Book Reviews


The central problem Geiger wants to explore in his interesting and lucid contribution to the scholarship on Hegel's political philosophy is the paradox surrounding the founding act of the state. For Geiger, the Hegelian contribution to this age-old problem comes in the form of the historical normativity implied by the Doppelsatz: 'what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational' (G.W.F. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, ed. A.W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 20) and in Hegel's theory of war and revolution as the destruction and rebirth of value.

In the light of these two theses, Geiger reformulates Hegel's critique of Kant, arguing that Hegel agrees with Kant about the need for reflection in ethical life, but seeks to understand what is to be reflected on. What is to be reflected on, it turns out, itself expressed the paradox of the foundation of the modern state: that the state seeks to justifies itself through the order it has imposed on nature, but that nature, as non-rational, cannot actually be the source of this authority. The authority of the state is thus based in part on arbitrary power. In terms of the Doppelsatz, this means that the actual must become rational and the rational must become actual. The paradox here is that 'the act that makes the rational actual is itself actual' (p. 122), in other words, that the rational is not rational through and through, but is itself a becoming rational which is parasitic upon the non-rationality of its origin.

From this Geiger concludes several things, all of which are of central importance for Hegel scholarship. First of all, this means that Hegel does not identify the present with the rational, for the paradox of the Doppelsatz means that there is no way of conclusively showing that the actual is rational (p. 91). Secondly, this means that Hegel's philosophy of history 'poses the historically imperative question of how the rational becomes actual' (p. 122). This is the question of the development of freedom itself. Lastly, as a way of combining these two theses, Geiger gives an account of how Hegel conceived of the structure of the reason's actualization through war and revolution.

Setting aside many of the interesting interpretative issues Geiger takes up with regard to Hegel's views on war and revolution, the central claim is this: that the concept of war in the Philosophy of Right (treated in the form of the French revolution in the Phenomenology of Spirit) is the founding act of ethical life because it destroys all value and hence reconstitutes all value. War brings to consciousness the paradox of the state in the sense that it reveals as empty 'rational' imperatives pressed on the individual by the state. War is thus the collapse of what might be called the state's 'rationalization' (my term) into the state of
nature (p. 103). But, as the state arose in response to a real need for order, that is, as the result of human reflection on nature, war at the same time inaugurates a new set of values.

According to Geiger, the reason individuals fall by the wayside in war and revolution is that no individual can found meaning or freedom on her own. At the same time, however, it is each individual’s duty to engage in reflection, that is, to create value. The intractable confusion about the content of these values is what, according to Hegel, gives rise to ‘the meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water’ (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], §582).

The paradox of war means both that the actual must become rational, but cannot fully become so. Geiger does not seek to dispel this paradox but argues that his analysis ‘explains why in moments of ethical crisis the duty to act on the highest moral law or the highest ideal of freedom condemns us to act outside any constituted order of social and political institutions and acknowledged laws’ (p. 150).

I would now like to raise a few interpretative questions with regard to Geiger’s two theses outlined above. In my opinion, Geiger is clearly right to interpret Hegel as conceptualizing history as the open-ended struggle for freedom and hence as rejecting the idea that history has come to an end because the actual is the rational. But the paradox which Geiger develops in order to make this point seems to me to come at too high a cost to Hegel’s project. Geiger turns Hegel from a dialectical thinker into a thinker of aporia—the term ‘dialectic’ is not mentioned once in the course of the book. The paradox of the founding of ethical life, underwritten by references to Cavell and Derrida, makes Hegel hard to distinguish from other thinkers in this tradition, like Hobbes and even Schmitt.

But this is not just a question of where in the tradition of political thought to locate Hegel, it is a question of the metaphysical (or post-metaphysical) content of Hegel’s system and hence of Hegel’s interpretation of the possibility of real historical freedom. The founding act of modern ethical life which Geiger identifies as war is supposed to be at once a description of actual or concrete historical events—the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars—and a philosophical paradigm. The paradox of war is supposed to show us both how meaning is disrupted in history by real events, and also how meaning is always a rationalization or a lie which hides its origins in nature. But the metaphysical side of the paradox, though it yields the welcome result that Hegel’s philosophy of history must be open-ended, fails to find its historical analogue.

The problem is that Geiger has disregarded a key Hegelian concept, namely mediation. Let me put the question this way: what does it mean for a war or revolution to accomplish ‘the complete collapse of the ethical sphere’ (p. 123)? I submit that this cannot be a historical point since, as we know from experience, wars and revolutions often change too little, they are not transformative enough. That is, what comes after a revolution often looks all too much like what is replaced. Hegel, giving his lectures on the philosophy of right in the 1820s could hardly have failed to notice the reactionary turn of life in France after Napoleon’s defeat in 1814, nor the conservative political climate in Prussia, which made it necessary to write his ‘conservative’ preface to that work. So then it must be a philosophical point, a point about the necessity of historical transformation. But why, one could ask, must transformation occur in fits and starts, by revolution? Is not much accomplished without radical transformation?