



BOOKS

A modern assessment of the philosophy of Hegel

by Ernest Nagel

HEGEL: REINTERPRETATION, TEXTS, AND COMMENTARY, by Walter Kaufmann. Doubleday & Company, Inc. (\$6.95).

Goethe once remarked, in commenting on the artificial and pompous manner of thought and expression he found in one of Hegel's disciples: "What are the English and the French to think of the language of our philosophers when we Germans do not understand it ourselves?" The appalling obscurity so frequently encountered in Hegel's own writings has nevertheless been no obstacle (and may even have been a help) to their having a profound influence on subsequent philosophical and religious thought, on the study of human history and culture, and on political, legal and social theory. The fruits of this influence are a mixed harvest, some of which Hegel would surely have disowned. Partly because his language is often ambiguous and cryptic, and partly because many of his central ideas are basically unclear, his followers have been able—not always on cogent grounds—to construe even his views on major issues in quite different ways and to develop them in divergent directions. For example, his philosophy has been esteemed as valuable by some professed disciples because of its allegedly systematic account of reality as the progressive manifestation of an immanent World Spirit, and by others because of its use of a supposedly distinctive dialectical method. His social philosophy has been interpreted as a rationale for political conservatism, as a foundation for a truly liberal society, and as a justification of totalitarianism. He influenced thinkers in various disciplines who rejected his philosophy as a whole or who were even unfamiliar with it at first hand. Some of them, such as Karl Marx and John Dewey, used the conceptions they borrowed from him only after

transforming them almost beyond recognition. Hegel is the source of a broad stream of historically significant ideas, but the stream has always had numerous branches.

The academic study of Hegel since his death in 1831 has had fluctuating fortunes. It has been flourishing in Germany for the better part of a century after recovering from a period of sharp decline, and it has been receiving increasing attention in countries where Marxism is official doctrine. On the other hand, although it was firmly entrenched in major universities in Britain and the U.S. during the latter part of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, it has steadily lost ground in these countries since World War I. One factor contributing to this decline was the impact of new developments in logical analysis on Anglo-American philosophers, who used the standards of intellectual workmanship they had acquired from modern logic to deflate many pretensions of Hegelian metaphysics. Philosophical systems do not, however, succumb easily, even to apparently devastating criticism; they can often be reinterpreted in such a way as to reveal neglected merits or minimize the significance of admitted failings by dissociating them from acknowledged virtues. In any case, interest in Hegel among Anglo-American scholars has been growing in recent years, and the latest fruit of the revival is this book by Walter Kaufmann of Princeton University.

Kaufmann's aim is to present a comprehensive reinterpretation of Hegel's thought. His book also contains translations or relevant documents hitherto unavailable in English, and a fresh translation, with detailed commentary, of the important preface to *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel's first and possibly most original major work. The book is the only one in English that makes extensive use of recently discovered Hegel correspondence and other manuscript material, and it clothes its meticulous scholarship and wide learning in an eminently readable style. Kaufmann sketches the climate of opinion

in which Hegel lived and gives a good account of his personal fortunes. He presents the development of Hegel's ideas as attempts to resolve intellectual problems that agitated reflective men of his time; he states what he believes is the gist of all but one of Hegel's books published during his life (the exception being *The Philosophy of Right*), and he corrects a number of gross but common misconceptions about Hegel, for example the belief that Hegel's dialectic proceeds according to the familiar triadic sequence of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and that he subordinated every human aspiration to the interests of the state.

It is central to Kaufmann's approach to distinguish between what Hegel maintained his philosophy established and what it actually accomplished; indeed, Kaufmann takes issue with various expositions of Hegelian doctrines for failing to understand them in the light of this distinction. Kaufmann believes many of Hegel's claims are in fact spurious. For instance, he denies that Hegel established the existence of a distinctive dialectical process in human history, or of a uniquely determined sequence of all possible world views proceeding from the crudest to the most profound, and he asserts that in spite of Hegel's pretension to have constructed a tightly knit system of thought "what is systematic [in it] is merely the arrangement." He nevertheless shows that if Hegel's philosophy is read in the context of the problems to which it was addressed, rather than from the perspective of Hegel's claims for it, much in it is richly illuminating and merits serious study. Kaufmann's book is on many counts a substantial contribution to the understanding of Hegel.

Although the import and validity of many things in Hegel are debatable, the locus of his problems and the broad objectives of his philosophy are reasonably clear. Born in 1770, he came to maturity during a turbulent period when hallowed beliefs about the nature of man and society were being seriously challenged—sometimes from opposite

directions—by a wide assortment of ideas. In one way or another Hegel responded vigorously to the rationalism of the French Enlightenment, the conceptions of human excellence advocated in the literature of German classicism and romanticism, the Kantian notion of the moral life as the pursuit of duty divorced from inclination, and the skeptical conclusions concerning the scope of human reason that are implicit in Kant's account of man's cognitive powers. Although Hegel was no simple-minded idolator of traditional institutions, he was sensitive to their values. At the same time, in spite of his lack of sympathy for some views that were highly critical of the established order, he did not find them without merit, nor was he unaware of incongruities between other ideas, also critical of tradition, to which he was attracted. Accordingly he felt a great need for reconciling all these ideas, in order "to restore the human being again in his totality."

Hegel welcomed the downfall of the *ancien régime*, and he believed social institutions must be subjected to rational scrutiny. On the other hand, he condemned the egalitarian doctrines of the French Revolution, and he was a severe critic of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. As he construed the individualistic theory of absolute natural rights on which their social criticism and programs were based, the theory cannot do justice to the civilizing role of social institutions or the hierarchical organization of society; indeed, he blamed the influence of the theory for Germany's national disunity. Moreover, he rejected the ideal of human freedom advocated by the Enlightenment, on the ground that it gives absolute priority to the satisfaction of individual desires, and mistakenly supposes that man is free by nature but becomes enchained by the state. In Hegel's view, which was greatly influenced by the enthusiasm of Goethe and Schiller for Greek antiquity, the state provides the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of man's nature, so that "genuine" human freedom can be achieved only through a philosophically informed (or "self-conscious") participation in the organized cultural activities of society. There are therefore good reasons for assuming that one of Hegel's cardinal objectives was to mediate between critics and defenders of the social order, by showing that in spite of the limitations inherent in every form of organized society every institution has an indispensable function in the social economy of its time and plays

an important role in the development of human freedom. "The insight to which philosophy should help us," Hegel declared in a revealing passage of his posthumous *Philosophy of History*, "is that the actual world is as it ought to be. . . . Thus philosophy is not a comfort; it is more, it reconciles, it transfigures the actual, which seems unjust, into the rational."

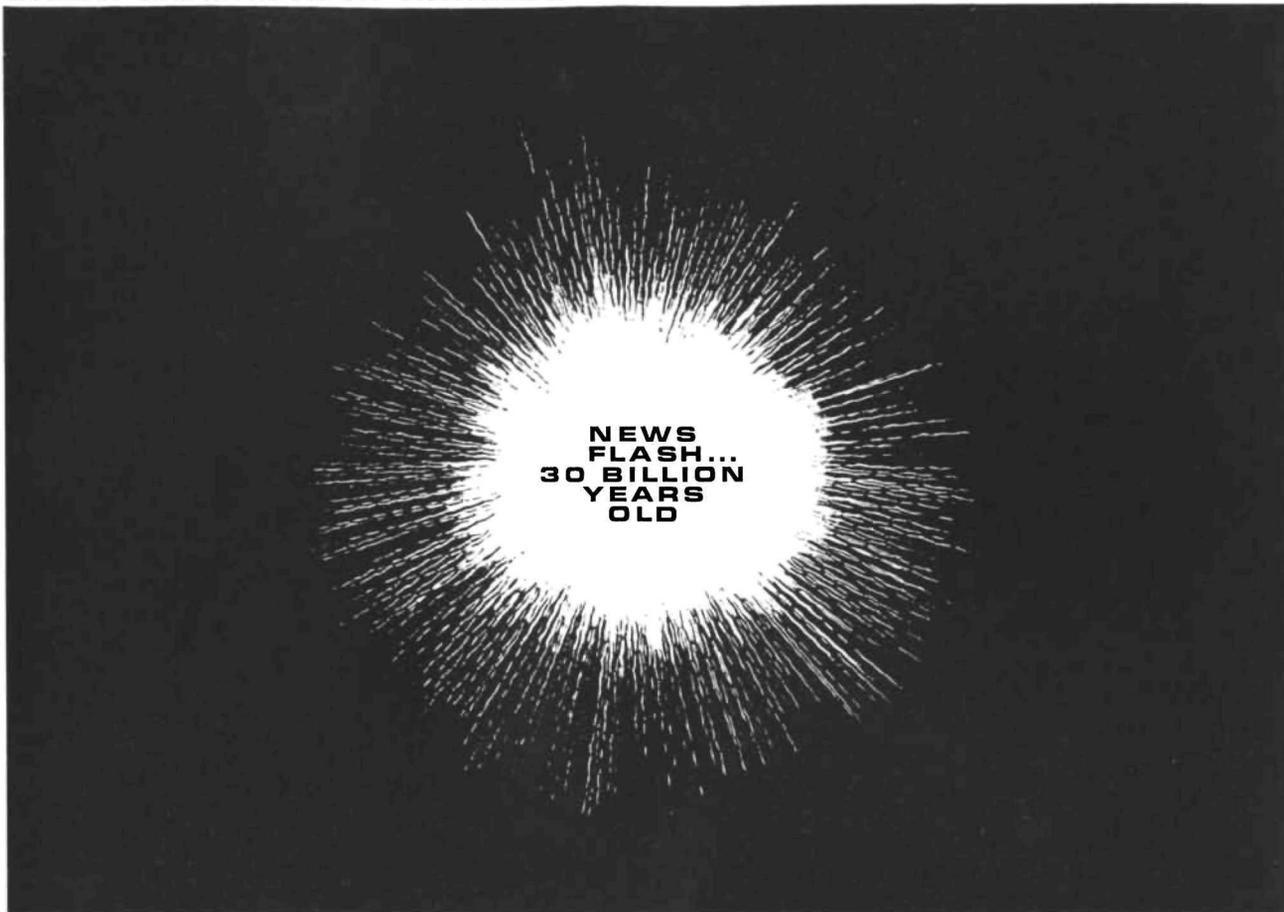
Hegel's philosophical system is in part a generalization of this approach to reconciling differing social ideals and conflicting evaluations of social institutions. Whatever else the system contains, it does present a boldly imaginative account of the virtues and corresponding failings that characterize not only various forms of institutionalized life but also different human attitudes and passions, scientific and commonsense notions, religious doctrines and philosophical perspectives. This aspect of Hegel's thought is particularly prominent in his *Phenomenology*, and it is the one on which Kaufmann sets greatest store. Hegel surveyed an impressively wide-ranging series of recurrent outlooks on things, with the intent of showing that none is tenable if it is embraced without reservation, and that each extreme view somehow generates another contrasting extreme. According to him, for example, naïve confidence in the certainty of sensory experience overlooks the general assumptions implicit in the interpretation of what is directly experienced, and it leads to an equally naïve confidence in the certainty of intuitively evident intellectual principles; similarly, a morality based on unreflective custom opens the gates to an individualistic morality of worldly success that is disruptive of custom.

But Hegel's philosophy is more than a gallery of such contrasting types of social institutions and intellectual commitments. Even in the *Phenomenology* the portraits of psychological attitudes and world views are not arranged in arbitrary sequence. The sequence has a definite hierarchical order that is alleged to be uniquely determined by a "dialectical" process to which Hegel believed he held the clue. The order is in effect an attempt at a theodicy—a justification of the essential rationality at the heart of things; it represents the manifestations of the World Spirit in an endless series of embodiments, each a fuller realization of the Spirit's nature than its predecessors. Hegel believed that this order is implicit in the categorical features of human thought as well as of its objects, and that it is generated

by the intrinsic incompleteness of everything finite. He maintained that the concepts of both common sense and science are radically incomplete—in his language they are "abstract" and the products of the "Understanding"—because the various traits that finite things possess are not theirs "absolutely," but only by virtue of the roles the things play in the endless series of increasingly more inclusive systems of which things are parts. Accordingly "the truth is the whole," a Hegelian dictum that condemns all discursive thought as being at best "one-sided" and "relative." Hegel does not explain, however, how his own contention that reality is spiritual escapes this condemnation, nor does he make clear why what is admittedly only a part of the "whole truth" (the fact that 5 is a prime number, say) cannot be absolutely true about some part of the whole.

Hegel persuaded himself that since every abstract concept stands in relations of logical opposition to its various contraries as well as to other concepts (for example, being a man is logically opposed to being a woman, and also to being a king), it is intelligible only by virtue of its relations to them. In consequence he maintained that the contraries of a term are somehow involved in both the meaning of the term and in the things to which it is applicable. There is thus an alleged latent "contradiction" in the concepts of the Understanding and in the things subsumed under them—an internal strain that is fatal to the apparent self-sufficiency of anything which falls short of the infinite totality of things, and which ultimately results in changes that absorb the finite in "sublimated" form into a more complete reality. Accordingly, except for purely physical things, whose changes Hegel believed are "perpetually self-repeating" and produce nothing new, everything else—particularly ideas and social institutions—is subject to inevitable dialectical transformations.

Although Hegel contended that these dialectical transitions are "necessary" because of the inherent "contradictions" in everything finite, he used words in such a scandalously loose manner that it is difficult to know what he meant by this assertion. The transitions are certainly not established by deductive argument; they are based on more or less plausible but usually tacit assumptions, or on suggestive ambiguities and even puns. As Kaufmann points out, the sequence of transitions is not always the same in Hegel's own presentation of them. According to Kaufmann, Hegel



One evening this spring, Dr. Maarten Schmidt sighted from Palomar a celestial object so distant it seemed to lie close to the beginning of time. Its light, he calculated, had begun its journey to earth soon after the postulated birth of the universe. Spectacular news – the first real clue to support Einstein’s “big bang” theory of the universe’s creation.

Dr. Schmidt lost no time in sharing the news—news that had already traveled 30 billion light years – with Dr. Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, editor of *The Astrophysical Journal*, published by The University of Chicago Press. In another twinkling, Dr. Schmidt’s findings were appended to the April issue of the *Journal*, already on the press.* So it was that this specialists’ journal (a journal that each month this year has found itself handling late news from outer space), became the means by which the daily press and thus the entire world learned of the great discovery.

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*“Large Redshifts of Five Quasi-Stellar Sources” by Maarten Schmidt, *Astrophysical Journal*, April 1, 1965, Vol. 141, No. 3, \$6.00; one year’s subscription (12 issues) \$35.00*



employed the German equivalent of *necessary* as an inclusive antonym of *arbitrary* rather than as a synonym of *logically necessary*; he therefore thinks that Hegel's intent is misrepresented by commentators who construe the word in the latter sense. Kaufmann may be right, but he is not entirely convincing. Hegel did not clearly distinguish causal relations from logically necessary relations, and even when he was dealing with dialectical transformations in society, he discussed them without mentioning specifically causal determinants of such changes as distinct from logical determinants. Nor is it clear whether Hegel understood dialectical transitions to be temporal or logical or both. He often described them in ostensibly temporal terms, and he maintained that he was able to explain them in terms of their role in the genesis of more developed systems. On the other hand, he presented such changes no less frequently as a logical progression of forms of reality when the forms are analyzed so as to exhibit their increasing structural complexities, irrespective of the temporal order in which they may be realized.

However this may be, Hegel believed that a "rational" order is embodied in everything actual, and that in particular there is an immanent purpose or "reason" in human history. In fact, he tried to show with some attention to detail that the rise and fall of nations has not been just a series of meaningless happenings, but that on the contrary history exhibits the cunning operation of the World Spirit in the progressive development of "genuine" human freedom. Hegel's assertion that he had thus established the identity of the rational with the actual, and had demonstrated the "insight" that "the actual world is as it ought to be," is effectively punctured by Kaufmann. Nevertheless, Kaufmann thinks it is seriously misleading to characterize Hegel's reading of the past as inhumanly optimistic; in partial support of his own interpretation that Hegel had a tragic vision of history, he cites Hegel's famous description of history as a "slaughter bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed." In his admirable effort to be fair to Hegel, however, Kaufmann is sometimes overly generous. It is difficult to defend Hegel from the accusation that he was insensitive to human suffering, when one finds him saying that the contemplation of the agonies men have so commonly endured must not make us "fall into the Litany of

Lamentations"—since the "so-called well or ill faring of these or those isolated individuals cannot be regarded as an essential element in the rational order of the Universe." There is real substance in Santayana's judgment that Hegel sanctified "a brutal law of success and succession" and "despised every ideal not destined to be realized on earth."

Contrary to the familiar adage, Peter's ideas of Paul are not always better clues to Peter's nature than they are to Paul's. Still, Kaufmann's predominantly humanistic interests are certainly reflected in the negligible attention he pays to Hegel's philosophy of nature and sociopolitical doctrines. He dismisses Hegel's views on physics, chemistry and biology in less than a page as "comparatively unimportant"—undoubtedly a sound summary judgment when those views are assessed for their current influence. His book seeks, however, "to establish a comprehensive reinterpretation of Hegel—not just of one facet of his thought but of the whole phenomenon of Hegel." Surely "the whole phenomenon" cannot be understood without a reasonably full examination of Hegel's essentially anthropomorphic and teleological view of nature, and without a careful analysis of his intellectual method in order to make clear why, for example, it enabled him to denigrate Newton's analytical procedures in astronomy as inferior to Kepler's "holistic" approach. Perhaps a more serious shortcoming of Kaufmann's book is the absence of any discussion of Hegel's views on various sociopolitical topics—the family, the rationale of private property, representative government, crime and punishment. This omission cannot be defended on the ground that Hegel's treatment of these themes is unimportant. To be sure, Kaufmann does flatly deny that *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel's chief political treatise, is the work of an apologist for the Prussian monarchic state, but he gives little evidence to support this denial, and he does not mention Hegel's personal role in opposing the extension of political suffrage. Moreover, although Kaufmann is informative concerning Hegel's influence on a number of later philosophers, particularly on Heidegger and Sartre, he is disappointingly silent on the important role Hegelian ideas have played in the development of legal thought, functionalism in anthropology, and relativism in social science and history.

Kaufmann's interpretation of Hegel deals with him primarily as a great seer—as a "physician of culture," to use a phrase of Nietzsche's—rather than as a

philosopher whose dimensions are to be measured by the adequacy of his vision and the cogency of his arguments. In any event, Kaufmann does not attempt to go through Hegel's thought "bit by bit" in order to untangle the countless gnarls in it. But since he has no illusions about the validity of Hegel's claims either for the system or for the dialectic, he does not make clear why Hegel merits attention as a major philosopher. In a review four years ago of a book on Hegel, Kaufmann wrote: "What is still wanted is a good book on Hegel that shows how he dealt with many of the problems with which Marx and Kierkegaard, sociologists and theologians, pragmatists and existentialists, analytic philosophers and literary critics have been dealing since." Kaufmann's book is undoubtedly a useful one, but the good book he described four years ago as unavailable is still unpublished.

Short Reviews

THE SCIENCE OF SMELL, by R. H. Wright. Basic Books, Inc., Publishers (\$4.95). R. H. Wright is a physical chemist who has spent some years as a member of the British Columbia Research Council studying olfaction and olfactory responses. One of the practical aims of his research is to find chemical substances that, without being toxic, would lure insects to traps or saturate their sensory mechanisms so that they could not locate mating partners. This is only one of the many topics treated in this exceptionally interesting book. A series of experiments on fish migration demonstrated that after fish have been spawned in freshwater streams and have journeyed out to sea they find their way back home by recognizing the smell of the water; fish that had their olfactory pits plugged were quite unable to smell their way home. Insects have an acute smelling apparatus and will travel great distances in the direction of an alluring scent. As the smell draws them on they must, as another series of experiments showed, be able to navigate their course by taking their bearings from the environment; for example, they need to see the bottom below them, and if their view of the bottom is obscured, they are quite unable to make their way to the source of the odor. The olfactory powers of dogs, it turns out, are not much keener than man's, although they may be sensitive to certain odors to which man does not respond. It is remarkable how many branches of science are brought into the study of smell: nerve physiology, which