

John McCumber. *Understanding Hegel's Mature Critique of Kant*. Stanford University Press 2013. 232 pp. \$60.00 USD (cloth ISBN 9780804785457).

Hegel's mature philosophical work can reasonably be seen as at least a response to Kant's philosophy. It also constitutes, however, a fairly thorough critique. Hegel, to put it mildly, did not fail to notice the most important philosophical influence of his own time. His critical reflections on Kant's philosophy are often presented implicitly; we must infer his critique only from where he differs from his predecessor. This gives John McCumber one of his main goals in *Understanding Hegel*: showing how Hegel worked out his philosophy by locating his own thought in relation to Kant's work. Thus, according to McCumber, studying Hegel's critique of Kant gives us 'a valuable index to [Hegel's] entire philosophical project' (9).

Studying Hegel's critique has another valuable benefit. McCumber claims it is simply 'of potentially great philosophical importance' (9). Given the influence of Kant's thought on modern philosophical ethics, if, as McCumber reads Hegel, Kant's project is glaringly incomplete and ungrounded (this, it will be claimed, is basically the essence of the 'emptiness' objection), then we should seriously reconsider the significance of the entire Kantian project itself.

The immediate problem facing anyone setting out with these two objectives is sorting out both the immense secondary literature and the sheer density of Hegel's textual legacy. To make things manageable, McCumber limits his investigation in several important ways. First, he restricts his discussion to providing a 'new understanding' of Hegel's criticisms; detailed evaluations of these criticisms are 'postponed' (9). Second, he considers only those secondary authors who help McCumber (often by disagreement) state his case for this new understanding. Third, only Hegel's mature works following from the *Phenomenology* are considered. Finally, with considerable qualification, McCumber proposes to consider only those topics within Hegel's critique which Hegel himself regarded as important. Topics of possible interest to contemporary philosophers are not examined.

In Chapter 1 McCumber acknowledges two lines of interpretation regarding Hegel's philosophical project: an 'older' line sees it as providing grounds for the rejection of Kant's critical project; a 'younger' one views Hegel's project as a continuation of Kant's. While McCumber's affinity is for the latter, he nevertheless offers considerable argument to show that both are, in the end, problematic. McCumber presents what he refers to as a 'definitionalist' reading as an alternative. Hegel, he claims, 'believes all philosophical problems are problems of language and that they can be solved either by reforming language or by better understanding how it works' (30). Surprisingly, it turns out that it is Hegel—not Frege, as many analytic philosophers might claim—who was the first philosopher to take the so-called 'linguistic turn'. McCumber's idea is that 'Hegel's systematic thought amounts to the reflective bestowal of meanings on empty words' (30)—i.e., provides definitions. Hence, Hegel's system offers us an *immanent* development of meaning, a way of recombining the meaning of one term with others within a system. Thus, Hegel's system becomes one whose content is (quoting Hegel) 'not accepted as merely as something that we come across but is recognized as grounded in free thinking, and hence as grounded in itself' (31). McCumber does not put forward this 'third view' as a refutation of the two traditional views since 'no such verdict is possible with Hegel' (29). Rather, McCumber intends his reading to simply 'take its place' beside the two views, and to cast further light on Hegel's critique of Kant.

Before considering Hegel's main critique of Kant's ethics in detail (Chapters 4 and 5), McCumber uses his understanding of Hegel's independence from Kant as established in Chapter 1 to explain Hegel's critique of Kant's theoretical philosophy (Chapter 2) and then Hegel's particular understanding of idealism (Chapter 3). These chapters are some of the most dense and difficult in the book. The challenge facing readers who might be interested specifically in the critique of Kant's ethics is determining how these topics illuminate that issue. The reader seems largely left to herself to connect these issues together.

The main claim that Hegel is often said to have made against Kant's ethics is that its formalism leaves it devoid of content. According to McCumber, however, this is much too simplistic. In Chapter 5, he adumbrates no less than *eight* aspects of Hegel's critique. Kant's ethics: [1] fails to begin from a systematically correct definition of the will; [2] fails to define the will naturalistically, and thus remains a 'noumenal' concept 'wholly separate from the empirical domain in which we live, decide and act' (148); [3] fails to show how our moral agency can integrate a moral sense of duty with other natural drives and desires; [4] provides no theory of action; [5] is too formalistic, lacking the ability to introduce content into morality; [6] conceives of moral motivation in terms of an inadequate opposition between moral and nonmoral motives; [7] cannot give rise to an 'immanent theory of duties' (149); and [8] gives rise to a social philosophy based on coercion instead of freedom. McCumber explains that only the last two aspects are criticisms that Hegel explicitly and particularly makes against Kant. Criticisms [5] and [6] are made against Kant's general philosophical approach shared by other philosophers (Fichte, for example). The first four are 'buried'. They represent implicit criticisms based on points of departure from Kant that Hegel makes in working out his own philosophy. Whenever we notice these departures, McCumber argues, we can safely assume that, from Hegel's perspective, Kant got things wrong.

The problem of formalism ([5] above) stems from the non-naturalistic basis of Kant's ethics. Agents engaging in moral judgment must reach moral decisions in the absence of empirical content. Since this cannot practically be done, content might be assumed or presupposed which has not passed philosophical muster—it is not part of a philosophically established, rigorous system. If this external poaching does not occur, decisions remain formal and abstract and then fail to provide specific moral guidance. Hegel, of course, is not objecting to formalism itself. If ethics is to escape from common prejudice, it must reflect on its own principles as abstractly as possible. McCumber notes that Hegel pushes this even further and claims that abstract, formal freedom is 'the highest form of freedom, since as abstract it is...freedom as the self-willing of the will, which is Hegel's version of autonomy' (158-9). The problem is that Kant's ethics *remains* formalistic. By its own restrictions it lacks the resources to become anything else. This point can perhaps be seen more clearly by examining Kant's 'Doctrine of Virtue' in the *Metaphysics of Morals*—a work often unread by contemporary moral philosophers—where Kant explicitly focuses on the application of the formal elements of his ethics defended in the *Groundwork*. Here Kant comes rather easily—too easily, many might argue—to conclusions regarding (to name just a few) 'killing oneself', 'defiling oneself by lust', and duties to develop one's talents which, unsurprisingly, seem to have noticeable markings from his own time and cultural situation.

In Chapter 4, McCumber presents Hegel's conception of marriage as an example of how moral life relates to ethical life. McCumber's discussion of the topic is provocative and fascinating. The application, he argues, shows us how Hegel thinks ethics really works, and how Kant failed to

adequately capture this reality. Marriage, according to McCumber, follows Hegel's 'general schema of utterance' (139). The basic norms of ethical life are first established within the family, are then submitted to 'external reality' in civil society, and then finally are reformulated and fixed by the state. Marriage apparently follows this same pattern—except that it begins naturally and hence follows a basic biological pattern of birth, death, and then rebirth. Two individuals entering marriage meet their 'death'; they lose their individual identities and create a new person. This new entity now must develop and change on its own. The original 'subjective' motives that began the marriage, however, do not continue as its stabilizing force. They give way to the collective concerns of the union itself. Thus marriage, for Hegel, becomes a vehicle of moral development and agency. This is, McCumber claims, what justifies the institution ethically for Hegel: 'Ethical living together on the part of human beings is their liberation' (140). Hence, something 'natural' or empirical (individual mutual attraction) transforms itself into a wider community where individual interests are given up for the benefit of the whole. In order for this ethical transformation to occur, McCumber notes, Hegel insists that marriage must be monogamous and lifelong. A plurality of partners involves a significant departure from the weight given, allegedly equal, to the members of a monogamous unity. And, if it is not lifelong and very difficult to dissolve, self-interest will not be displaced in favour of genuine, community-regarding sentiments.

McCumber's own content restrictions against contemporary interests and evaluation, however, might leave many current readers wishing these had been lifted. In McCumber's hands, Hegel's conception of marriage looks remarkably traditional (and deeply influenced by orthodox Christian theology). It would have been interesting, on the other hand, to consider how Hegel's understanding of marriage and ethics holds up to more contemporary analyses and criticisms, particularly feminist ones. A less external concern, however, is that Kant has also offered us an identifiable account of marriage (in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Lectures*) which might have been worth some comparative examination, given the main focus of this book.

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