

## Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit

Report of the eighth biennial meeting  
of the Hegel Society of America, 4–6 October 1984

THE eighth biennial meeting of the Hegel Society of America took place on the Albany Campus of the Russell Sage College. Albany is the capital of New York State and provided most pleasant surroundings for the meeting. The topic under discussion during the course of the three day conference was Hegel's *Philosophy of the Spirit*.

Eight papers were given in all, with a nice balance between papers dealing with particular aspects of Hegel's system and those devoted to his system as a whole. The conference opened with an illuminating discussion by Robert B. Williams (Hiram College) of 'Hegel's concept of *Geist*'. Williams outlined three possible interpretations of the concept:

- 1 as a more systematic reading of Kant's and Fichte's transcendental ego,
- 2 as an onto-theological world view,
- 3 as a socially interactive world view.

Without wholly rejecting the first two interpretations Williams gave most attention to the third view. Drawing on the writings of contemporary German philosophers, such as Ludwig Siep, M. Theunissen and J. Habermas, Williams sought to show that the community concept of *Geist* ('we' instead of 'I') shed a great deal of light on Hegel's system. *Geist* for Williams is essentially a mediative concept which draws together the extremes of subject and object without either sundering them or cancelling them. Richard Winfield (University of Georgia), in his discussion paper, largely accepted Williams's interpretation, but warned against isolating the intersubjective concept of *Geist* as an abstract truth, since part of Hegel's objective in developing his concept of *Geist* is to show that no knowledge can be absolutely grounded.

In the following paper Eric van der Luft (Villanova University) gave an intriguing account of the 'Birth of spirit for Hegel out of the travesty of medicine'. Von der Luft's reflections on the birth of spirit arose from an analysis of Hegel's account of phrenology in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. On the surface the topic dealing with the relation between the physical features of the skull and an individual's personality is an odd one to appear in a major philosophical work. But Hegel's object in dealing with it was to refute the currently fashionable conception that there was a link between a person's being – his soul – and his physical make-up. In one sense an individual's face is an expression of his personality; however, in another respect the face is no more than outward, dead form. Hegel indeed ridicules phrenology for reducing spirit to a 'dead bone'. Van der Luft found this section of the *Phenomenology* not only instructive in understanding Hegel's idealism but also indicative of Hegel's hierarchical view of natural science – of which medicine is the highest discipline. The paper's discussant

was Quentin Lauer (Fordham University) who agreed fully with van der Luft that the *reduction* which Hegel detected in phrenology was absurd.

The third paper 'From Jena to Heidelberg: two views of recognition' was given by Leo Rauch (Babson College). Rauch argued that 'being recognized' is one of the most basic categories of Hegel's social ontology. However, he suggested that there are marked discrepancies between the accounts of recognition in the Jena *Geistesphilosophie* and the Heidelberg *Encyclopaedia*. Rauch also brought into his discussion the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* account of recognition which he suggested was a good deal nearer to the *Encyclopaedia* account than that given in the 1806 Jena lectures. In the lectures the struggle for recognition is not used, as it is in the *Phenomenology* and the *Encyclopaedia*, to explain the formation of society, but to show how such a struggle presupposes society's existence. Thus the priority given to the struggle for recognition in the later writings is different, and not present also in the later writings is the stress that Hegel places on labour in enhancing mutual recognition. Social synthesis in the Jena lectures is achieved through love, whereas in the *Encyclopaedia* it is achieved through the struggle for recognition being taken to a conclusion. Rauch's apparent preference for the earlier version of the struggle for recognition was taken to task by Samuel Assefa (Williams College) in his commentary because it systematically underplayed the role of conflict in Hegel's system. Assefa linked the struggle for recognition with the birth of freedom which was necessarily a conflictual, dialectical process.

Through a contrast and comparison with Aristotle's position John Sallis (Loyola University), in his paper on 'Imagination and presentation', sought to show that the preference Hegel gives to reason over imagination might be misleading. Following closely Hegel's account of *Vorstellung* and the imagination in the *Encyclopaedia*, vol. III, Sallis suggested that even in Hegel's own terms there was a transcendent quality to the imagination. Daniel J. Cook's (Brooklyn College) discussion paper, however, wisely drew our attention to the lowly position of imagination in Hegel's system. In the *Encyclopaedia* imagination gives way to memory.

In an imaginative paper on 'Natural Life and Subjectivity' Murray Greene (City University of New York) also sought to draw a contrast between Hegel's system and classical philosophy. Greene was particularly concerned with the contrast between the synthesis sought in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy in 'noetic living' and the synthesis sought by Hegel in the concept of spirit. For Plato and Aristotle the contemplative life was the highest form of life because of the philosopher's ability to comprehend the harmony between man and nature. Because of the rise of individuality in the modern era this synthesis was not available to Hegel. Subjectivity now necessarily appears at odds with natural life. None the less Hegel tries to recover the harmony in Greek life through his conception of the individual as a 'negative unity' which both externalizes himself in natural existence and returns to himself in philosophy. John McCumber's (Northwestern University) commentary made the point that thought and reality are in fact closer or more aligned to each other in

Hegel's philosophy than in Plato and Aristotle. In his view, Hegel took the diversity and complexity of nature more seriously.

Harry Brod of the University of Southern California next addressed the conference on the topic of 'The *Spirit* of Hegelian politics: public opinion and legislative debate from Hegel to Habermas'. Brod stressed the modernity of Hegel's approach to politics and, in particular, Hegel's desire to see the authority of the state legitimized through public debate. Hegel's project he thought in this respect similar to that of Habermas, especially the position Habermas develops in his earlier work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Hegel takes seriously the enlightenment view that the citizen should be encouraged to develop his confidence in his own opinions, provided those opinions are grounded in knowledge. However, as Florindo Volpacchio (Columbia University) pointed out in his commentary on the paper, Hegel's attitude to public opinion was two-edged. Hegel thought it deserved 'to be as much respected as despised' (*Philosophy of Right*, §318). Hegel believed the concern of the public for welfare of the whole should be encouraged, but he was not confident that the public itself had the answers to the problems of the state. In this respect Habermas's project is more open than Hegel's, since Habermas suggests that if truth lies anywhere in public affairs it lies on the side of enlightened opinion.

Merold Westphal (Hope College) gave the conference's presidential address, 'Hegel on the religious foundation of the state'. Westphal's paper was more a Hegelian paper rather than a paper on Hegel. He employed Hegelian categories and concepts to analyse recent development in American and Western politics. In particular Westphal employed Hegel's view of the relation of religion and politics to criticise the United States' moral majority movement which sought to underpin state action with religious precepts. This was not the way to view the relation between religion and the state. From the Hegelian viewpoint the two should, of course, be in harmony, but this should be derived not from the subordination of the one to the other, but through each recognizing the other's legitimate sphere. Westphal, controversially, believed that a gradualist, reformist politics could be derived from Hegel's practical philosophy which aimed at organic evolution towards a more peaceful world. In a wide-ranging paper Westphal also expressed concern that Hegel's essentially Protestant philosophy might prove too sectarian to achieve the harmony essential for world peace.

In the seventh session of the conference William Desmond (Loyola University) gave a clear account of 'Art as "aesthetic" and as "religious" in Hegel's philosophy of absolute spirit'. Desmond pointed to an apparent paradox in Hegel's approach to art in that Hegel sees the 'truth' of art transcended by higher forms of spirit yet, none the less, includes art within the form of absolute spirit. Desmond sought to reconcile these two views through a detailed analysis of Hegel's account of the various forms of art. Hegel sees modern art as confirming the creative powers of man: in the artistic object man recognizes his universal features and capabilities. Art shares this interest in the universal characteristics of man with religion. The discussant, Donald P. Verene

(Emory University) further stressed the complementarity of religion, art and philosophy in Hegel's system. All three worked towards the liberation of absolute consciousness. Both Desmond's and Verenc's accounts left one wondering: why then Hegel had broken with Schelling's view of art as the absolute?

The final paper of the conference on 'Speculation and theonomy at the close of Hegel's system' was given by Martin DeNys (George Mason University). DeNys brought out the important role which Hegel believed negativity to play in the Christian religion. Hegel sees Christianity as picturing the limited and dependent position of the individual and then overcoming this alienation through the image of the unification of the human with the divine. But for Hegel, DeNys argued, religious consciousness does not represent full self-consciousness because the main categories of religion come to the individual not as his own but in the form of a creed. Only philosophy can retrieve the full speculative worth of religion. L. Dupré (Yale University) in his commentary further stressed this aspect of Hegel's philosophy. Whereas Desmond's paper had sought to see all the forms of absolute spirit (art, religion and philosophy) as equivalent, Dupré argued that religion represented a less complete conceptualisation of the role of spirit. *Geist*, in Dupré's view, should be seen as a continuous process of transcendence.

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## HSGB Council Meeting

A MEETING of the HSGB Council was held in Pembroke College, Oxford on 29 November 1984. The principal matter discussed was how to improve the appearance of the *Bulletin* by the use of clearer type and better printing technique. The financial situation of the Society according to the Treasurer allows extra expenditure for the purpose. The meeting also discussed ways to cope with the growing number of Hegel books sent to the Editor. Greater use of short 'book notes' to review less valuable books or those of less central concern to the *Bulletin* readers, and a new section 'books received' were suggested. Robert Bernasconi of The Philosophy Dept., Essex University, has agreed to help with future issues as Assistant Editor.