



Hegel: A Biography

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One of the founders of modern philosophical thought Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) has gained the reputation of being one of the most abstruse and impenetrable of thinkers. This first major biography of Hegel in English offers not only a complete, up-to-date account of the life, but also an overview of the key philosophical concepts in Hegel's work in an accessible style. Terry Pinkard situates Hegel firmly in the historical context of his times. The story of that life is of an ambitious, powerful thinker living in a period of great tumult dominated by the figure of Napolean. Pinkard explores Hegel's interactions with some of the great minds of this period: Holderlin, Goethe, Humboldt, Schelling, Novalis, the Schlegels, Mendelssohn, and others. Throughout, he avoids Hegel's own famously technical jargon in order to display the full sweep and power of Hegel's thought. Terry Pinkard is professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University and is author/editor of five previous books, the most recent being DEGREESUHegel's Phenomenology (Cambridge, 1996). He is honorary Professor of the Philosophy Faculty of TÜbingen University, Germany and serves on the advisory board for the Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung.

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Mohammad says

G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy, and the philosophies of those he influenced, especially Karl Marx, have been accused of obscurantism. Analytic and positivistic philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, and the critical-rationalist Karl Popper, accused Hegel and Hegelianism of being obscure. About Hegel's philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that it is: ". . . a colossal piece of mystification, which will yet provide posterity with an inexhaustible theme for laughter at our times, that it is a pseudo-philosophy paralyzing all mental powers, stifling all real thinking, and, by the most outrageous misuse of language, putting in its place the hollowest, most senseless, thoughtless, and, as is confirmed by its success, most stupefying verbiage.."

Nevertheless, biographer Terry Pinkard in this book notes "Hegel has refused to go away, even in analytic philosophy, itself." Hegel was aware of his obscurantism, and perceived it as part of philosophical thinking — to accept and transcend the limitations of quotidian thought and its concepts. In the essay "Who Thinks Abstractly?", he said that it is not the philosopher who thinks abstractly, but the layman, who uses concepts as givens that are immutable, without context. It is the philosopher who thinks concretely, because he transcends the limits of quotidian concepts, in order to understand their broader context. This makes philosophical thought and language appear obscure, esoteric, and mysterious to the layman.

Atila Demirkas?mo?lu says

Terry Pinkard'ın ?? Bankas? yay?nlar?ndan ç?kan Hegel biyografisini okumay? bitirdim. Kitab? be?endim. Kant biyografisinden daha ba?ar?l?. Olanla anlat?lan fark? hep vard?r ama bu kitap bu fark? az tuttu?u kan?s?n? uyand?rd? bende. Bir de özellikle ya?ant?lara daha ?l?ml? ve taraftarl?ktan uzak bakmak gere?ini hissetmeme yol aç?. Okumam iyi oldu diyeyim.

Güis Guerrero-Enterría says

Interesante biografía que intenta además dar una explicación clara de muchos de los conceptos básicos de la obra de Hegel . Bien escrita.

diana mendez says

working on it....

Willem van der Scheun says

It was everything it promised to be, a thorough overview of Hegel's life and a clear overview of his thoughts, work and influence. I found it inspiring and helping to overcome to bridge to go and read Hegel himself. I already made a start in his Philosophy of Right, which I hope is going to be the subject of my bachelor thesis.

Jesse says

Incredible. Successfully debunks some of the notorious Hegelian myths and presents Hegel as a person that, over the course of the book, I came to admire even more than before.

Jack Hart says

Formally this one should go on my biography shelf, but this work on Hegel's career so helpfully addressed my own reading limitations that I have to count it as a work of philosophy.

I had read The Phenomenology more than once, and dutifully slogged through the (more readable) lectures on aesthetics and the history of philosophy. So before reading Pinkard's work I had a pretty good handle on Hegel in a history-of-ideas sort of way.

But Hegel never took my breath away--as has practically every other major philosopher who I've been lucky enough to study at length. I just couldn't figure out why Hegel was such a big deal. I knew that he was and knew my not getting it pointed to a hole in my understanding, not at the quality of his contribution.

In his preface to The Tempest Dr. Johnson comments on Shakespeare, "...as we owe everything to him, he owes something to us; that, if much of his praise be given by perception and judgement, much is likewise given by custom and veneration." Terry Pinkard's biography helped me understand why so much is given to Hegel by custom and veneration, and with a clearer idea of why his peers, and the next generation or two, revered him and his work, my subsequent readings of The Phenomenology have been more generous and comprehending. Thanks to Pinkard I get why he's such a big deal.

So here's what Pinkard's biography taught me about Hegel's status.

Because Hegel was from a small town he had to go to a crappy little seminary not a big prestigious university. There he was formed intellectually by the luck of making two dear friends there (Holderlin and Schelling) who were themselves to emerge as significant intellectuals. As he was becoming an adult, patriotism, as it happened, French patriotism, was emerging as a force in the world for the very first time. Hegel set himself the task of trying to understand what was happening as the notion of the fatherland transformed itself into the idea of the nation state.

Here the details help, but it's to be remembered that The Holy Roman Empire was an actual administrative entity in Hegel's time, and progressives were longing for something to come into being that could be called Germany. They wanted this because the French model suggested to them that if the little kingdoms united into a nation it would hire secular philosophers to help determine policy and to provide the historical knowledge thought to be wise government's most crucial source.

Hegel was constantly writing his friends begging for help finding a job teaching philosophy at a University,

but he could never find such a job. So he had to be a tutor, edit a learned journal and then a newspaper, and then more or less a high school principal with teaching duties. Finally, at age forty six, he got appointed to a university professorship at Heidelberg. He had a deep sense, perhaps mistaken, but quite sincere of what a Professor might and ought to be in the New World Order of his time. This allowed him to invent himself as a self-conscious role model, and many younger ambitious intellectuals learned from him how to take a stance under the new conditions of state patronage.

Pinkard is not only smart about putting together the details of Hegel's life to form a revealing and compelling life story, but along the way he makes use of his own professorial explaining skill. You get a sense of the Kantian waters that everyone in Hegel's generation with philosophic ambitions had to swim in. You follow both the controversies within Kantian thought, and the polemic against it. There's a ton of such commentary throughout the book, and yet, at least to me, while some of it slowed me down none of it bogged me down.

Much of Hegel's prose is not at all obscure. The Phenomenology is famously obscure, and there are lot of good commentaries on it. Once you've worked you way through that kind of study, though, if like me you're still puzzled by Hegel's achievement, Pinkard's book may be just the help you need to snap it into focus.

Micah Perry says

Instrumental in my evolution from oil painting to...

I would reference this book throughout grad school and I read it as an undergrad. What I specifically like about this book among the other Hegel books is Pinkard's way of translating the unintelligible gobbledegook into something I can digest. Hegel is the last platform from which the contemporary artist takes that leap into her own right while leaving the past behind. Real art is the making, not the made.

Josh says

"Christoph Theodor Schwab visited Hölderlin shortly before his death on June 7, 1843. He asked him whether he had thought of Hegel. Hölderlin answered that of course he had, muttered something incomprehensible, and then noted simply, "The Absolute""

An incredibly well written and thoroughly researched biography that combines intensely rich and detailed examination of Hegel's life with a rigorous exposition of his philosophy and evolution of thought. Hegel is portrayed as a man of great passion, dynamism and intelligence.

Less desirable facets of Hegel's life and personality are not omitted and discussed openly, giving a balanced and authentic view of one of history's greatest thinkers.

With exposition covering the philosophy, art, history, politics of Hegel's environment, the work is immensely vivid. Bravo to Pinkard who's work here is nothing short of fantastic, an honestly splendid read.

Highly recommended to anyone with an interest in Hegel, German idealism or philosophy in general.

Greg says

I read this book during the winter and early spring of 2009. As I'm sure you already know--since you're taking the time to read what I have to say about this volume, which is not exactly a popular title--this is an intellectual biography of the most important post-Kantian philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel. (This man had four names! Wow!)

I was taking an undergraduate course with Robert Brandom at the University of Pittsburgh on nineteenth-century German philosophy as I was working through this book, and I do think reading it helped shed some light on the "reciprocal, cognitive relations" that he maintains are at the heart of Hegel's metaphysics. I probably understood only half of the philosophical content of this book, but I did learn a lot of interesting trivia about Hegel, as well as a lot of equally interesting information about the German education and political systems of the time.

Hegel's favorite card game was whist.

Raully says

An amazing work of scholarship that comes from a philosopher's point of view and yet ably weaves in the historical and biographical background. Highly recommended, but at its heft its not for the casual reader.

David M says

Published in 2000, this is the first major biography of Hegel in English. Hegel died in 1831. Why did it take so long? Well, a big part of the reason may be that the man just didn't lead a particularly scintillating life. Pinkard doesn't have a lot to work with in terms of human drama. There's a lot of academic backbiting and university politics. Compare, say, the life of Marx, and I think most would agree this is pretty thin stuff.

As far as his subject's personality, Pinkard keeps insisting that Hegel was a surprisingly normal, sociable fellow. I guess this is supposed to be counter-intuitive and therefore kind of interesting. Speaking for myself, I can't really agree. The tortured genius may be a bit of a cliche, but the interestingly boring professor isn't much of an alternative.

The good news is that none of us this matters very much, since Pinkard really does know his philosophy. He does an excellent job not just explaining what Hegel said but showing the tension and drama internal to his thought. The chapters exclusively concerned with philosophy are thrilling, the ones on Hegel's career and domestic life tend to drag.

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I'm reading this biography in the hopes of actually tackling Hegel's first opus later this summer.

Considering that he takes 200 pages to get there, Pinkard's treatment of the Phenomenology is surprisingly brisk, under 20 pages.

Kant as representing a kind of 'good Friday' of thought. Where Kant himself downplayed the more skeptical

implications of his philosophy, these did not go unnoticed by the next generation of philosophers. Romanticism arose partly in reaction to what many saw as Kant's nihilism. In the first critique Kant sought to demonstrate the failure of all previous metaphysical systems, to show in fact why all such metaphysical ambitions were doomed from the beginning. Kant would thus change the subject of philosophy, a turn from being itself to self-consciousness. 'Reason' provides coherence to our mental processes but does not guarantee any access to the world as it is. Many were dissatisfied with this situation, and yet Kant's revolution was seen as definitive. It wasn't possible to simply go back to an older kind of metaphysics, at least not through arguments. Kant had won the argument, but a longing for unity with being still remained. Thus while Romanticism started out as movement in philosophy, it would find its most natural expression in poetry - a medium which allowed the poet to adumbrate what could no longer be avowed directly as knowledge.

At this point (I'm on page 220) it's not exactly clear to me how Hegel fits into this picture. Pinkard emphasizes the importance of Kant's second critique for Hegel in writing the *Phenomenology*. Against Kant's notion of the pure will, Hegel sought to bring history and inter-subjectivity into philosophy. The struggle for recognition replaces the isolated conscience. All well and good. Kant's moral philosophy is sort of a hypertrophied Protestantism, low-hanging fruit in some respects. Hegel was surely right to reject as hopelessly abstract this project of founding morality on pure practical reason. However, the nature of Hegel's engagement with the first critique remains obscure for the moment.

*

Great discussion of the Logic. Is Hegel's 'absolute Idea' perhaps equivalent to the 'pre-thematized life-world' of Husserl? The background space of reason or implicit whole in which all our thinking occurs. Does Hegel believe this can ever fully be articulated? The usual knock on him, which may or may not be fair (I'm still only on page 352!), is that he was arrogant enough to believe he had provided this final articulation, thus completing philosophy and bringing it to a close.

On the surface Hegel may appear somewhat similar to Spinoza. They seem to share a quasi-mystical obsession with the whole. Yet in his Logic Hegel thought he'd given the definitive refutation of Spinozism, by showing how Spinoza's conception of the whole precludes the possibility of a thinking subject capable of comprehending it. Thus if Spinozism is true it must also be absurd and unknowable.

This is a very interesting and relevant line of thought, especially when you consider the contemporary vogue of Spinoza among neuro-scientists wishing to give a reductive account of mind. Hegel is there to beat back this perennial temptation.

Padraig McGrath says

A great biography, and lots of good insightful commentary on Hegel's most important work. Beautifully written.
