

Michael Forster

German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond.

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A companion volume to the author's *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (2010), this essay collection has two goals. First, it seeks to 'set the historical record straight' regarding the origin of the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, crediting it to the pre-Fregean German tradition, particularly the movements and figures inspired by Herder, who Forster claims laid 'the foundations for modern philosophy of language' (2). Second, it argues that Herder's core insights 'get...many important things right' (2) concerning language, in contrast with those theses that deviate from them, including those more recently affirmed by figures in the German tradition, but especially by contemporary Anglophone philosophers, to whom this volume is largely addressed.

Briefly, Herder's core insights (e.g., 25, 88-9, 109-10) are: 1) thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language; 2) meaning consists in word-usages, rather than referents, mental ideas, etc.; 3) different cultures exhibit profound differences in language and modes of thought; 4) investigating the differences between languages reveals culturally distinct modes of thought. These principles are not explicitly defended in this volume, save indirectly by critiques of rival theories. Rather, they form the connecting link posited between Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt and G. W. F. Hegel (the only thinkers covered at length), abandoned at times by Hegel and then by many subsequent philosophers of language (treated more summarily) in a move Forster finds retrograde.

The first and third essays are overviews of the life and thought of Schlegel and Humboldt, respectively, while the eighth essay offers a survey of 19th century philosophies of language. While by no means complete introductions, these three papers are succinct and lively, focusing largely on themes Forster draws from Herder. While many will no doubt—and sometimes with justification—question some of the details, overall these essays offer both fine outlines of Schlegel's and Humboldt's works in particular, and a gateway into Forster's take on the post-Herderian linguistic tradition in general, especially for his target audience.

The second essay concerns Schlegel's hermeneutics, in particular aspects of it that were not adopted in the more famous lectures of Schleiermacher, but which preserve and extend ideas drawn from Herder. These claims include: a) one must attend to a text's genre when interpreting it; b) a distinct meaning may be implicitly expressed by a textual whole, above and beyond those of its parts; c) unconscious meanings can be expressed and thus interpreted; d) one may need to attribute inconsistencies to a text in order to properly understand it; and e) non-linguistic art expresses meanings that can nevertheless be linguistically articulated. While Forster's discussion, focused on Herder's insights, is

somewhat narrow in scope and could have benefitted from a consideration of some of the recent scholarship on Schlegel in literary studies, it does explicate an underexplored chapter in the history of philosophical hermeneutics, grounded in a wide range of relevant texts which are often interpreted with nuance.

The fourth essay charts the developmental origins of modern linguistics, crediting the pivotal contributions to Schlegel, not only for preserving the above insights, but for building on them in original and influential ways, e.g., by positing an organic conception of individual languages grounded in their specific grammars, identifying comparative grammar as the central mission of empirical linguistics, and making significant headway in the comparison of different grammars. He also argues that Humboldt's contributions were largely limited to refinements of Schlegel's contributions, e.g., extending the organic principle to identify the sentence as the 'fundamental unit of language' (115), undertaking a more encompassing and refined comparison of different grammars, and hypothesizing more strongly than his predecessors that the different grammatical structures of language constitute different cultural worldviews. Again, Forster's historical work is subtle, as well as provocative. He also rightly takes Schlegel and Humboldt to task for attempting to 'rank' world languages in accordance with a hierarchy of grammatical forms, for both factual and ethical reasons. Less successful is his argument against the most well known aspect of Humboldt's theory: the thesis of a universal grammar. Centering his critique of UG on the cases built by Humboldt and Chomsky (a rather quick version of the poverty of stimulus argument), Forster raises some potentially interesting counter-arguments, but ignores commonly proposed proofs for it (e.g., infinite recursion, pidgins, empirical typology), as well as the historical development and specific structures of Chomsky's own grammar. It is refreshing to see the Sapir-Whorf thesis defended through its historical antecedents, and many compelling criticisms of UG can and have been made; but, given the brevity of his discussion of both UG and its potential problems, Forster overreaches in declaring 'the doctrine of an innate universal grammar...a serious mistake' (127).

While repetition is an issue throughout the volume, it particularly affects the remaining essays (most of which were previously published) and consequently, as Forster himself suggests, only an 'energetic reader' (4) is likely to work through them all. The fifth chapter seeks to provide an overview of Hegel's philosophy of language, again, by focusing primarily on its adherence to, and deviations from, Herder's insights. However, while arguably suited to less systematic thinkers like Schlegel and Humboldt, the concentration on Herder's influence tends here to obscure as much as it enlightens, as Forster's analysis is too focused on isolated claims and rarely take full account of their context, either in individual works or in his system as a whole. Overall, the essay seems devoted to tracking textual evidence for Hegel's affirmation or rejection of Herder's views, rather than systematically presenting Hegel's arguments. Consequently, it omits some of the most central (and still contentious) aspects of his work on language (the speculative sentence, the role of language in recognition, the relationship between grammar and logic, the tension between philosophy and its linguistic expression, the nature of the linguistic sign and its links with representation, imagination and memory, etc.). While admittedly not intended as an 'exhaustive' (176, n. 97) treatment, and while

revealing many interesting historical shifts and ambivalences in the development of some of Hegel's ideas about language, the essay nevertheless remains too fragmented and narrow to offer a compelling introduction to Hegel's still elusive philosophy of language, in particular to readers not already acquainted with the literature.

Chapter 6 uses Hegel's *Aesthetics* to explore the vacillation many German philosophers display between the claim that thought is strictly bounded by what we normally call language ('narrow expressivism') and the looser claim that it is bounded merely by expressive media, such as sculpture or music ('broad expressivism'). Forster explores the problem with balance, ultimately defending a 'refined' version of narrow expressivism that makes some concessions to the most persuasive aspects of broad expressivism, e.g., by widening the understanding of language to include such rule-governed conventions as gesture. This is the most compelling of the papers on Hegel and, arguably, the book's most substantial 'systematic' contribution.

The remaining two essays treat hermeneutics—one focused on Hegel, as well as Gadamer, the other providing a critical historical survey—and seek to refute what Foster suggests is the dominant, post-Hegelian 'assimilative' view of interpretation that drifts from Herder's ideal of uncovering objective, original meaning. Historically, these essays are less thorough and nuanced than the rest, offering very brief, often problematic accounts of major figures resting on a small number of texts and themes. For instance, there is no substantial discussion of the hermeneutics of inter-subjective or communal recognition in Hegel, the hermeneutic circle or truth as concealment/unconcealment in Heidegger, prejudice, horizontal fusion or dialogue/conversation in Gadamer; and, despite the infamous dispute between Gadamer and Derrida, Forster essentially identifies their theories of meaning. These problems, no doubt, result in part from limited space in the original contexts of the papers, but also from the continued focus on Herder's insights, rather than on the richly imbricated and distinct systematic accounts of the individual thinkers, or their various and serious disagreements. Consequently, Forster overstates the 'assimilationist' tendencies of those he takes to be Herder's opponents (including Anglophone advocates of the principle of charity, 'according to which', Forster argues, 'it is impossible to think inconsistently' [62]), while neglecting some of their most significant contributions. These incomplete presentations of perceived foils correspondingly affect his critiques of modern hermeneutics which, while potentially provocative, often rest on mere assertions. For example, there is his undefended contention that Herderian *Einfühlung* can aid in recapturing original meaning (233); his claim that 'even if it were true that an exact understanding of historical or cultural Others is always impossible...it would surely still be attractive to espouse [such an understanding] as an *ideal* at which interpretation should *aim*' (233); and his suggestion that Gadamer's and Heidegger's critiques of the hermeneutical quest to uncover an objective 'original' meaning might merely be 'convenient' methods for reinterpreting some of their own past pronouncements, in particular those made while they were 'Nazi collaborators', 'to their own advantage' (329, n. 113).

Overall, then, several of the essays combine make a compelling case for the book's overall historical thesis, and can be warmly recommended. However, some of the

book's systematic contributions, as well as its portrayals of perceived opponents, lack the precision and generosity that make its discussions of Schlegel and Humboldt and expressivism so fruitful.

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