



Review of Hume, Hegel and Human Nature

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Christopher J. Berry: HUME, HEGEL AND HUMAN NATURE.
 The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982. pp. X + 229, Dfl.
 95.00

The project of this book is both interesting and important. Hegel owes a considerable debt to the thinkers, historians, and researchers of the Scottish Enlightenment -- a debt which is only now beginning to be uncovered, examined and appreciated properly. As a theorist of human nature in its integrity Hume towers over his contemporaries; but the originality of his work in epistemology created such a stir both in England and in Germany that the constructive and systematic character of his naturalism went almost unremarked for more than a century after his death (even though it brought him most of the favorable notice that he received during his life). Thus for all of the German thinkers after Kant, Hume was noteworthy as the sceptical voice that disturbed Kant's "dogmatic slumbers". Hegel knew of him as a historian from his own school days onwards; but as far as I can make out it was only the sceptical voice that had any impact upon him in his maturity.

And yet, because both of them were critical and systematic thinkers about human nature who shared the fruits of a great tradition of humane learning and a large body of social scientific inquiry, there are some remarkable similarities between them. Of course, the differences are even more obvious and striking, but it is the substantial community both of goals and of beliefs that makes the differences truly interesting.

Berry is sufficiently conscious of this community to be sympathetic to both of them (which is quite an achievement in view of the precedents set by

giants like T.H. Green and Bertrand Russell). His book is therefore a valuable first step toward the detailed comparison between Hume's empirical naturalism and Hegel's spiritual empiricism that will eventually fill many books and articles (and absorb the energies of quite a number of intellects in different fields). But it is only the first step; and I cannot help feeling that a bigger step was possible, even within the compass of a pioneering two hundred pages. It is a pity that he seems not to be acquainted with the essays of Joachim Ritter. In Ritter's work, Hegel's debt to Scottish thought was evaluated in a way that would surely have stimulated Berry to go further. All who are interested in Berry's problem should be apprised of the translation of Ritter's Hegel and the French Revolution, (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T., 1982).

Berry's own approach reminds me a little of Plutarch. He sketches out two "parallel systems". This has some advantages, since on the one hand much of Hume's social thought is scattered in his Essays, and it needs to be organized; and on the other hand, Hegel's philosophy of Spirit is so voluminous that it has to be abridged for us, in order that its structure may be properly visible. But when one has put "Hume's system" into seventy pages, and "Hegel's system" into eighty (with fifty pages of valuable background discussion of the Enlightenment and Romantic generation) there is not much space left for the elaboration of comparisons; and the two statuesque portraits have not enough of the blood and breath of real life in them to allow for any but the most general comparisons. In Plutarch's Parallel Lives the "comparisons" are often missing altogether -- either because Plutarch never got around to working them out,

or because later generations of readers would not pay for the transcription. In Berry's "parallel systems" the final comparison is not quite lacking, but it would hardly be worth paying for. There is little more to it than a page here and there devoted to the elaboration of his last sentence: "In short, in sum, Hume's theory of human nature and society places them firmly in the world of nature, whilst Hegel's theory of human nature and society places them equally firmly in the Nature-transcended world of Geist". (The duplicative tendency evident even in this sentence is symbolically appropriate).

Regarded as two parallel essays Berry's work is quite valuable (for the reasons indicated). It is quite possible for a reader who is interested in only one of the two H___'s to read the appropriate half of the book with profit and without much static interference or "white noise" (so to speak). This fact should be publicized and emphasized because it is not what the average user of a library catalogue will be apt to assume. Of course, many of Berry's interpretations are highly debatable; and often (like Plutarch) he is not as careful as he should be about the context from which his data come. But since he is more scrupulous than Plutarch about the existence of other views, no intelligent reader will be tempted to believe that the truth is simple and obvious.

All the same, the point where Berry stops is the point where the serious inquiry should begin. His method of approach has forced him to leave this task to his successors. When they appear, they will find that he has done valuable spade work, and that as a result some of the focal problems are easy to identify. For example, when we compare Hume's assumptions with those

of Hegel, we can see why the theory of the self caused him so much trouble. In my view, Berry's work shows that it is here (upon the obvious yet undiscoverable self, and its capacity for sympathy) that the next stage of the comparative inquiry must be focussed.

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