

BOOK REVIEW

THE 'ROUTLEDGE PHILOSOPHY GUIDEBOOK TO HEGEL AND THE *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*'—A BRIEF REVIEW

Tim Themí

Robert Stern, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*, London, Routledge, 2002, ISBN: 9780415217880.

It is true enough, one would think, that every philosopher, scholar, and intellectual alike—and regardless of their respective positions in fields as diverse as politics, aesthetics, and ontology—is probably best to engage with the thought of Hegel at some point; but this has notoriously proved no easy task to set underway. And the thing that can often strike one most who dares here for the first time is Hegel's *style*—his mode of revealing, of presentation, his way of saying that which he has to say—and this is too often confounded enough by the fact that Hegelians themselves would seem to take almost completely contrary positions on all manner of things. Sometimes this would even seem to hold true of Hegel himself.

And it is just here, with such difficulties kept firmly in mind, brought into relief and focus, that Robert Stern, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield, aims to take us with his new millennium guide-book on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—out across the way and through, into the open, and without too much tarry, with problems such as these 'contraries' *paving* the way even.

Thus Professor Stern begins his introductory text—one suitable I would think for all virgins of Hegel—with an introduction that seeks to ameliorate in advance the seemingly perturbing phenomena which impenetrable texts, and multiple interpretations can bring—observing in the field of Politics, for instance, that: 'Left Hegelians (such as Feuerbach, Marx and Engels) saw in Hegel a utopian vision of freedom, community, and the triumph of the human spirit, while right Hegelians saw in Hegel a theocratic

defence of the Prussian state, support for the status-quo of absolute monarchy, and a quietistic conservatism' (xi). Wow!

Further on, and Stern observes how Hegel has even been taken, often enough, and by his many readers, to be a kind of champion of both Reason *and* Romanticism, of both Christianity *and* Atheism; and what is more, as being both a Kantian *and* something wholly Other!

So just who is Hegel then? Can it not be considered a failure of his 'style' that such ostensibly contradictory positions have been simultaneously gleaned so historically from his texts? And with consequences of such significance, especially out to his nearest East.

The answer to this question of 'failure' due to style—for Stern, is—No; and emphatically so.

And in outlining why, Stern believes he can also teach us too the answer to the other question, to that of identity—to that of 'just who is Hegel?', and that of 'just what exactly *does* he stand for in his texts?'—because for Stern, these oppositions, this apparent arguing for both sides of a story, for both sides and indeed in a sense thus for none. And this in a prose that *is* as meandering as it is at times most brutally precise, and second to none in this respect—well, all this, Stern would tell us, is precisely what Hegel is made of, it *is* who he is; because Hegel, Stern would hold, is nothing other than a kind of *middle*. As he explains:

In what follows, I will attempt to make sense of this 'Hegelian middle', by showing how it is generally wrong to see Hegel as straight-forwardly occupying *either* one side *or* the other on many issues; rather, he is usually to be seen as attempting to undermine this opposition by showing that these two options form a false dichotomy, and that the best option lies in some sort of compromise between them (xiv).

Consequently, Stern would tell, that though it be true that Hegel criticises certain *aspects* of the Enlightenment and of Modernity, that still, it is rather rash in light of this, and foolish even, to simply label Hegel as an *anti*-Enlightenment or as a Conservative thinker respectively. In fact—and I don't think that Hegel is the only great figure to suffer from this sort of move—what one would be doing here by simply labelling Hegel in this way, and on the basis of certain critical perspectives he puts forward, is simply *reducing* Hegel down to only one of the many possible currents or tendencies in his work, down to only one of the many perspectives he might put forth on any particular philosophical or cultural position; and in effect, this is simply to reduce the whole river down to only one of its many tributaries, currents, or streams, to take a part for a whole, metonymously, when of course, Hegel's aim is always ostensive towards the ocean—and maybe even *absolutely*—if those wishing to talk about water are too not afraid to get more than just their feet a little wet!

For there is much to the many-sidedness of truth that can often get left behind in such simplifying moves—these manoeuvres of ours which are, too much, only truth's very covering over; as categories get trotted out as truisms after a while, as empty-

intentions, learnt by rote, as self-evident truths that nobody can remember the proofs for anymore—and what the Hegelian dialectic does here, perhaps, is deploy one of the most sophisticated attempts ever in history and since the great Plato-Socrates himself, to deal with this phenomenon. And what better place to see it in action, this owl's wing perennial in the philosopher's heart, this dialectic, emerging fledgling from the dusk, than in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Stern here, again offering himself as guide says: 'In the rest of the book, I therefore attempt to trace out Hegel's dialectical handling of a series of issues, as these are presented in the *Phenomenology*' (xv).

I think it is probably fair to say that the 'dialectic' is very much the essence of Stern's here secondary text—every major Chapter grouping contains it in its title—whether it's the 'Dialectic of the Subject' or the 'Dialectic of the Object', the 'The Dialectic of Reason' or the 'Dialectic of Religion'; not to mention of course the final chapter, 'Philosophy as Dialectic'. And this is what perhaps makes it such the worthwhile read, regardless of whether one sees oneself as 'Hegelian'—or *Not*—where this latter too one suspects to be one of the seemingly weighty oppositions that would soon be jettisoned, and at the very edges—two of the sharp prods of the dialectic, walking us the plank and in contrary motion, out into the very depths of the *whole* that Hegel's thought-in-itself *is* as one of the more definitive ways unto.

But Stern is hardly about to leave us all alone plunged straight into the deep-end here, imbuing thus his guide with about forty pages of what he describes as setting 'The Phenomenology in Context'—with forays into Hegel's life and times—and he clearly brings out what a fascinating epoch it must have been then to be alive; where all things were turning, where movement itself was even moving, and thought could be nothing else but a whirlwind for those so attuned in what they stand...

Where Stern himself then moves to situate the *Phenomenology* amidst Hegel's own trajectory—and this guide rarely misses a chance to take the leap forward into the *Logic*, Hegel's later opus—before finishing off this first chapter with a section dedicated to that famous *Preface*, the preface which many 'specialists' themselves seemed never quite to make it out of.

Nonetheless, though the Preface does not give much away concerning the content of the *Phenomenology*, and is certainly far from transparent and fully explicit, it is still highly relevant to Hegel's main theme which is that we must satisfy reason in our conception of the world, and further that philosophy as a speculative science can help reason find that satisfaction (30).

An imperative to be satisfying *reason* in our conception of the world?—and philosophy as a kind of *science* to help this process?—but this might be nothing like the kind of idea that one already has of Hegel, as hatched in the heads of the uninitiated, and particularly if one has had themselves the many pleasures of being yoked of spirit through the many annals of the 'English-speaking' University system—the system where Hegel is more the 'stock-ball' of trade of the Continental tradition, a tradition which can often seem not overly fond of the scientific condition—whilst the tradition that is, and some would argue perhaps too much, the Anglo-American or Analytic tradition, is often found to be

very fond of science, but not too much of Hegel!—A most fascinating dialectic indeed, especially for the undergraduate, who can always learn much by watching the ‘grown-ups’ fight.

However, as Stern reports, Hegel goes further here in the direction of rigour, to offer scorn even for that thinking he takes to be merely of ‘mystical’ ilk, and scorn enough too for those who would completely attempt to abandon ‘reason’ and *actual* knowing altogether for mere ‘faith’, the ‘esoteric’, and sheer ‘edification’. But it’s those such as Schelling, Stern informs us, that Hegel is explicitly gunning for here; to which I would add that this is an enduringly useful debate to keep in mind, and through the moments of every time. And then, tempting now the void for the first time, Stern proceeds next to offer some of what he aptly refers to as Hegel’s ‘most notoriously dark sayings’ (32).

Here is one from the *preface* that once struck me so profoundly, and to the core, not least because it first got caught in my ‘eye’ as included all so neatly indented beneath a chapter heading by one very surrealist writer in the form of Georges Bataille, in that very strange, uncanny, and possibly brilliant little text of his entitled *Eroticism*. And it went:

Death is the most terrible thing of all, and the greatest strength is demanded to keep death’s work going.¹

I won’t try to clutter up anyone’s own, nascent forming dialectic here with too many preliminary, cursorily improvised interpretations of my own; but rather, knowing something of the fact that even silences have their meanings, move quickly instead into the concluding moments of this text of Stern’s, where he proclaims—and taking the historical sense this time—that certain things are not quite *dead* as yet:

...for, as has so often happened with Hegel, despite the repeated suggestion that his time has irrevocably past (by Marxist materialists, by post-modernists, or by analytic philosophers, for example), he has repeatedly returned to speak to us once again, in ways that were previously unimagined (201).

For through the silence even the dead can speak, and maybe it’s because they didn’t even know they were dead: maybe even Deleuze’s now famous 1962 attempt to ‘take-out’ the Hegelian dialectic once and for all, to blow it completely out of the water—or at least out of the French Channel—could even perhaps be read as a kind of dialectic itself²,—one this time, however, which only takes instead the ‘dialectic’ itself to be the very *object* for further dialectics. It’s simple, just interpret the dialectic, then oppose it as best one can, and then... what? ... Synthesise? Compromise? But what if we think we have opposed so well that what we have discovered is something wholly and completely Other?—This is perhaps altogether a different kind of problem, though one that would still linger long for us today. Everything hinges on the role we assigned to the negative, and

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶ 32 of the ‘Preface’; and taken from – Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 265.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983.

It seems likely, therefore, that as long as Hegel's problems remain our problems, it is to the living present rather than the dead past that the *Phenomenology* will continue to belong (201).

And t/here *endeth* the speculation—Enjoy!

'We can learn from Hegel, even if what we Learn is not everything he actually taught' (199).