

Hegel and contemporary ethics

The Annual Conference of the Hegel Society of Great Britain took place as usual in the first week of September at Pembroke College, Oxford. This year's uncommonly voguish theme, 'Hegel and Contemporary Ethics', promised much, as did the impressive line-up of speakers, which included three of America's finest young scholars of German post-Kantian idealism, as well as the Mill expert and ethicist, John Skorupski.

Frederick Neuhouser opened proceedings with a presentation on 'Ethical-life and the Demands of Conscience', putting to rest the caricature of Hegel's ethics that has adversely affected Hegel's reception among moral philosophers. Notoriously, Hegel claims that the Greeks had no conscience. If one supposes that Hegel modelled his conception of *Sittlichkeit* on the Greeks, then it looks as though there is no room for conscience here either. But this reading puts undue emphasis on Hegel's undoubted admiration of the Greeks, and distorts the delicate balance of classicism and modernism that characterizes his philosophy as a whole, the practical and theoretical. In particular it overlooks that ethics is based on insight not acquaintance.

Sally Sedgwick spoke to the theme of 'Metaphysics and Morality in Kant and Hegel'. One of her concerns was to prevent a familiar move of defenders of Kant, to excise, ignore or interpret beyond recognition all those features of Kant's moral philosophy against which Hegel's criticisms are directed. To this end she argued that Kant's conception of the intelligible subject is indispensable to his metaphysics; that the intelligible subject is a noumenal causality, and that the conception of noumenal cause makes no sense without the premiss of the absolute heterogeneity of form and content. She then proceeded to attack this metaphysical premiss.

The third of the trio from the States, Michael Hardimon, gave a paper on the relation between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, setting out a nuanced and insightful survey of the respective projects of Kant and Hegel and of their core concepts. His main aim was to put some clear water between Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit* and his criticism of *Moralität* and the more Nietzschean anti-moralism that has come to the fore in recent years, including Bernard Williams's attack on the 'peculiar institution' of morality. He raised the questions: (1) Does Hegel have an ethics? (2) Is he a friend or foe of moral theory? (3) Does he have a theory of morality? The answers were: (1) Yes; (2) A friend of a moral theory that does not seek to isolate moral questions from those of our orientation to our social and political institutions, a foe of a moral theory that does; (3) No, at least not a theory of special type of obligation.

In addition, David Merrill gave an expository paper on 'The System of Needs' and Gordon Finlayson sought to show how Hegel's criticism of the formalism of Kant's moral standpoint applies *mutatis mutandis* to Habermas's Discourse Ethics. Finally John Skorupski constructed a more robust defence of moral autonomy than that offered by Kant, which applied Hegel's thought that punishment is due to the free will of the criminal to the phenomenon of moral punishment – the feeling of blame. His account tried to avoid the difficulties that Kantians have in explaining why we hold agents responsible for their heteronomous acts, without losing sight of the heteronomous nature of those acts.

Given the recent resurgence of interest in Hegel's ethics, it was a shame that few graduate students participated. This was due mainly to the prohibitive cost of the conference. At the AGM various suggestions were mooted to encourage the attendance of students through subsidies. Let us hope that this does not remain merely a suggestion and that, by next year, the policy that ought to be, also is.

Gordon Finlayson