

Robert Meynell

Canadian Idealism and the Philosophy of Freedom.

Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2011.

xv + 303 pages

\$95.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7735-3798-8); \$29.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-7735-3799-6)

In *Canadian Idealism and the Philosophy of Freedom* Robert Meynell offers a persuasive formulation of the intellectual roots of the philosophies of C. B. Macpherson, George Grant and Charles Taylor. Meynell argues that despite the real differences among his three subjects, there is an underlying identity: Hegelian idealism. That Meynell manages to write an immensely readable book organized around Hegelian concepts is no small achievement. But above and beyond this, in pointing us toward 'Hegel' Meynell is indicating something at once more general and more unique about the Canadian philosophical situation.

One way of describing the structure of Hegel's thought generally would be to say that as a philosopher Hegel is always deeply concerned with presuppositions. For any proposal we make, Hegel would say, there are always unstated presuppositions without which it cannot stand. Many apparently logical and ethically admirable proposals rely on such unstated presuppositions. If I were to proclaim as a principle of libertarian aspiration a general and unlimited right of individual freedom, I would be presupposing that no individual's maximized right would impose on another's. This presupposition, and therefore the simple libertarian argument itself, is immensely idealistic, though this idealism may not be evident until the presupposition is made clear.

Bringing to light the unspoken presupposition of the libertarian ideal—the atomic isolation of individuals—shows the radical individualist argument to be deeply problematic, because it actually implies radical and continuous violations of peoples' freedom precisely as a result of the assertion of absolute individual freedom. Taking only the tiniest step further, we realize that freedom is realized *precisely in the limitation of freedom*. And it is at this moment that those mysterious Hegelian words, 'Geist', or the untranslatable 'aufgehoben', usually make their appearance.

Meynell deserves credit for making the logic of Hegel's dialectics as readable as he does. But the real point of this book is to highlight a unique as well as fragile dialectical sensitivity characteristic of Canadian political and social theory. Attention to the structure of presuppositions in thought leads us to consider ideas in terms of multiple levels and, most importantly, always to understand ideas as operating in contexts. Meynell, along with his interlocutors Stamps, Armour and Trott, suggests that Canadian idealist thinking is Hegelian in the sense that it is generally marked by an attention to the contexts and presuppositions of ideas as much as 'the ideas themselves.'

What is 'uniquely Canadian' about any of this, when indeed it is a German philosopher to whom Meynell gives credit as the unifying element among Macpherson, Grant and Taylor? The answer lies in the fact that Meynell's argument is focused specifically on the uniqueness of

Canada in the North American context. With regard to that context, it is worth invoking an outside observer, the late British-American philosopher Gregory Bateson, to bring out the shape of Meynell's proposition. Bateson wrote that Americans (with whom, it should be noted, he lived and worked quite happily), 'have a strange response to any articulate statement of presupposition. Such a statement is commonly assumed to be hostile or mocking or—and this is the most serious—authoritarian' (M&N, 27). Bateson's generalization serves as an illuminating negative image of Meynell's argument about Macpherson, Grant and Taylor and about Canadian theory more generally. Canadians in general have been more open to investigating the prevailing dogma of North American politics in terms of its presuppositions, in ways which might seem 'authoritarian' or 'conservative' or 'elitist' to the normal American mind. The archetypal Canadian asks the American, 'but what does the priority you give to individual freedom presuppose?' The archetypal American replies, 'and who do you think *you* are?'

Meynell is not primarily concerned for the precise extent to which extent 'good-naturedness,' or civic spirit, or (simply) marginality would account for this spirit of open discussion regarding the presuppositions of freedom. His concern is for the future of that discussion—a concern apparently shared by the late Jack Layton, author of the Foreword to the book. The 'idealist' subjects of the conversation in this book are, accordingly, three very different thinkers. C. B. Macpherson is described as idealist in his emphatic resistance to British as well as American conceptions of negative liberty, where social authority is conceived as a necessary evil to be minimized. Macpherson insisted that the freedom described by possessive individualist liberals from Hobbes to Berlin is ultimately the freedom to consume in the market and nothing more. Meynell underlines clearly Macpherson's insistence that meaningful freedom must have something more than a commercial product as its object: it must involve the development of capacities and skills of the makers, and this involves the development of relationships and learning of performances, not the acquisition of things.

Macpherson's contribution is framed clearly by Meynell in Hegelian-dialectical terms. According to Meynell, Macpherson demonstrated that 'free' possessive individualism does not lead to freedom, but to general servitude before the immense armatures of corporation and state, which are required to contain the atomic dispersion of the marketplace. He carries forward Macpherson's vision of a society beyond possessive individualism: 'Macpherson is seeking to overcome the competitiveness of capitalism and classical liberalism. He is explicitly rejecting the notion of equality of opportunity as "an equal right to get into the competitive race for more for oneself" in favour of "an equal right to a fully human life for all who will exert themselves."' (98)

Meynell finds the thread connecting the socialist Macpherson to the conservative George Grant: the Hegelian awareness of the mutual influence of concepts and their material context, of how our presuppositions about materiality give a particular direction to our lived social experience and help construct materiality itself. Meynell summarizes Grant's argument in *Philosophy in the Mass Age*: 'Our actions involve choices that are based on what we *believe* we ought to do, and those beliefs are informed by our culture and our history.... The material world we build turns around and builds us....' (111) Grant resembles Macpherson in that for both of them, the apparent inescapability of modern market society and its increasingly one-dimensional technological liberalism actually rests on a circular or spiral historical development: the more the

markets grow, the more the markets make us market-people, the more the markets grow, etc. We are not, for Grant or Macpherson, possessive individuals by any aspect of 'human nature.' Our present 'nature' has been constructed by what cybernetic scientists would call a 'positive feedback loop'—one that, thank God, has not yet amplified itself beyond the earth's capacity to contain it. Meynell quotes from Grant: 'It is this ability to transcend any worldly situation that we call the freedom of the spirit.' (123)

Meynell argues that Grant reached an ideological dead end in his thought because he decided that (to paraphrase Grant himself) Hegelian philosophy and technological liberalism 'go down the same river in different boats'. For Meynell, Grant's turn to Strauss and faith (and away from reason and freedom) is part of his failure to appreciate the extent to which Hegelian philosophy, specifically speaking, or attention to the nature of conceptual presuppositions, more broadly, can liberate us from Hobbesian liberalism. It is here that Meynell's third subject, Charles Taylor, makes his appearance.

Taylor might be seen as the most dialectical and synthetic thinker of Meynell's three subjects. His philosophy consists of a deep appreciation of criticisms of modern society and the erosion of standards for moral evaluation. In this he goes into deeper detail, in spiritual terms, than Macpherson. At the same time, he does not agree with Grant that only faith can save us from the malaise of modernity; reason, in Taylor's philosophy, is or ought to be the expression of humanity's 'reflective consciousness.' Grant's rejection of modern reason *in toto* throws out the reflective baby with the reductivist-empiricist-technocratic bathwater. For Meynell, as for Taylor, a project of reflective or philosophical liberalism is worth maintaining as the antidote to the violence, spiritual emptiness, and democratic decline that mark modern life.

It might be objected that the precise connection between Taylor's philosophical concepts and the practical economic world of work life and self-development—in a nutshell, the problem of systemic inequality which was Macpherson's prime concern—remains rather abstract in *Canadian Idealism*. This criticism would of course be properly directed not only at Meynell but at Taylor's philosophy itself and the many sophisticated varieties of Canadian pluralism that are akin to it. Meynell, like Taylor, tends to identify philosophical conceptions of freedom—or more generally, ideas *about* political relations—with the achievement of freedom in the relations themselves. Meynell and Taylor perhaps overestimate the real influence which reframed conceptual presuppositions can have in the absence of the practical application of this insight in political and economic life. Does this kind of idealism not betray precisely the kind of 'distance from hard reality' Macpherson attributed, in *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, to the mixed legacy of John Stuart Mill? And is it not this abstract quality of Taylorian arguments about freedom that might explain, if not justify, Grant's despair with all forms of progressivism?

Colin J. Campbell
York University