that Hegel was in some way an Atheist or Secular Humanist, who merely expressed himself in religious imagery to disguise the

¹ <https://edinburgh.academia.edu/StephenCowley>

² <https://groups.io/g/hegel/topics>

³ <https://scottish-hegelian.blogspot.com/2011/10/karl-rosenkranz-on-life-of-hegel.html>

⁴ [rosenkranz.htm](https://www.rosenkranz.htm)

⁵ https://hegel.net/rosenkranz/Rosenkranz1844-Hegels_Leben.pdf

⁶ <https://hegel.net/rosenkranz/>

real content of his thought from himself or others. However, Rosenkranz does address Hegel's interest in pagan Greek literature in the early parts of the biography. Rosenkranz also edited Kant's Works - it is fair to say that he focuses on the transition from Kant to Hegel and acknowledges as much, saying that it was inevitable in Königsberg!

He also uses other perspectives (e.g. the Pantheismusstreit and influence of Spinoza) of a theological nature, that perhaps helps to explain why the early reception of Hegel in English from the 1850s takes Hegel so seriously as a theologian. Rosenkranz was also a critic of Schleiermacher - in which he follows Hegel (roughly speaking).

The volume concludes with Rosenkranz's reply to Haym (1858). The book is obviously the source of much that has since become commonplace in biographical writing on Hegel. Osmo discusses the biographical writings on Hegel of Jacques D'Hondt and the recent German work of Horst Althaus in this respect.

Here is the French review of Osmo's translation from *Le Figaro*:

"The translation of Karl Rosenkranz's book which today appears is an event. The author was chronologically the first biographer of Hegel. He followed the courses of the thinker [this appears not to be true] and knew him personally. It was at the request of Hegel's family that he wrote his book, published in 1844. Rosenkranz was a singular Hegelian, as Pierre Osmo shows in his excellent preface.

[The book] is the most serious witness of a contemporary of the thinker, neither an exalter nor a detractor. Certainly, he did not know everything and did not say all that he knew, but he keeps his distance with regard to the neo-hegelians who fratricidally attacked each other speedily after the death of the philosopher. Later, when the latter was no longer fashionable, he took up his defence in his *Defence of Hegel against Dr Haym*, who followed his biography.

This biography reminds us that Hegel was deeply religious, which we tend to forget nowadays. He never rejected his Protestant upbringing, which was not so gentle with the Catholics and the Jews. He thought that the Church and State were the two pillars of society. "Religion constitutes the most intimate unity of man, who comprehends everything under it." At the end of his life, Hegel wrote a work devoted to the proofs of God's existence. "It is the determination of God that is at the origin of the creative activity of the world" - of which the philosopher describes the history in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*."

"La traduction du livre de Karl Rosenkranz qui paraît aujourd'hui est un événement. L'auteur fut chronologiquement le premier biographe de Hegel. Il suivit les cours du penseur, le connut personnellement. C'est à la demande de la famille de Hegel qu'il rédigea son livre publié en 1844. Rosenkranz était un hégélien singulier, comme le montre Pierre Osmo dans son excellente préface. C'est le témoignage le plus sérieux d'un contemporain du penseur, ni chantre ni détracteur. Certes, il ne sait pas tout et ne dit pas

tout ce qu'il sait, mais il garde ses distances à l'égard des néohégéliens qui s'entre-tuent allégrement après la mort du philosophe. Plus tard, alors que ce dernier n'était plus à la mode, il prendra sa défense dans son *Apologie de Hegel contre le docteur Haym*, qui suit sa biographie... Cette biographie nous rappelle que Hegel était profondément religieux, ce que l'on a tendance à oublier aujourd'hui. Il n'avait jamais renié son éducation protestante, peu tendre avec les catholiques et les juifs. Il pensait que l'Eglise et l'Etat étaient les deux piliers de la société. «La religion constitue l'unité la plus intime de l'homme qui comprend tout sous elle.» A la fin de sa vie, Hegel écrivait un texte consacré aux preuves en faveur de l'existence de Dieu. «C'est la détermination de Dieu qui est à l'origine de l'activité créatrice du monde» dont le philosophe décrit l'histoire dans *La Phénoménologie de l'esprit...*»

Rosenkranz's Preface

Reading Karl Rosenkranz's book has taken me back to my own discovery of "philosophy" through Hegel, which was a magical experience for me - Rosenkranz breathes enthusiasm for the role of thought and scholarship in experience.

I've now read his preface three times and think I've got the gist of the complicated argument. There is a lot of material there, so I'll only comment on stuff that I think would be new to an English reader.

There is firstly some material on the French reception of Hegel. Apart from Victor Cousin, this was associated with Joseph Willm of Strasbourg, whose "Essay on the Philosophy of Hegel" (1836) Rosenkranz cites and who went on to write a four volume *History of Philosophy from Kant to Hegel* (1848-51) as well as work on education.

There follows a summary of Rosenkranz' approach to biography, where he says he wants to make his book the history of Hegel's thought, this being appropriate to a thinker whose outward life was uneventful and who so ceaselessly thought matters over throughout his life. I think RG Collingwood borrowed this remark for his *Autobiography*. Its full significance will hopefully come out in the course of the book.

Thirdly, and most interestingly, there is material on the philosophical possibilities of Rosenkranz' time, in which he sees the appropriation of Hegel as central. Rosenkranz states that post-Hegelian thought has fallen into extremes (Left and Right in politics, but the state is not the whole arena where this plays out). He characterises these as abstract ontology and (abstract) empiricism, with a similar opposition of abstract theory and abstract practice. He predicts that these extremes will fail to "verify themselves" in "concrete practice", but that is not the end of the Hegelian school, but maturity. (Oddly

(to me, but not to everyone) he identifies this with Spinoza, for whom "abstract knowledge of the Idea is the principle of practice".)

The examples he gives of the failing "extremes" are interesting. On abstract empiricism, he cites F A Trendelenberg (1802-72), author of *Logical Studies* (1840). We have discussed Trendelenberg before on this list and he was influential in the "personal idealist" critique of Hegel by A Seth (*Hegelianism and Personality*). Trendelenberg, says Rosenkranz, claims Hegel relies on "intuition" (Anschauung, presumably) but dissimulates the fact. As he separates thought and being and takes only intuition as the bridge (a version of common sense, I guess) his thought becomes dualist and fails to test itself in history. For Hegel though, thought and being are one (when "concrete").

"Abstract practice" is exemplified by Feuerbach, though he endorses his critique of Schelling. His abstractions are true, but in reality are limited by other determinations and thus are not applicable to reality. As an example, he cites their endorsement of "love", but indifference to its realisation in marriage.

He has less to say about "abstract ontology" and "abstract theory", but what he does say is key, for he says that the former involves the separation of logic and metaphysics (i.e. a dualism of thought and being). Their unity is a key initiative of Hegel's "Logic". The structure of the Logic has always puzzled me. It looks like the Doctrine of the Concept is simply a repetition from a subjective standpoint of the content of Being and Essence, but apparently Rosenkranz means to deny this. I will look forward to the rest of the book and see if his point becomes clearer to me.

In terms of "concrete practice" - the Hegelian alternative to all the above - Rosenkranz says that "A true philosophy is the act of a people" (p75). This seems to prefigure the trend towards nation-state nationalism in 19th century Europe rather than something that is prominent in Hegel, though it is there in him (Rosenkranz is writing only four years before the 1848 Springtime of nations, after all). He develops his point saying that a philosophy in another language may be true, but is "without weight", presumably because you have not put it into practice in your own community. I sometimes think it is a shame for Europe that no-one thought of the European Union in 1910, but at the same time, there is something to be said for enough "patriotism" (or public spirit) to get you out your front door and along to meetings. I will wait and see how this one pans out over the course of the book too.

Finally, Rosenkranz defends Hegel against the view that, having expressed some guarded sympathy with Voltaire, he really agreed with D'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*. In Rosenkranz' view, Hegel was a "Protestant", which he identifies with an absence of reliance on outside authority, which you might guess is a bit of an exaggeration, but there too, I will wait and see what he does with the thought before judging him.

The Preface is particularly rich in ideas (almost like the *Phenomenology*) and I could go on for some time summarising and reacting to it. However, I will hold my horses until the abstract initial

statement of the case outlined above is put in relation to the biographical facts.

"Hegels Leben", Book 1

Rosenkranz' *Life of Hegel*⁷ is organised into three "books" [KF: published as one book], the first covers the period up to his move to Jena around 1800, the second up to his move to Berlin around 1818 and the third the time in Berlin.

[KF: the chapters are not numbered in Rosenkranz's original edition].

Chapters 1 -6 - Hegel's Youth

Book 1 has 20 chapters, of very uneven length and the first six cover Hegel's youth until he left for Tübingen in 1788. Again, I will focus on stuff that I haven't seen in English biographies, though I have never read the longest, by H.S. Harris. Rosenkranz describes a "family album" on which he partly relies, in which family members would get people they knew to write comments. He describes Hegel's younger brother Karl and timid younger sister Christiane. Psychologically one might think that as the eldest son, Hegel would carry responsibilities and the expectations of his family, but that is conjecture on my part. Rosenkranz stresses that Hegel's father, a civil servant, was quite well connected in Stuttgart and thus that Hegel met some famous characters at the family home, from the court and politics.

For his very early life, Rosenkranz makes some fanciful interpretations, e.g. that Hegel's recognition of the Swabian dialect as distinctive indicates a dawn of self-consciousness, but we soon move on to firmer ground, as documentary evidence of Hegel's schooldays was available to Rosenkranz.

At school, Hegel read Cicero and Shakespeare ("The Merry Wives of Windsor"). He early comes to like history, taught in a manner like Hume and Voltaire and speaks of "the consolations of the sciences amidst the vicissitudes of life" (Chapter 3). The principles of the Enlightenment and study of the Greek and Roman classics were the marrow of teaching at the Gymnasium. He dislikes superstition", which he finds in Christianity as well as in the ancients. He goes on to read the Psalms, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Homer, etc. He thought the seriousness and serenity of the Greeks must be taken up by Christianity, but at the same time was no uncritical admirer of antiquity.

He also read modern reviews. He began to keep leaves of quotes and extracts of what he read, a habit he kept all his life. This seems to have functioned with him like a kind of commonplace book and is similar to the lecture note-taking encouraged in some models of university education. This reflected

⁷ https://hegel.net/rosenkranz/Rosenkranz1844-Hegels_Leben.pdf

an intellectual method of putting himself in others' shoes and this too stayed with him.

His declamation and public presentation were and remained poor. He did not repeat, but rethought material as he spoke. Rosenkranz notes that he wrote well though - and comments that only his depth of thought later stifled this.

On leaving school, he read out a remarkable speech on the quality of education at the Karlschule, praising his teachers, the Duke's support for education and contrasting this with Turkey - a speech also notable for its piety.

Rosenkranz thinks that Hegel's personality was settled by the time he left school and did not change thereafter. He was scholarly and scientific par excellence. He did not present himself as a philosopher, but rather you dealt with the whole person when you met him. He thought he controlled passion of card games said something about modernity. It strikes me that, despite Hegel's later interest in mathematics and the philosophy of nature, there is little record of the scientific input to his education.

Chapter 7 - Tübingen

Hegel attended the University of Tübingen (the Stift - meaning convent, charitable foundation) from the Autumn of 1788. His first year courses were Schnurrer's on the History of the Apostles and Psalms; on Psalms and Catholic Epistles by the same; and Flatt's on Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (nature of the Gods). He had already read some Cicero - the considerable Old Testament content of the course of study was news to me.

In his second year, he took the courses of Roesler on History of Philosophy and Flatt on Metaphysics and Natural Theology. Metaphysics would cover immortality of the soul, freedom of the will. Flatt (d1821) taught something of Wolff and Kant and was considered a penetrating critic of Kant with liberal views - Hegel already knew Wolff's Logic since age 14.

In his third year, he studied under Storr, firstly the Gospels, Romans and other letters and secondly Dogmatics. The atmosphere of the Stift owed much to the Enlightenment, but the content could be pedantic.

Of Hegel's own undergraduate work, we know that he preached on Isaiah 61.7-8 and Matthew 5.1-16. These turn out to be the Covenant with Israel and the Sermon on the Mount respectively. It is notable that in his own manuscript on the Life of Jesus, Hegel simply quotes the Sermon on the Mount, apparently unable to give the Kantian turn to it he previously succeeds in. Rosenkranz comments that other sermons are dry and moralistic interpretations of Christianity. This is a common feature

of sermonising in the Enlightenment era.

A further talk on advantages of reading Greek and Roman writers survives. He argues that we learn much about the customs of the Israelites and are a propaedeutic to philosophy, in that we find a "middle way" in which truth resides through the mutual contradictions of the ancient schools. He also studied some anatomy and botany.

All in all, what I find notable is that there was some considerable exposure to the Old Testament - which of course is not reflected in the *Phenomenology*. It may thus be that the idea of Lutheran Christianity as focussed on the promise of the Gospels seen out of context is overdone and anachronistic.

Chapter 8- Student Life

Hegel was remembered as jovial, joining in drinking sessions, rising early, playing cards, neglecting theology at first and reading at most some Kant. He also read Rousseau and liked the wild language of the book of Job (this in preference to Kant). He fell back a place among his students (these places were taken seriously) for his disorganised way of studying, then tried to catch up. He also practised English and apparently French. His manner led to the nickname "the old man" (Laurence Dickey has more to say on this). He admired a girl Augustine, along with several others, to little apparent effect.

On the French revolution, he and Schelling (several years his junior) planted a tree of liberty. Klopstock, Schiller, Kant and Jacobi all welcomed the French revolution at first, seeing it as an "authentically philosophical spectacle". There was a political club formed at the Stift. Soon an inquiry into it was set in motion by the authorities and some students left for Strasbourg. There was soon an émigré regiment stationed nearby and duels were fought. Hegel argued with his father about the latter's aristocratism, but he soon came to dislike phrases such as liberty, equality, rights of man, seeing them as "empty". This takes us up to around 1791, probably with some memories mixed in from a little later.

Chapter 9 - The Dissertation for a masters degree of 1790

This chapter discusses a dissertation that Rosenkranz attributes to Hegel, but which Osmo, the French translator, says was actually written by his tutor and only discussed by Hegel after two years at the Stift. It's of some interest anyway.

The dissertation is on 'the limits of human duty, abstraction made from the immortality of the

soul' and takes issue with Kant. The argument is that sensibility and reason are so interwoven as to be the basis of a single, unique [human] subject. Thus there is no *purely* moral action, but rather we can distinguish degrees of moral culture. The argument is that some sense of duty would survive, but on a scale from necessity, utility, perfection the highest would suffer most from absence of a belief in immortality and Divine Providence.

One can see from this that Hegel's critique of Kant's stoicism and historical approach to morality was not unique to him, but borrowed from the studies of his college days. Rosenkranz doesn't see this, as of course he thinks Hegel wrote it himself.

Chapter 10 - The Dissertation of 1793

This also concerns a document that, according to Osmo, was not written by Hegel. Unfortunately, he does not give his source for this view, but as the document itself seems to be of less interest I will pass over it.

Chapter 11 - Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling

In the family album referred to, Hölderlin wrote Goethe's words:

Desire and love are the wings
That give flight to great actions

and the 'hen kai pan' ('One and All') motto. Neither were bound by the worldview of the French *Lumières* (the secularising enlightenment in France), but were also drinking in the culture of Greece. In Hegel's case, this particularly meant Sophocles the tragedian. Soon, Hölderlin went on to Jena (near Weimer, where Goethe stayed). Here he heard Fichte, who had not yet been dismissed, and wrote to Hegel about him. Around this time, Hegel also read Plato, Kant and Jacobi.

Schelling was five years younger than Hegel and the son of a prelate His best days were thus ahead of him at this time.

[PS: I draw your attention to some valuable remarks made by Kai Froeb in response to the above on the <https://groups.io/g/hegel/topics> archive on 18 March 2009, now available here⁸]

⁸ [on-rosenkranz-hegel-biography.htm](https://groups.io/g/hegel/topics)