

The New York Review of Books

July 15, 1965

Restoring Hegel

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Hegel: Reinterpretations, Texts, and Commentary
by Walter Kaufmann
Doubleday, 498 pp., \$6.95

If civilization is wiped out in a nuclear war between East and West, it is quite likely that Hegel will be among the few authors to survive the holocaust. His writings are currently being studied in places as far apart as Ghana and Cuba. He is part of the curriculum in Samarkand, and Mao Tse-tung has seen to it that Chinese schoolboys are imbued with a proper respect for the official philosopher of Prussian conservatism. There are bearded sages in Central Asia for whom he has taken the place of Aristotle (the only other philosopher to have come to their notice). Africans who study in Paris cannot fail to return with potted fragments of Hegel in their mental baggage, though they may think of themselves as followers of Marx or Sartre. All in all, Hegel has made good. The only considerable area of contemporary civilization where he remains taboo is the Anglo-American academic world.

The appearance of a critical commentary on Hegel by Professor Walter Kaufmann provides a welcome opportunity for examining some of the reasons for this cultural lag. The most important of them is obvious. As Sidney Hook observed in a recent Encounter article, the Anglo-American school of philosophy has been hard at work since the First World War trying to make people forget its own previous indebtedness to Hegel. Green, Bradley, and McTaggart in Britain, Royce and Dewey in America, had been deeply influenced by him. Indeed the whole idealist movement down to 1914 owed its peculiar cast of mind to the impact of the Hegelian tradition. Penance was called for, and Hegel was duly exorcized, along with Nietzsche (with whom he had literally nothing in common). In later years, the rise of Communism and Fas-

cism—both ostensibly linked to Hegel—sharpened the antagonism. By 1945 the educated public was ready for Karl Popper's furious vituperation in *The Open Society*. In vain did the surviving academic Hegelians, with G. E. Mure of Cambridge in the lead, point out that Popper clearly had not read Hegel properly, let alone understood him. The general reader was impressed by Popper's authoritative tone and reluctant to credit the notion that he might be talking through his hat. Only when Professor Kaufmann some years ago, in a lengthy and effective polemical essay demolished Popper's criticism, did it become possible once more to get the debate back on dry ground.

What Kaufmann has now done in his new book is decidedly original. He opens with a brief biography of Hegel, and then goes on to a discussion of some of the more difficult texts: principally the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology*. In addition he has provided a full translation of the lengthy and important Preface to the latter work, with a textual commentary on facing pages. There he not only clarifies Hegel's famous obscurities, but offers the reader a guide to the often very puzzling connotations of Hegel's elaborate punning in German. No translator can do full justice to the *Phenomenology*—the most poetic, as well as the most difficult of Hegel's voluminous writings—but Kaufmann at least gives the student who has no German a glimpse of the fascination of the original. He clearly takes Glockner's view that "whoever has understood the preface to the *Phenomenology* has understood Hegel," and his lengthy commentary is a minor masterpiece of concise and erudite interpretation. This is a welcome departure from the lazy habit of pretending that Hegel was an obscure

pedant who fortunately left some quite readable lectures on the philosophy of history. In fact the famous lectures (as Kaufmann points out) were put together after his death, and the editing left much to be desired. It will not do either to follow the other fashionable direction and confine oneself to the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel expounds his political doctrine; or to his minor political essays, recently published in T. M. Knox's translation, with a Preface by Mr. Z. A. Pelczynski. From these writings one may gather that Hegel (as Hook has pointed out) was a conservative, but one will not learn why radicals like Marx took him seriously. Even less will one understand why he has been called the German Aristotle. To grasp what Hegel was really trying to do, one has to confront his metaphysics, and thanks to Kaufmann this can now be done even by the philosophical novice.

The editor, however, has not simply popularized his subject. He has indeed provided an introductory essay in haute vulgarisation, but even at this level he writes as a specialist (and as a trenchant critic of previous editors and translators). Moreover, it is just not possible to discuss Hegel's early work without plunging into the celebrated German metaphysical fog: never thicker than in the early years of the nineteenth century. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is as romantic and chaotic as Goethe's *Faust*, the first part of which was published almost in the same year (1807-8). Maddeningly obscure, it is also lit up by sudden flashes of almost superhuman illumination. Decked out with stylistic gargoyles, it is at the same time loaded down with oblique allusions to classical and modern drama, from Sophocles to Schiller. It is in fact a work of art—the greatest in the history of modern philosophy—at least if (unlike Professor Kaufmann) one withholds the title of “philosopher” from that remarkable artist, Nietzsche. The editor himself suggests that Hegel, like Wagner half a century later, was trying to produce “a Gesamtkunstwerk, leaving out little but music.” An earlier German biographer spoke of Hegel's “romantic masquerade.” It is a fact that he alludes in passing to such varied themes as the death of Socrates, the *Antigone*, medieval Christianity, the French Revolution, Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, and the writings of Kant—always in such a way as to leave his interpreters in doubt as to his precise meaning. Any-

thing that served his purpose was stuffed in, whether it was Goethe's *Iphigenia* or his own sister. There is even an obscure reference to *Macbeth*.

That a writer who first made his mark with such a work (whose 750 printed copies remained unsold for many years) should have come down to posterity as a dry German professor, tells one something about the way history gets written, but it is also part of Hegel's own tragedy. A romantic in his youth, and passionately interested in public affairs—when Napoleon's invasion of Germany wrecked the university of Jena and halted his academic career, he made a living for a while as a newspaper editor—he gradually turned into the stiff, elderly pedant who from his professorial chair in Berlin laid down the law to colleagues and students alike. Even then (if one can believe Heine, who studied under him) he was capable on occasion of sudden flashes of rationalist cynicism, at least in private and on the subject of religion. But the mask had stuck. He had become the official apologist of Prussian conservatism, though the true reactionaries regarded him with unconcealed distrust, and after his death the aged Schelling was imported from Munich to grapple with the “dragon seed” of Hegelianism. The audience at Schelling's inaugural lecture in 1840 (which was generally voted a disappointment) included Engels, Bakunin, and Kierkegaard: fate (or revolution) knocking at the door.

Professor Kaufmann has comparatively little to say about that part of the Hegelian inheritance which was taken over by Marx and his followers. Perhaps he is wise. After all, one can have too much of a good thing, and this particular topic is now nearing exhaustion. I suspect, however, that his interest is not seriously engaged by the subject of history. He is more concerned to defend Hegel against Schelling's and Kierkegaard's strictures, and incidentally to make the point that some of Heidegger's allegedly original insights in 1927 were anticipated in 1807 by the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This needed saying. I am less happy with his obstinate attempt to establish some sort of link between Hegel and Nietzsche. We all have our foibles. Professor Kaufmann's is an unshakeable conviction that justice has not been done to Nietzsche's importance as a thinker. Instead of disputing the point I shall

content myself with suggesting that Nietzsche's critique of religion would have seemed less original to his contemporaries if that rebellious Hegelian, Feuerbach, had not been so completely forgotten.

There remains the question of Hegel's contemporary relevance. This theme is rendered difficult by the conventional association of Hegelian thought with Marxism, and by the conviction of the Soviet Marxists that they are in possession of a "total" world outlook (usually known as "dialectical materialism") which is supposed to have come down to them from Hegel via Feuerbach and Marx. In actual fact dialectical materialism was the invention of Engels, who on this point circumvented Marx and went straight back to Hegel, from whom in a sense he had never emancipated himself. One can be a Marxist without taking dialectical materialism seriously, though in Russia this is denied and most Communists still regard such statements as damnable heresy. In any case the whole issue has not the slightest practical relevance. No one—not even Hegel—ever tried to deduce the actual sequence of empirical events from the triadic march of logical categories. The Hegelian triad (which unlike Fichte he never described as thesis-antithesis-synthesis) has no significance outside logic and was never intended as a universal key with which to unlock the mysteries of the universe. It is quite irrelevant how one rates Hegel's own performance in his *Logic*, of which Kaufmann gives a brief summary. On any interpretation, his conceptual scheme provides no method different from that of the empirical sciences. Kaufmann quotes Lenin's remark that one cannot understand Capital without having read the *Logic*. Plenty of people who had never read a line of Hegel proved perfectly competent to argue about Marx's economic work, though they may have had trouble with the Hegelian terminology of the opening chapter. It is a fact that Lenin (like Plekhanov before him) thought highly of Hegel, but so did some eminent Russian theologians. Indeed Hegel has been more influential in Russia than in Germany, among conservatives and radicals alike. This is because he was a metaphysician, and because the Russians even more than the Germans were hungry for metaphysics and contemptuous of positivism. Now that the Soviet Union is belatedly turning into a modern country, one may confi-

dently expect that its philosophers will gradually become as empiricist and boring as the rest of us.

While no dialectical materialism can be found in Marx, there remains the question whether a species of dialectical theology is not to be found in Hegel. Kaufmann does not go at length into this subject, though he notes that German Protestant theology has since the nineteenth century been heavily indebted to Hegel. The fact appears to be that Hegel's employment of the term *Geist* (spirit) enabled him to elude the difficult choice between a theological and a rationalist view of the world. It was after all his aim to "think the absolute in the form of subject," that is, to arrive at direct cognition of the assumed metaphysical principle whose self-generating movement was supposed to run through the phenomenal realm. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is neither ordinary metaphysics nor psychology: it is both. The infinite spirit is encountered in the comprehension of the world by the finite spirit; the dialectical movement of concepts is held to mirror the ceaseless motion of the *logos* which is the common ground of being and thinking. The whole system constantly teeters on the brink of atheism, and the final passage of the *Phenomenology*, with its invocation of "the Golgotha of the absolute spirit," literally ends with the death of God. Yet Hegel managed to persuade himself—and numbers of theologians—that he understood Christianity better than its authorized exponents did. While treating theology as a propaedeutic to philosophy, he encouraged the theologians to believe that at the end of the journey they would find what they were looking for: proof of God's existence. He is the most ambiguous of the great philosophers, and it is this profound ambiguity which to this day has made it possible for men deeply divided over the most basic issues to find sustenance in his writings.