

Freedom, Truth and History: An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy

Stephen Houlgate

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Stephen Houlgate has written an introduction to Hegel that is more than historical. For him, "Hegel's is still a viable philosophical endeavour with extremely important things to contribute to modern debates, particularly the debates about historical relativism, poverty and social alienation, the nature of freedom and political legitimacy, the future of art, and the character of the Christian faith" (3). This ambitious book is clearly written and very thoughtful. By concentrating on a number of central themes, Houlgate avoids giving us another numbing summary of the whole system, yet he conveys a general idea and feel for the overall project. He also provides fresh looks at areas of Hegel's thought not usually treated by those in his wing of Hegel interpretation.

Houlgate begins with an introductory chapter presenting Hegel as attacking immediacy and showing the necessity of conceptual apparatus in our getting in touch with the world. Hegel is neither a relativist (for there are internal criteria implicit in our self-developing nature), nor a straightforward Enlightenment optimist. The chapter introduces the twin themes of self-creation and immanent logic, which intertwine in the rest of the book. Humans make themselves what they are, but within their self-creation is "the logic immanent in our own activity" (39). There is a delicate tension between self-determination and letting go, between Spirit as rationality in the world and humans as self-producing, between the presuppositionless and the historical. On all these points Houlgate's Hegel comes down on the side of necessity, but tries to integrate subjective needs and freedom into the self-developing whole.

In each of the sections of the book there is a tension between self-determination and rational fate. For example, Houlgate will say: "For Hegel the absolute truth of humanity is that human beings have no fixed, given identity, but rather determine and produce their identity and their world in history, and that they gradually come to the recognition of this fact in history.....If human beings are indeed historically self-determining, they cannot simply be this, but must actively determine themselves in history to be self-determining....this process involves humanity making itself explicitly what it already is implicitly" (26). However, that implicit nature has more constraints than you might think; the self that determines itself is not what the usual person might think when reading the preceding quotation. Indeed, Houlgate says that while "most people like to consider themselves the ones who are active when they are thinking....the procedure of Hegel's logic disturbs that 'freedom' to think for oneself" (63). While the key to Houlgate's interpretation of the Hegel's logic is the self-determination of thought, crucial to his later discussions is the realization that this is not identical to the realization of the finite self. That self's business is to abandon itself to the movement of thought and to the development of reason in the community or in the world. "Let thought determine itself in our thinking, not...insist that we be the ones who do the thinking or who control the path that thought takes" (63). As Houlgate reads Hegel's philosophy of the state

and religion, this precedence of necessity over subjective freedom will be mobilized in favor of Sittlichkeit and faith.

Immanent development and self-creation come together in the Logic, which is the self-development of reason. The chapter on Hegel's Logic offers an overall reading rather than any particular detail. Houlgate's approach to the Logic generally follows the categorial interpretation found in Kenley Dove, Richard Winfield, William Maker, and others. His is not the "'soft', hermeneutic, pragmatic Hegel" (69). The logic is seen as the development of self-grounding presuppositionless thinking, starting with pure indeterminacy and exploring the self-constitution of thought as it achieves determinacy. Houlgate sees the Phenomenology as showing that there is no way to make an intelligible distinction between determinations of thought and determinations of being.

Houlgate's presentation of the logic is particularly clear on the point that Hegel does not apply some separable method. Houlgate is therefore committed to the analysis of the transitions in the logic being of different types, depending on the subject matter, and he does a good introductory job of showing how this might be. Still, given the length of the logic, Houlgate cannot give its transitions the lengthy discussions he devotes to the major transitions in Hegel's treatment of right, art, and religion. His strategy in the Logic chapter is to narrate the transition from being to becoming as the minimal a priori thought of determinacy. That narration is deftly done, though his replies to standard objections (55ff) presuppose a commitment to the project of self-grounding thought that the objector would not grant.

If his treatment of the Logic is meant to show how Hegel reins in the seeming freedom of individual thought, Houlgate's treatment of the Philosophy of Right tries to save Hegel from the charge of allowing no political freedom. This involves differing from standard liberal notions of freedom (80) without subordinating the individual to some larger Individual or social totality. True social freedom involves "being able to let go of one's insistence that one's conscience is the ultimate moral authority in one's life, of being open to the value of laws, customs and institutions and of knowing how to trust them and find freedom in them....the laws and institutions in which trust is placed must merit this trust by guaranteeing the rights of personal inviolability, property, and moral responsibility" (102).

Houlgate has many insightful things to say about the three large divisions of the Philosophy of Right, and about their progression and interrelation. He shows how each sphere of right demands more than it can itself provide, thus moving the dialectic along. His interpretation of the sphere of abstract right is the most original of the three and manages to be both clear to the beginner and useful for the specialist.

Houlgate is committed to a currently unfashionable essentialism, and he makes the most of it. Houlgate is of necessity abrupt in dealing with the details of Hegel's theory of the state, though he handles the question of poverty adroitly. He also gives an excellent treatment of the importance of the Corporations in Hegel's scheme. Houlgate describes the State in terms of the need for a civic spiritual whole and union (120). However, because of this emphasis on union,

Houlgate slights the particularity of different states, and from his treatment it is not obvious why Hegel would be against the creation of a world-state.

Houlgate's chapter on Hegel's theory of art provides a good summary description of Hegel's ideas plus an extrapolation of how Hegel's views might deal with recent trends in art. Houlgate's Hegel emphasizes art's beauty, harmony, and the at-homeness of spirit. Here too Houlgate is an unabashed essentialist, and here especially this puts him at odds with recent art that has been directed at questioning essential definitions in art as well as the connection of art and beauty. Houlgate responds by reading Hegel's attacks on the ironic art of his time as directed at a proto-postmodernism.

Houlgate has trouble with art that is deliberately dislocating or based on the sublime rather than the beautiful. "[R]estlessness and endless deferral of self-presence" are not the final truth of human existence. Houlgate chooses to censure modern and postmodern art rather than take up Hegel's theme of the death of art (168). He describes postmodern art as a new form of symbolic art. These maneuvers are not notably convincing, and I have the feeling that the conceptual tools Houlgate deploys are not really up to dealing with current art. Perhaps this is because those tools remain fixed on art as the embodiment of the beautiful, and because Houlgate's essentialism forces him to treat contemporary art as too unified a movement.

In the end Houlgate's treatment of art is nostalgic in a way that Hegel himself might avoid. Houlgate says, "Perhaps Hegel was wrong and modern art has simply displaced his aesthetics of beauty and truth--either by creating a need for a new philosophical aesthetics (such as that of Adorno) which can do justice to the emancipation of art from beauty, or by making any general philosophical aesthetics superfluous or impossible. Or perhaps Hegel's aesthetics should force us, rather, to ask whether, through the emancipation of art from beauty, we have not lost as much as we have gained. We may welcome the freedom and inventiveness of modern artists, but we might ask whether some have not used that inventiveness to undermine, rather than sustain, the wholeness and richness of human life." (174) Despite its insight, this misses the point of so much recent art whose attempt has been to show that "the wholeness and richness of human life" has been undermined by other non-aesthetic forces, or perhaps never really existed as it was represented.

The chapter on Hegel's philosophy of religion provides an insightful interpretation. Houlgate's Hegel is at once the most Christian of philosophers, because his doctrine of rationality in the world follows a Trinitarian and incarnational pattern, and not Christian at all, since personal relations with God and Christ disappear. Love is an image of rational existence (187). Houlgate offers less comfort than he thinks for those who take Hegel as an orthodox Christian. However, much of this chapter is devoted to various theological objections to Hegel and Houlgate's attempt to show how religious images are appropriately cashed out in terms of Hegel's project of the self-development of immanent reason.

Houlgate argues that Hegel is not being reductionist in his treatment of the relation of religious representation to philosophical thought. However he also says that "whereas worship is a

'thinking towards God', therefore a thinking which comes to consciousness of its identity with God, philosophy knows itself to be God's thinking of himself in and as our thinking or, to put it in less theological, more philosophical terms, to be reason determining itself" (226).

Houlgate's God is self-developing, self-conscious reason. In order to translate the religious image of creation Houlgate accepts a doctrine of natural teleology: "by understanding dialectical reason as leading necessarily from immediacy to explicit self-determination, Hegel can show that, although physical objects are not obviously self-determining since they are subject to external mechanical forces, nature as a rational whole is a process leading to modes of being which are fully self-determining" (179). There is serious question about what this could mean if it is assigning a teleological structure to nature as a whole while admitting mechanical causation in all details. This difficult doctrine also confronts Darwinism (which curiously is never mentioned), and questions of the sort raised by Steven Jay Gould concerning the contingency of the products of evolution.

Houlgate's discussion of the necessity of faith and the heart even for philosophy is masterfully clear, and he draws exciting parallels between religious faith and resignation to God's will, and his earlier emphasis on abandonment of the particular self (to the movement of thought in the Logic, and to the Sittlichkeit of the community in the state). The tension between self-creation and necessity is held within the realization that "speculative philosophy and Christian faith are simply two modes of the same spirit, two ways of experiencing freedom and new life through letting go of oneself" (227).

In this review I have touched on only a few of the themes and arguments Houlgate presents so clearly. Houlgate sought to write "a moderately-sized introduction to his philosophy which can help render that daunting but immensely rewarding body of thought accessible to non-specialists" (3). With the clarity of its writing and its willingness to take stands on Hegel interpretation and on current issues, the book offers a fine introduction. The book will also give more experienced Hegel readers many worthwhile issues to think about.

I am not so sure whether the book will also succeed in its aim "to kindle an interest in Hegel amongst those who have...previously regarded him with suspicion" (4). I suspect that philosophers of a more Heideggerian or deconstructive bent will find in Houlgate's book ample confirmation that Hegel is the kind of metaphysical thinker they thought he was. Analytic philosophers should find the arguments about ethics and the state of considerable interest, but I suspect few will be persuaded to take Hegel seriously overall. In part this would be because Houlgate's interpretation depends on the idea of schemes of thought, which runs into serious objections stemming from Davidson and others. Also, in this introductory presentation Houlgate does not have the space to connect his reading of Hegel's development of concepts and notions with the post-Fregean concentration on propositions and sentences.

Still, as an introduction the book does a splendid job of linking Hegel to real concerns and questions, and providing a topical overview that is not afraid to take sides. For what it intends, and we need that function filled, Houlgate's book is the best available.

