

BOOK REVIEW

A MODEL OF PEDAGOGY, BUT IS IT HEGEL?

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Frederick Beiser, *Hegel*, New York, Routledge, 2005, ISBN: 0415312086.

Fluently and lucidly written, Frederick Beiser's *Hegel* offers students an introductory overview and explication of the philosophical thought of G. W. F. Hegel. Beginning with a brief discussion of the cultural and philosophical milieu in which the young Hegel was immersed, the book then moves in turn through each of the major themes and areas of Hegel's philosophical system. Beiser provides an eminently readable account, balancing a philosophical and epistemological discussion, synthesising the most recent directions of scholarship on Hegel, with a simultaneous effort at a historicist description, providing sufficient contextual information to firmly situate Hegel within his cultural, historical and philosophical surroundings. The overall style is predominantly pedagogical: it is a book consciously directed at and produced for students. It is first and foremost a contribution to the burgeoning body of the literary genre of the 'Introduction'. In this regard, the tone and manner of writing is one of the greatest strengths of the book; even a philosopher such as Hegel, renowned for the tortuous obscurity of his prose, is brought within the comprehension of the student.

Beiser seeks to contextualise Hegel's philosophy, adopting a historicist hermeneutical method. He attempts to both individuate Hegel by demonstrating which features of his thought were particular to him and to place him within his generation by showing which elements were the common preoccupations of his contemporary generation. Here Beiser does an admirable job, displaying a thorough familiarity with the complex world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century German milieu. His contention that Hegel's absolute idealism, his philosophical attempt to achieve a synthesis of Fichte's idealism and Spinoza's naturalism, was not original and unique to him but a part of the legacy of early romanticism is forcefully and persuasively argued within the first two chapters concerning Hegel's early years and cultural context. Here Beiser draws upon

some of the most recent scholarship on the German romantic generation, in particular the work of Dieter Heinrich and Michael Franz. Indeed, the book is probably best read in conjunction with Beiser's other writings on the thought and literature of the period, in particular his *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, in order to gain a fuller appreciation of the case he makes for his historical understanding of Hegel.

Central to Beiser's study is his claim that metaphysics is the central and irreducible foundation of Hegel's philosophy; that 'to understand Hegel in his individuality and integrity demands first and foremost restoring metaphysics to its central role in his thinking'. To this effect, his discussion of Hegel's absolute idealism, his organic worldview and his philosophical engagement with Christianity are structured within a broader analysis of Hegel's constant emphasis on metaphysics as the 'root of the tree of knowledge'. Here Beiser argues against some of the recent work of Robert Pippin and Paul Redding, who seek to reduce or redefine the centrality of metaphysics in Hegel's work. His own interpretation is well argued, advancing a subtle redefinition of metaphysics itself and linking this to currents of thought present in German romanticism, in particular in the work of Spinoza and Schelling.

The overall method of the book is to proceed by 'theme', elaborating each in turn, rather than by the study and exegesis of Hegel's individual philosophical works. Analyses of 'themes', such as 'The Dialectic' or 'Hegel's theory of the State', are grouped within broader sections that encompass discussions of 'Metaphysics' or 'Epistemological Foundations'. While this method contributes greatly to the overall clarity of the text, the juxtaposition of quotations from different texts, often within the same paragraph, could be described as somewhat contentious. It can, at times, have the effect of eliding some of the difficulties of interpretation, by reducing the inherent complexities and inconsistencies within the Hegelian oeuvre and replacing this with a unified figure of 'Hegel'. Yet the overall effect of such a strategy is to render Hegel's philosophical endeavours marvellously transparent. Chapters on the dialectical method and the intricacies of Hegel's conception and methodology of metaphysics, in particular, are models of pedagogical explication. The rather more detailed commentary on the Lordship and Bondage section of the *Phenomenology*, placed within the chapter concerned with Hegel's broader propositions concerning solipsism and intersubjectivity, provides the necessary level of detailed textual analysis for the development of an engagement and familiarity with this crucial cornerstone of Hegel's philosophy. Throughout, the book offers enough synthesis to provide a sufficiently unified interpretation as to be readable while carefully and studiously avoiding precluding further possibilities of discussion and reflection.

It is this tone of calm pedagogy that pervades the book and makes it so eminently comprehensible that also contributes to some of the volume's stranger generic features. By providing such a model of measured discussion and exegesis the book also displays a curiously flattening or levelling effect that at times causes it to gloss over contradictions and iron out complexity; there is an exclusion of the incommensurable. Philosophical

moments, movements and fundamental disputes are contained and somewhat domesticated within the introductory and pedagogical tone; the clash of controversy in one of the modern world's formative periods becomes a polite and muted roar. To somewhat overstate the case, there is a peculiar lack of a sense of consequence, as if these things can be studied at a remove and none of it really matters.

There is unquestionably a large and growing marketplace for books of this type, as students avidly consume texts that enable them to engage with a wide and ever-expanding range of philosophical approaches. The genre certainly possesses a commendable stress on correctness, on getting things right. This emphasis does perhaps militate against the more idiosyncratic responses that might be inspired by a direct and unmediated engagement with the philosophical works themselves. The production of books dedicated to introducing students to the systems and theories of philosophers may be necessary, it may even be laudable, it will certainly facilitate the production of people with degrees in philosophy, yet it does raise interesting questions regarding the relationship between philosophy and commentary, between pedagogy and philosophical practice. Still, in an age of global scholarship, where there is so much to be read, there is perhaps not time to read Hegel, so; one must read a brief exegesis.

One area where this reviewer was disappointed with the book is the epilogue concerning the 'Rise and Fall of the Hegelian School'. At a mere seven pages, and concluding its historical account in the 1840's, it fails to convey an appreciation of the continuing importance of Hegel during the nineteenth century. The premise briefly advanced in the introduction that 'virtually every major philosophical movement of the twentieth century...grew out of a reaction against Hegel', is left tantalisingly unexplored. Obviously considerations of space are ever present in a book of this type, and the historically contextual interpretation of Hegel adopted by Beiser works against a broader consideration of philosophical currents and controversy, yet even a slightly larger overview of the Hegelian legacy and some reflection on the 'Hegelian revival' of the 1970s and 1980s would have been a very welcome addition to the corpus of literature.

The major failure of the book, at least in my view, is in neglecting to provide sufficient reason why Hegel should be read: why he should be considered important, or exciting, or valuable. This may well be a minor quibble: someone who has decided to read an introduction to Hegel's philosophical work could safely be assumed to have decided this for themselves previously to reading the work. But it could have been a worthy contribution, at least in this reviewer's opinion, for one of the world's foremost Hegelian scholars to offer a more expansive viewpoint on why Hegel should be read. The book's introductory pages, which advance the contention that Hegel 'was influential and important', and conclude that Hegel 'remains an interesting interlocutor to contemporary philosophical discussions' seems to be a little safe in their assertions. Perhaps an elucidation of the reasoning behind a more forthright statement such as Beiser's own from his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, 'if the modern philosopher wants to know the roots of his own position, sooner or later he will have to

turn to Hegel, would have been a more impressive contribution.

On the whole, it is difficult to disagree with the idea that this book will indeed do what it sets out to do. It performs its function very well; a thoughtful and well chosen bibliography, selected particularly with the student in mind, testifies to the success of its pedagogical intentions. It may be possible to engage in an examination of the value, functions and narrative strategies of the field of the philosophical introduction, but this book remains an excellent example of the genre. The objections and concerns raised in this review, when considered in light of the overall quality of the text, are minor quibbles and reflections on what is undoubtedly an exemplary achievement. The book is overall a well-written, comprehensive and lucid text that offers the student an admirable introduction the thought of Hegel.