

# Review of S.J. McGrath and Joseph Carew (eds.), *Rethinking German Idealism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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## Preview

These are exciting times for the philosophy and historiography of German Idealism. While in the first half of the 20th century, scholars have been content to provide stand-alone works on single thinkers (itself a very important task), we see since Dieter Henrich's *Hegel im Kontext* a trend that involves the setting of thinkers side by side in a constructive dialogue. While not every thinker gets an equal share of the time (or is placed on equal footing), the trend is towards more equitable exegeses. *Rethinking German Idealism* is no exception. While the editors did not set out to overtly juxtapose various thinkers and programs of German Idealism in the text, they did set out to create a dialogue amongst them, and the upshot of this dialogue serves nicely as an example of such juxtaposition.

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The text consists in an Introduction and twelve essays. Fully ten of the essays deal with Schelling and/or Hegel, and these will be the focus of my comments, here. But it is helpful to begin with the Introduction, which sets out parameters of the essays to follow. The editors are self-conscious about the aims of their project. First is to highlight the ongoing development of the German Idealist tradition, and its need for constant re-thinking (5). Second is to highlight the ongoing importance of developing new theoretical frameworks and bring these to bear on traditional concepts and texts (5). Third is to challenge the "monumental history" of the reception of these concepts and texts (6). As the editors claim, it is to look back, but with contemporary conceptual frameworks serving to reconstruct historical 'facts' (6). This in turn may serve our current philosophical needs (6). Fourth, it serves to open up spaces of dialogue which forces us to encounter German Idealism on its own self-understandings, and not (necessarily) ours

(6). The chief method of these four aims consists in allowing the philosophers to speak to us directly and then deciding on a historical reconstruction that is attuned to our own (philosophical) problems (7). Thus, we should expect a great deal of the following essays to be given over to passages from the thinkers themselves, together with meticulous exegeses and a continuous linkage to problems faced by contemporary philosophers.

I think we get both the thinkers and the exegeses, but less so the linkage to contemporary problems, as I will try to articulate throughout.

In regards the last point, it is the constructive dialogue that emerges from the juxtaposition of thinkers that I wish to concentrate upon, here. There are four essays on Schelling, three on Hegel, one on Schelling and Kant, one on Schelling and Hegel, one on Kant alone, and one on Fichte alone. (There is also a stand-alone essay on the continuing relevance of German Idealism.) I will concentrate on those essays dealing with Schelling and Hegel. The first of the four Schelling essays is by Alexander Schnell, and is entitled “The Meaning of Transcendental Idealism in the Work of F.W.J. Schelling.” This essay concentrates upon Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). The essay begins by canvassing various critical responses to the philosophy of the subject and finds in Schelling’s *System* resources for thinking the real (52). The author does this through articulating two “moments” in Schelling’s Transcendental Idealism: the placement of reflection within nature (61) and the alignment of what is real with the reflection (mirror) of that which is outside of us (68). The Absolute in the context of System is the identical subject-object. But, as the author points out, this can be distinguished into subjective and objective subject-object. In the *System*, it is the subjective subject-object that is supreme: but this is merely the philosopher’s viewpoint. In the complete unity of subject-object, both subjective and objective poles are reconciled (72) and connection with the real is assured.

The second essay featuring Schelling is Devin Zane Shaw’s “Animals, Those Incessant Somnambulists’: A Critique of Schelling’s Anthropomorphism.” As with Schnell, Shaw is concerned with Schelling’s understanding of nature. He, too, notes the importance of Schelling in the critique of contemporary philosophical thinkers and problems (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Grant) (78). But Schelling (1797-1809) is part of a tradition leading back to Aristotle that considers animals lacking in language and freedom (80). The capacity for logos, restricted to human beings and denied to animals, nevertheless forms for the author a counter-argument to anthropocentric philosophies of nature (82). Shaw turns to the *Freedom* essay and to the conflict of good vs. evil as that which distinguishes human beings from the animals (93). Shaw’s conclusion is Schelling remains anthropocentric—though not irremediably so. For in Schelling’s “Presentation” of 1801, Shaw sees an argument for the *thoughtfulness* of all individuals and so animals (97). In the third Schelling essay, Cem Kömürçü deals extensively with the *Freedom* treatise. His central thesis is that Schelling’s Absolute is a non-Absolute—an Absolute that is forever out of our grasp (100). It is the non-ground and is inaccessible to our thinking

(101). In concert with the latter-day arguments of Derrida and others on difference and speculative reason, the author retrieves the (Romantic) idea that art and poetry do a better job of capturing what goes on behind the beginning than thinking (111-112). This of course is in contrast to the mainstream of German Idealism—particularly Hegel—who is said to make thought itself the beginning (100). We see a similar claim in the fourth essay featuring Schelling; Jason Wirth’s, “And Hence, everything is Dionysus: Schelling and the Cabiri in Berlin.” Wirth, invoking Manfred Frank, locates Being beyond and prior to the beginning of thought (288). This, Wirth claims, is a disclosure of Schelling’s Berlin lectures—an “unprethinkable being as what precedes all thinking” (287).

While Shaw sees “thoughtfulness” penetrating deep into the structures of individuals, Kömürçü and Wirth (it is difficult to say with Schnell, as he deals more with endings than beginnings) see a non-ground inaccessible to our thinking. In the case of the Hegel essays, two deal squarely with the topic of nature, while the other ranges over his corpus. Joseph Carew’s essay, entitled, “Hegel on the Universe of Meaning: Logic, Language, and Spirit’s Break from Nature” moves the reader from the nature of Hegel’s logic (non-metaphysical, semantic, discursive) to the relationship of logic with nature. Carew provides a “deflationary” reading of Hegel’s logic (166)—though distinguishable from Terry Pinkard and Robert Pippin’s naturalistic readings. For Carew notes the “deep bond” between logic and language that is absent from these other readings. Since language is conceptualization for Hegel, the logic is foundational in the sense that it provides the structure through which we can understand what it means to talk about the world (168). Logic emerges as a “meta-discourse”—a language in which we use language in giving meaning to the world (173). The historical tradition that envisages Being as first philosophy (including Schelling) takes a hit, here: there is no Being of pure presence at the basis of metaphysics (177). As categories construct a natural discourse, it is only through categories we envisage a complete and self-sufficient nature (184); nature beyond categorization is both indifferent and impervious to our reflective activity (185). Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature is less about nature *an sich* and more about our reflection of it. Carew situates Hegel’s break from nature favourably between three poles of current thinking—the eliminative materialism of the Churchlands, the irreducibility of mind (Chalmers), and the inexplicability of consciousness (Meillassoux) (188).

Wes Furlotte’s “Lack and the Spurious Infinite: Towards a New Reading of Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature,” makes the claim that Hegel’s nature is exteriority, rather than the mere idea of exteriority, or the

exteriority of the conception (195). It is “externality all the way down” (195). This is in contrast to modern-day readers of Hegel, such as Meillassoux, who are suspicious of Hegel’s philosophy of nature (193). It also rejects recent readings of Hegel’s philosophy of nature, such as Allison Stone’s, wherein nature is thought an exteriorization of the Notion (196). Furlotte takes us through Hegel’s account of animal life in the *Philosophy of Nature* to buttress his thesis. Furlotte’s thesis leaves us with the question how Hegel’s initial exteriorization of the Notion (at the beginning of the *Philosophy of Nature*) is not initially the mere Other of the Notion, rather something in and of itself, which it would need to be if it were irreducibly external *and* approachable by the Notion.

Adrian Johnston, in “Absolutely Contingent: Slavoj Žižek and the Hegelian Contingency of Necessity,” deals directly with a contemporary reading of Hegel. The starting point for Johnston is the absolute contingency of Hegel’s Absolute—a reading, incidentally, shared by many contemporary Hegel scholars (216-217). In Žižek’s reading, contingency plays the role of foundation to necessity: necessity (and the Absolute, and Idea, and the Concept, etc.) are outcomes of what is a fundamentally contingent set of (categorical) affairs (223). But does contingency really go all the way down? Johnston surmises Hegel would be unhappy with Žižek’s characterization, as there is a sense in which categories (Johnston is speaking of Hegel’s logic, here) are atemporal and ahistorical and impervious to Žižek’s retroactivity (227 - 228). The logic remains metaphysical, while the Philosophy of Right is temporal/historical.

Sean McGrath’s “On the Difference Between Schelling and Hegel” directly confronts Hegel with recourse to Schelling’s early and later works. While Schelling never built a system (he in fact builds several systems), his works remain systematic, governed by “the canons of adequacy and coherence” (249). Schelling’s resistance to building a system is the recognition that a system of thought is inadequate to account for the world of things (250); a sentiment that Hegel apparently does not share. Nor do certain contemporary thinkers—Žižek amongst them. Nor does Markus Gabriel, well-respected Schelling scholar that he is. For all of these, and several Anglo-American Hegel scholars besides, Hegel’s closedness to the world of thought by way of a closedness to the world of things makes his a philosophy of immanence, whereas Schelling’s is a philosophy of transcendence (252; 269). Even as early as *System* (1800), Schelling makes clear the radical open-endedness of thinking: his is not a sovereignty of philosophy over nature, over science, over “other forms of discourse” (259). Perhaps most trenchantly, “otherness” for Hegel is the mere appearance of difference, and difference is the difference of oneself (thought, Spirit) (259).

“Otherness” in Schelling, by contrast, is not fully graspable as thought or Spirit. In the later Schelling, a kenotic move is made, wherein reason must fully empty itself to grasp its outside (262). Of course, Schelling, able to make room for the other, has a positive philosophy that Hegel, unable to do so, lacks.

The final paper I mention is Konrad Utz’s “Beyond Modernity: the Lasting Challenge of German Idealism.” The legacy German Idealism has left us is the quest for a comprehensive, systematic theory (295) and this is the goal philosophy should recover (316). Needless to say, Utz does not speak for all of the presenters, and certainly not for those that decry systematic theory (without necessarily decrying the attempt to be systematic). Here, I am thinking of Shaw, Furlotte, McGrath and Wirth. But Utz’s essay raises an interesting point I would like to dwell upon for the remainder of this review: if there is something valuable in German Idealism that allows it to respond to contemporary philosophical problems, what is it if not its systematic nature? Schnell, in contrast to Shaw, Furlotte, McGrath and Wirth, seems to agree with the systematic intent of Schelling’s *System*. This puts him in closer alignment than Shaw et. al to the Hegel scholars (with the exception of Furlotte), who likely agree with Carew that philosophy is the master discourse that sublates other discourses (science, art, religion).

We therefore have a tension between those that see the proper role of philosophy as a systematic enterprise, a closed (or closed enough to hang together well) discourse that gathers other discourses together and makes them meaningful (Utz, together with Schnell, Kömürücü, Johnston and Carew), and an attempt at systematicity (at least in one phase of German Idealism) that reveals the irreducible difference of Being itself, most notable in Schelling’s *Freedom* essay and later works, but recognizable even in *System* itself as the differing subjective and objective unities of the subject-object (McGrath, together with Wirth, Shaw, Kömürücü, and Furlotte, who argues for a Hegel privileging nature as pure exteriority). Juxtaposing these thinkers is not to suggest one side is right and the other wrong; rather, it is to suggest that the question of how German Idealism will best serve contemporary philosophical problems is going to devolve on the understanding and position of Being and the role and scope of systematicity, unity, and teleology in the completed program. These are properly metaphysical concerns, and so the service German Idealism provides will depend on how these concerns are addressed. There are plenty of thinkers invoked that eschew systematicity and unity mentioned in the volume (Derrida, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Meillassoux, Harman, and Žižek), both in admiration and criticism. Are there contemporary thinkers

of the opposite persuasion: thinkers that believe otherwise? It seems to me any fruitful debate will turn on such a challenge made manifest. In any event, we should want the linkage of German Idealism to contemporary problems to reveal the tensions in the metaphysical concerns we have today and these, to judge by the contemporary philosophers and thinking invoked in this volume, concern Being, beginnings, and systematicity now as much as then.

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