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Introduction: The Puzzling Hegel Renaissance

No one who looks at the bibliography to this new edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* will be unimpressed by the remarkable growth of interest in Hegel. The bibliography covers only the last fifteen years – roughly those since the appearance of the first edition of this book – and it deals with books in English alone. To prevent it from ballooning to twice, thrice, or four times its size, the editor had to exclude French, German, and Italian books on Hegel. Such a surge in interest is remarkable for any philosopher, but especially for one who, some fifty years earlier, would have been treated as a pariah.

How do we explain the great contemporary interest in Hegel? It is necessary to admit that it is rather puzzling. After the rise of analytic philosophy in the 1920s, and due to the growing influence of positivism in the 1930s, Hegel's reputation fell into steep decline in Britain. The patron saint of British Idealism had become the ogre of positivism and the very model of how *not* to do philosophy. Hegel's fortunes began to change in the 1960s as the result of the growth of interest in Marxism. For the student rebellion and trade union movements of the 1960s, Marx became the guiding spirit; but the Marx that inspired them was not so much the mature Marx of *Das Kapital* but the early Marx of the 1844 Paris manuscripts. The concepts and terminology of the early Marx – "alienation," "self-consciousness," "mediation" – made Marx's debts to his great forbear obvious. It was clear that one could understand the precise meaning of these important but strange concepts only if one made an intensive study of Hegel, who had not been studied in Britain since the early 1900s. Although Marx claimed that he broke with Hegel – that he stood Hegel on his head – it was obvious that one could appreciate this only with a good grasp of Hegel. And so Hegel was once again on the agenda, someone worth studying, talking, and writing about, even if he was treated only as a footstool for Marx. Not surprisingly, the study of Hegel was mainly focused on his more social and political works, especially the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Philosophy*

of Right, and *Philosophy of World History*.[1] No one bothered with the study of Hegel's system as a whole, still less any of its integral parts: the *Philosophy of Nature*, *Philosophy of Spirit*, and, least of all, the *Science of Logic*.

Yet, what is so puzzling about the contemporary interest in Hegel is how much it has outlived the original source of its inspiration. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Marxism has suffered – for better or worse – a steep decline in prestige. But as Marx's star fell, Hegel's only rose. Somehow, the servant to Marx became a master in his own right. Now every aspect of his philosophy became of interest. Hegel was restored to the pantheon of great philosophers, taking his place alongside Leibniz and Kant.

So our original question returns: Why the contemporary interest in Hegel? How has it managed to outlive its initial debt to Marxism? The mystery only deepens when we consider the subsequent course of the Hegel renaissance. The apex of the Anglophone Hegel revival was the publication in 1975 of Charles Taylor's *Hegel*.[2] With grace, precision, and remarkable erudition, Taylor surveyed the depth and breadth of Hegel's entire system and showed it to be an edifice of great intellectual subtlety and sophistication. Unlike earlier scholars, Taylor did not limit himself to Hegel's social and political thought; he treated every aspect of Hegel's system and examined in depth its central core and foundation: its metaphysics. The central theme of that metaphysics, Taylor argued, was the concept of self-positing spirit. What held every part of the system together, what made it into a unified whole, was the idea of an absolute spirit that posits itself in and through history and nature. Because of its remarkable clarity, Taylor's book proved to be a great success, going through several editions and translations. Yet, it is difficult to understand how Taylor's book could lead to a growth in interest in Hegel. The idea of self-positing spirit, which Taylor made the very heart of Hegel's philosophy, is so speculative, so metaphysical,

[1] The chief monographs were Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972); G. D. O'Brian, *Hegel on Reason and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); B. T. Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Bernard Cullen, *Hegel's Social and Political Thought* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1979); and Raymond Plant, *Hegel* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1971). Also much discussed in the 1970s were George Armstrong Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History: Sources of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univerity Press, 1969), John Plamenatz's two chapters on Hegel in *Man and Society* (London: Longman, 1963), II, pp. 129–268; and Z. A. Pelczynski's substantial "Introduction" to *Hegel's Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 5–137.

[2] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

and so religious that it is hard to understand how it could convince modern readers of Hegel's intellectual merits. These readers had been raised in a much more secular and skeptical age, in a philosophical culture suffused with positivism, and so the idea of a self-positing spirit proved very problematic. When Taylor's book appeared, the academic establishment in Britain and the United States was already dominated by analytic philosophy, which never had much time for metaphysics. So, ironically, given the emphasis it placed on Hegel's metaphysics, and given the anti-metaphysical atmosphere in Anglophone academia, Taylor's book was more likely to bury than revive Hegel. Yet, interest in Hegel only grew. Why?

For all its merits, this had little to do, I believe, with Taylor's book. Instead, it had much more to do with the fact that scholars began to ignore or underplay that aspect of Hegel's philosophy that Taylor had placed center stage: metaphysics. Some scholars fully admitted the metaphysical dimension of Hegel's philosophy; nevertheless, they insisted it is not important for every aspect of his philosophy, especially his social and political thought. Since the early 1960s, many scholars of Hegel's social and political thought claimed that it could be understood without his metaphysics.[3] Hegel was appreciated for his critique of liberalism, his conception of freedom, and his theory of the state, all of which seemed to have point and meaning independent of the rest of his system. To see value in Hegel's critique of social atomism or contract theory, for example, one did not have to accept his theory of self-positing spirit. Other scholars, however, began to question the metaphysical

[3] The first of these scholars was Z. A. Pelczynski in "An Introductory Essay" to his edition of *Hegel's Political Writings*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). Since then, many other scholars have followed his lead and the nonmetaphysical approach has been the dominant one in the interpretation of Hegel's social and political thought. See Steven Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. xi; Allen Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 4–6; Mark Tunick, *Hegel's Political Phiosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 14, 17, 86, 99; Michael Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 8; and Alan Patten, *Hegel's Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 16–27; Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 83–84, 126, 135–136, 140, 151–152, 360–361; John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 330. For some recent protests against this approach, see Yirmiahu Yovel, "Hegel's Dictum that the Rational is the Actual and the Actual is the Rational," in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. by Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 26–41; and Adrian Peperzak, *Modern Freedom: Hegel's Legal, Moral and Political Phiosophy* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 2001), pp. 5–19.

interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, claiming that his entire system is best understood apart from, or even as a reaction against, traditional metaphysics. Taylor's interpretation was rejected because it seemed to make Hegel's thought much too metaphysical. Since the 1970s there have been at least three kinds of nonmetaphysical interpretations. First among them was the *category theory* of Klaus Hartmann and his school.[4] According to Hartmann, Hegel's philosophy is not speculation about mysterious entities, such as the absolute or spirit, but an attempt to develop a system of categories, the most basic concepts by which we think about the world. It is only in a metaphorical sense that Hegel's *Science of Logic* is about "the essence of God before the creation of the world"; in the proper literal sense it is only about the structure of our most basic concepts, those necessary to think about being as such. Another nonmetaphysical interpretation was that developed by Robert Pippin in his *Hegel's Idealism*.[5] Pippin places Hegel's idealism essentially in the Kantian tradition, as a theory about the necessary conditions of possible experience. The subject that is at the heart of Hegel's idealism lies not in any conception of a self-positing spirit but in Kant's unity of *apperception*, the principle that self-consciousness is a necessary condition for all experience. Yet another nonmetaphysical approach has been worked out more recently by Robert Brandom.[6] "The master idea that animates and structures Hegel's metaphysics and logic," Brandom writes, is "his way of working out the Kant–Rousseau insight about a fundamental kind of normativity based on autonomy according to the model of reciprocal authority and responsibility whose paradigm is mutual recognition."[7] Brandom sees Hegel as fundamentally a theorist about the normative dimension of life, experience, and discourse, and claims that all his talk about spirit has to be understood in terms of the mutual recognition implicit in such norms.

So we now have something of an explanation for our mystery, for why the Hegel revival survived the decline of Marxism and Taylor's metaphysical interpretation. Interest in Hegel endured because the most difficult and troubling aspect of his philosophy – his metaphysics – was either ignored or read out of his system. The nonmetaphysical readings

[4] See Klaus Hartmann, "Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View," in *Hegel*, ed. by A. MacIntyre. New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 101–124. See also the anthology of his students, *Hegel Reconsidered*, ed. by Terry Pinkard (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1994).

[5] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[6] Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[7] Ibid, p. 234.

of Hegel have been acts of enormous interpretative charity: they have interpreted Hegel in a way to make him acceptable to the standards of a more secular and positivistic age. They have worked so well because they have made Hegel conform to the image of what we think a philosopher should be.

Yet, despite their success, these interpretations have not been able to suppress a nagging doubt: Are we interested in Hegel only because we have made him reflect *our* interests? Do we find him acceptable now only because we have re-created him in our image? If that is so, it leaves us with an even more troubling question: Is the Hegel revival perhaps a mistake? Are we interested in Hegel only because we have a false image of him?

Although the nonmetaphysical interpretations are interesting and illuminating, they have never succeeded in convincing many Hegel scholars. The problem is that the metaphysical dimension of Hegel's thought has proven stubbornly irreducible. When push comes to shove, all those who advocate a nonmetaphysical reading have to admit that they have not revived the real historical Hegel but only some aspect of him that reflects our own contemporary interests and values. One respect where the nonmetaphysical interpretations are especially problematic concerns the religious dimension of Hegel's thought. There can be no doubt that, ever since his Frankfurt years, a crucial part of Hegel's program was to demonstrate the fundamental truths of Christianity.[8] We have to take Hegel at his word when he tells us in his lectures on the philosophy of religion that God is the alpha and omega, the end and centerpoint of philosophy.[9] Of course, Hegel's God is not the theistic God of orthodox Christianity, and still less the deistic God of the eighteenth-century philosophers. Nevertheless, whatever the precise nature of his God, he still answered to the general concept of the infinite or absolute, and still complied with the St. Anselms classical definition of God as "*id quo nihil maius cogitari possit*" (that of which nothing greater can be conceived). We cannot explain away the Hegelian absolute in terms of the completeness of a system of categories, the subject of the Kantian unity of apperception, or the structure of mutual recognition involved in norms. For all these interpretations give us only one half of the Hegelian equation: the manner in which we *think* about the universe; they do not give us the other half: the universe itself. The

[8] See my *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 124–152.

[9] See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel (Franfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), XVI, 28, 32–33, 94. For the role of religion in Hegel's philosophy, see the article by Peter Hodgson in Chapter 9 in this volume.

Hegelian absolute was always meant to be the universe as a whole, the identity of subject and object, not only how we think about the world but the world itself.

Another respect in which the nonmetaphysical interpretations have proven problematic is with regard to Hegel's *Naturphilosophie*. This was an integral part of Hegel's system, indeed, its very heart and center, the middle part of the three-part *Encyclopedia of philosophical Sciences*. But its very large presence has always been an embarrassment for his nonmetaphysical expositors. In his *Naturphilosophie*, Hegel speculates about the nature of the living and material universe, and he employs an a priori methodology very unlike the method of observation and experiment of contemporary natural science. Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* is explicitly and emphatically a metaphysics. It is implausible to interpret it as only a system of categories, for Hegel is patently and explicitly attempting to tell us about nature itself, not only how we should think about it or the normative structure for discourse about it. In sum, Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* scarcely fits into the modern conception of natural science, and it is far removed from any contemporary conception of what philosophy should be. Yet there it is, in the very heart of his system, all 538 pages of it in the *Werkausgabe* edition.

It might now seem as if the Hegel revival has been indeed a mistake. The premise behind that revival is that Hegel has something interesting to say to us now from the standpoint of our own philosophical culture, that he can somehow address our philosophical concerns in the early twenty-first century. But the more we examine the real historical Hegel, the more we can say that his chief interests and goals were far removed from our own. For Hegel was first and foremost a metaphysician, someone intent on proving the existence of God, someone eager to establish a priori the first principles of *Naturphilosophie*. Nothing better, it seems, shows him to be a typical early nineteenth-century thinker. So, unless we are interested in the nineteenth century for its own sake, it would seem we have no reason to study Hegel. A contemporary philosopher has no more reason to study Hegel, it would seem, than he has reason to study Napoleon's strategy at the battle of Jena or the costume of the early romantic age.

At this point Hegel scholarship confronts a dilemma. If our scholarship is historically accurate, we confront a Hegel with profound metaphysical concerns alien to the spirit of contemporary philosophical culture, which mistrusts metaphysics. But if we continue to interpret Hegel in a nonmetaphysical manner, we have to accept that our interpretation is more a construction of our contemporary interests than the

real historical school. This is just one version of the classical dilemma that plagues all history of philosophy: that between anachronism and antiquarianism. The more we interpret historical figures from *our* standpoint and according to our interests, the more we commit anachronism, imposing the present upon the past; but the more we interpret them from *their* standpoint, the more we engage in antiquarianism, as if any historical facts were interesting for their own sake.

Is this dilemma inescapable? It is not so in principle. We can imagine a more religious, less positivistic culture for which the original Hegelian program would be an inspiration. For this culture, the more it delves into the real historical Hegel, the more its philosophical interest grows, because the past very much reflects its own interests. Such, indeed, was the scenario behind the Hegel renaissance in England and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hegel was then much more popular and pervasive than he is today;[10] indeed, it is only when we realize this that we can understand the deep aversion to Hegel that has persisted in English philosophy for decades; that aversion was the product of a profound reaction. Since that culture was much more religious than our own, philosophers had a much less anachronistic and antiquarian interest in the real historical Hegel. For thinkers in this epoch were still troubled by the conflict between reason and faith, the very conflict that had once troubled Hegel himself. The problem for the Hegel revival, of course, is that our culture is no longer so religious. For our own more secular, scientific, and skeptical age, the dilemma does appear utterly inescapable.

We might think that the dilemma is escapable after all if we resort to a strategy often used by some scholars.[11] Although they admit that their nonmetaphysical interpretation does not conform exactly to the "letter" or appear in the texts of Hegel, they still claim that it represents his "spirit" or intention. It is as if their interpretation were what Hegel really meant to say after all, even if he never did say it *expressis verbis*. If we talk about what Hegel "really meant" or what he "intended to say," it seems as if we get around the gulf between the real historical Hegel and our contemporary philosophical interests. But this strategy engages in a form of self-deception. It conflates the factual with the normative,

[10] To get a sense of just how popular Hegel was in late nineteenth century Britain, see William James 1908 Hibbert Lectures *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans & Green, 1909), pp. 52–54.

[11] For more on this strategy and those who employ it, see my "Dark Days: Anglophone Scholarship since the 1960s," in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Espen Hammer (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 77–80.

what Hegel really did say with what we think he *ought to have said* if he were reasonable like us. Ultimately, we have to admit: it is a hypostasis of our own contemporary philosophical interests that has little to do with actual historical reality.

While the dilemma between antiquarianism and anachronism does seem inescapable, at least for our nonmetaphysical age, it does not follow that the Hegel revival is a mistake. It will be a mistake only if we continue to delude ourselves, that is, to assume that the real historical Hegel is essentially the same as our contemporary philosophical interests. But there is no need to make this assumption. We can admit that Hegel's philosophical program was essentially metaphysical, and that much of the historical Hegel is of little interest to us today. Nevertheless, having made this admission, we do not have to accept the dilemma in every respect, as if it were true across the board or for every aspect of Hegel. There are still many other aspects of the real historical Hegel that are still of philosophical interest for us today, and that we can proceed to reconstruct without fear of either anachronism or antiquarianism. Historical research on Hegel is not doomed to philosophical irrelevance; and philosophical reconstruction of Hegel need not be condemned to anachronism. But to avoid these extremes, the philosophical historian has to be skillful; he has to work back and forth between the demands of history and philosophy; he must know enough history to avoid anachronism, enough philosophy to avoid antiquarianism. If he is successful in negotiating between the demands of history and philosophy, he can sometimes find that middle path where the real historical Hegel and our contemporary interests coincide. This has indeed sometimes happened with the nonmetaphysical interpretations. Although these interpretations have been slow to acknowledge the distance between the real historical Hegel and their own reconstructions of him, they have sometimes brought out aspects of the real historical Hegel that are philosophically important and interesting.

In negotiating between the demands of philosophy and history, the philosophical historian can proceed in two different ways. He can begin from his own contemporary philosophical interests and hope that there is something answering to these interests in the real historical Hegel; or he can start from the real historical Hegel and hope that something philosophically interesting derives from him, something which might or might not answer to contemporary philosophical interests.

While either approach works and has its advantages, they also both have their risks and disadvantages. The former brings with it the risk of anachronism, the latter that of antiquarianism. On the whole, scholars in the Anglophone world have preferred the former approach, and so they

have often run the risk of imposing their own philosophical interests on the texts and confusing their philosophical reconstruction with the real historical Hegel. The coincidence between the real historical Hegel and our contemporary interests is then only forced and artificial. We think that Hegel answers to our interests only because we read these interests into him.

To avoid this common pitfall, and contrary to the direction of most Anglophone scholarship, I would like to say a word here in behalf of the latter approach, the path less travelled. There is a strong case to be made for bracketing our own contemporary philosophical interests and examining Hegel in his historical context. In this case, we reconstruct Hegel's position as a contribution to a past conversation. We will fully understand the point and meaning of Hegel's philosophy only when we see it in discussion with the positions of others. If we ignore its precise place in the past conversation, we run the risk of confusing Hegel's position with those of others or we fail to see his precise intentions. This approach has the advantage of being closer to the real historical Hegel; and it has real philosophical content insofar as it sees Hegel's position in a philosophical discussion. While there is no a priori guarantee that closer historical study will bring results answering to our contemporary interests, it does have a possible greater benefit: that we widen our philosophical horizons and discover issues that are interesting for their own sake even if they answer to no contemporary concern. In the next section, I will suggest some of the ways in which this approach might take Hegel scholarship in new and interesting directions.

Granted that the Hegel renaissance is not a mistake, or at least need not be one, the question remains where it should go? Prima facie, it would seem that there is nowhere further that it can go; such has been the sheer volume of writings on Hegel that it would seem that no stone has been unturned and no corner unexplored. Indeed, repetition has become the order of the day: the same ground is gone over again and again, often with little variation. There are so many commentaries on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, so many studies of the *Philosophy of Right*, that there seems no point in doing another. If there were ever a case to be made for too many scholars chasing too few texts, it would seem to apply to Hegel's body of work.

Nevertheless, despite all the work done on Hegel, I would like to suggest that there is still much to do; indeed, in some respects, work has been scarcely begun. Let me just briefly indicate here some of the few places where Hegel research needs to go if it is to make any progress in the near future.

One of the most spectacular developments in research on German idealism in the last decades has been the *Konstellationsforschung* initiated by Dieter Henrich.[12] Crudely, *Konstellationsforschung* means the detailed investigation into the network of intellectual relationships between writers during the famous *Wunderjahre* in Jena and Weimar (1790–1800). This research attempts to get beyond the usual narrow focus on a few major writings of a few famous canonical figures, which fails to provide an accurate picture of a period as a whole. Instead, it strives to acquire a broader perspective by reconstructing, as far as possible or as the sources permit, the discussions between all the thinkers in a period, whether major or minor, that took place in letters, articles, reports on conversations, and so on. After these lost conversations have been reconstructed, it is then possible to see major works in their precise historical and philosophical context, to understand their point and meaning through their specific place in a discussion. The problem with the older approach, which was oriented toward the analysis of a few texts, is that it often gave a false impression about the period as a whole. If, for example, one were to generalize from a study of the main writings of Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling, one would think that this period is characterized by the predominance of foundationalism, by a search for the self-evident first principles of philosophy from which all the results of Kant's philosophy could be deduced. But a closer examination of the discussions between the many more "minor" thinkers of this period demonstrates something much more interesting: that most thinkers were highly critical of Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling's foundationalist project, and that foundationalism was in fact a minority view on the defensive. This result is of the greatest importance for an understanding of the genesis of early romanticism, whose aesthetic grew out of the antifoundationalist epistemology of the period.

Although it is of the utmost importance for Hegel research, *Konstellationsforschung* on Hegel has scarcely begun. When Hegel arrived in Jena in 1801, the heady creative years were over; still, their effects were a fresh memory. Seen in context, Hegel's early Jena writings show themselves to be contributions to the recent conversations among his contemporaries. We need to reconstruct Hegel's philosophy in the Jena

[12] See Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Unterscuhungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)*, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992); and *Grundlegung aus dem Ich: Unterscuhungen zur Vorgeschichte des Idealismus, Tübingen-Jena, 1790–1794* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004). See also Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), and Violetta Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte 1794–1800* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).