

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Thom Brooks. *Hegel's Political Philosophy: A Systematic Reading of the Philosophy of Right.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. xvii + 204 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2574-1.

Reviewed by Lydia L. Moland (Colby College)

Published on H-German (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher



The True is (Still) the Whole: Defending Hegel's System as System

One can almost hear a collective sigh of relief from aspiring political theorists interested in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel when one reads assertions such as the following: "Hegel's political thought can be read, understood, and appreciated without having to come to terms with his metaphysics" (p. 7). Indeed, many of the most familiar names in Hegel scholarship have made similarly liberating claims.[1] Permission granted, then, to throw off old metaphysical shackles and embrace a kinder, gentler, even "sexier" Hegel (p. 130).

Thom Brooks's new study throws some well-deserved cold water on this enthusiasm. Building on Hegel's own professed view that his system was only comprehensible as a whole, Brooks's clearly written and engaging monograph sketches out several cases in which our attempt to do Hegel a favor by updating him for less metaphysically inclined readers leads us to misinterpret him. For better or worse, Brooks reminds us, Hegel was a systematic thinker, and many of his claims can only be understood through understanding their place in his system.

A short introductory chapter, "System," gives the bare-bones requirements for the systematic approach Brooks advocates. Here Brooks sketches, for instance, Hegel's crucial (if often inscrutable) differentiation between something existing and something *actually* existing; he introduces other key vocabulary terms such as "universal," "particular," "individual," "sublation" (*Aufhe-*

bung), and the "idea." With the exception of *Aufhebung*, these terms are listed rather than explained (although footnotes point the reader to the relevant paragraphs in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* [1817]) as part of what Brooks calls his "weak" rather than "strong" systematic approach. (By a "strong" systematic reading, Brooks seems to mean not one more committed to being systematic; rather, a "strong systematic reading would entail more space to note additional specific features of the system" [p. 27]).[2] Following this introduction, the remainder of the book suggests how keeping this system firmly in mind can mediate chronic problems of scholarship in the following areas, each of which is treated in its own chapter: property, punishment, morality, family law, monarchy, and war. As a straightforward application of the systematic approach, each chapter can, Brooks claims, stand alone.

Brooks refreshingly resists the temptation to make Hegel out to be a supporter of whatever modern cause we would most like to conscript him for. Hegel would not, for systematic reasons, have endorsed same-sex marriage or the acceptance of women into the public sphere; he would have continued to advocate a monarchy; he would have rejected cosmopolitan perpetual peace as unrealistic. Brooks frequently reiterates that he does not defend Hegel's positions: he is simply serving up the uncomfortable truth that they were indeed Hegel's positions, and not only because of when he lived, but also because they made sense to him systematically.

Brooks is especially good on the topic of the monarch, showing tensions in Hegel's own claim that said monarch must only "dot the i's" (p. 106). Most helpfully, he highlights the importance of the monarch's prerogative to choose his own ministers and his importance in drafting (and not, as in the British system, only signing) legislation. Those who conclude that Hegel's description of the monarch is "bizarre', 'comical', 'implausible';" and so on do so because they inadequately understand the systematic reasons that lead Hegel to give the monarch his circumscribed majesty (p. 96). Brooks is particularly clear-eyed when recounting Hegel's position on war; he accurately depicts Hegel as a realist both about war and about its sometimes renewing effects on a political community.

Brooks makes then a compelling case that in several key areas of Hegel scholarship, a more systematic approach can clarify vexing questions. This argument is successful as far as Brooks takes it. I found myself sometimes thinking, however, that Brooks's study is by his own description not systematic enough. One of the book's persistent refrains is that Hegel never meant the *Philosophy of Right* (1821) to stand on its own, but saw it as relying on the *Encyclopedia*. But just as Hegel's work did not start with the *Philosophy of Right*, neither did it end there. Hegel treats the philosophy of history and absolute spirit with frustrating brevity at the end of the *Philosophy of Right*, but his further thoughts on both are copiously available to us in his lectures. In these lectures, for instance, Hegel thematizes religion in ways relevant to the questions Brooks asks: he ranks some religions over others, describes what form they should take, and specifies the place religion should have in the life of a modern citizen. Hegel's philosophy of history, to take another example, provides rich detail about the importance of the nation as he perceived it; his extremely controversial claims there about the development of freedom in history should inform our understanding of what Hegel means by a "world court" and subsequently what Hegel's real objection to a cosmopolitan state would be.

Such considerations, then, should encourage us to carry Brooks's systematic approach further. But I also want to register a comment on what I see as its limitation. Brooks has in his sights those who would try to make Hegel more palatable, popular, or widely read. Brooks correctly points out that increasing Hegel's audience is in itself not a defensible goal; philosophy should not be a popularity contest in which number of converts defines success. More to Brooks's point: if making Hegel palatable means distorting his positions on issues ranging from the family to war, it is not clear we are doing

Hegel any favors. Nevertheless, I think there *are* good reasons to attract a larger audience for Hegel's philosophy, reasons having to do with the dominance of Immanuel Kant in both moral and political theory. Hegel's philosophy offers crucial corrections to these trends; it for instance offers a clear emphasis on intersubjectivity and recognition, a complex conception of freedom, and a willingness to make the details of ethical life fundamental rather than secondary to our definition of moral action. Kant scholarship has benefited in the last half century from a clear narrative that is instantly recognizable and compelling without knowledge of its metaphysical underpinnings. It is, in my opinion, a great benefit of the kind of scholarship Brooks criticizes that it has begun to integrate a Hegelian narrative into the philosophical dialogue. If this development has the consequence of steering the conversation in moral and political philosophy away from its liberal excesses, it will in my opinion have done the field a substantial service.

Such general considerations aside, I also think there are specific Hegelian insights worth applying to our world even if Brooks is right that we do violence to Hegel's system by doing so. As an example, let us return to Brooks's accurate claim that Hegel would oppose homosexual relationships on systematic grounds. Brooks rightly locates the source of Hegel's projected disagreement in his belief that the ethical value of marriage results from its joining of *opposites*. Hegel clearly thought that the salient difference was *gender* difference for reasons no doubt justified a hundred different ways throughout his system. Most of us would probably reject each one of them. But this rejection does not destroy the power of Hegel's insight that loving relationships are of value in part because they ask us to recognize someone whose essence is different from ours and modify our desires to take that person's desires into account. Much can be made of this insight, despite the fact that its application to homosexual relationships would certainly throw a proverbial wrench into the works of Hegel's system. So much the worse, one wants to say, for the system. Just as not reading Hegel systematically can lead us to misunderstand him, only reading him systematically risks neglecting insights that can do important philosophical work.

Brooks's work puts us on notice that we cut ourselves loose from Hegel's imposing system at our own peril. We may decide, for some of the reasons listed above, that it is a risk worth taking. Even in this case, Brooks's careful and insightful work is a reminder that a return to the systematic can be very instructive. Perhaps just as impor-

tantly, Brooks shows that a systematic reading of Hegel's philosophy need not require reading or writing tomes of tortured academic prose. Once again, perhaps, a collective sigh of relief is in order.

Notes

[1]. For instance, Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8; Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2; Allen Wood, "Reply," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 25 (1992): 7; Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 5.

[2]. I wonder whether Brooks's choice of "weak" and "strong" as descriptors here is the right one. His commitment to the systematic reading is not weaker, just not spelled out: witness the listing rather than explication of these key terms. I think it would be more accurate to specify only one systematic interpretation and then defend the detail or lack thereof with which one intends to carry out that interpretation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Lydia L. Moland. Review of Brooks, Thom, *Hegel's Political Philosophy: A Systematic Reading of the Philosophy of Right*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25922>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.