Castles
on rock

Hegel and Skepticism
by Michael N. Forster
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One of the greatest problems facing the student of Hegel is that of finding an inroad into his complex system and obscure terminology. Michael Forster's route - via Hegel's reflections on skepticism - is to be recommended. As he states in the Introduction, "the challenge of skepticism lies at the heart of any serious epistemology. Although Hegel's career and critique of the skeptical tradition reveals that epistemological concerns underpin the entire Hegelian system.

Forster's project is developed in three parts. The first examines Hegel's account of the history of skepticism in his 1802 essay, The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy: a presentation of the newest of the newest of the skepticism with ancient skepticism. Hegel attributed greater significance to the ancient tradition and, as Forster argues, the elaboration system of defences erected around his mature writings were to protect his philosophical structure. For the challenge posed by ancient skepticism was not merely academic; it influenced his philosophical understanding of history. Passages in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy and the Phenomenology of Spirit reflect Hegel's belief that the "emergence of man's consciousness had a decisive impact on a certain historical point in the development of human culture."

The second part of Forster's investigation considers Hegel's account of any philosophy and culture. In the Lectures on the History of Philosophy the skeptics, including Socrates, are representative of a skeptical movement bound up with the "collapse of the cognitive, political and religious attitudes of Greek culture. This transition from the unified and harmonious culture of the Roman Empire to the Greek culture with its concept of a God separated from the human world, is characterized in the Phenomenology of Spirit as the "Unhappy Consciousness" - the alienation of humans from God and their natural and social environment. It is only by recognizing the importance Hegel attached to problems, raised by the ancient skeptical tradition, that one can appreciate Hegel's own epistemological standpoint, which Forster elaborates in the third part of the book.

The destructive force of ancient skepticism was two-fold: first, it describes as "concept instantiation" - a sharp division between conceptual thought and reality and second, the second was the general method of equipollence or "esthetics" (equal force on both sides), setting up thought as the ultimate arguments on any issue. This method was employed by the Pythagoreans to produce a suspension of belief. For example, a skeptic might ask whether concepts like "God," "freedom," or "justice" have any instances and then add that it is impossible to assign to each instance a value or to each instance a value. For Hegel this was more threatening than the modern skepticism of Descartes and Hume, which was not founded on any specific method but focused instead on a cluster of problems, such as the legitimacy of metaphysics or the role of reason in the external world. Lacking equipollence modern skepticism was castigated by Hegel for its dogmatism, resting on beliefs whose vulnerability to skeptical attack. Whereas ancient skepticism was about the "decline of belief," its modern variant merely suspended some beliefs, asserting others as "dogmatically, such as the Cartesian certainty of subjective mental states. So if the greater challenge came from the ancient tradition then Hegel focused on the "establishment of concept instantiation and equipollence. This he accomplished, argues Forster, in his mature works, such as the Phenomenology of Spirit, where all his philosophical systems were shown to be incoherent by means of an exhaustive phenomenological analysis. The "method" in Hegel's employment of "self-reflective, dialectical, and "negative" attitudes to himself. This is a supreme irony the method used, to combat skepticism (a total embrace of skepticism) becomes the hallmark of the Hegelian dialectic. Recognizing that any metaphysical standpoint faces no alternative but to destroy itself in its own destruction Hegel pushes each alternative to his own philosophy into sell-inflicted destruction. This approach, argues Forster, originates in Hegel's early Jena period (from 1801 to 1807) when Hegel was deeply, perhaps obsessively, concerned with the pursuit of epistemological certainty. The Hegel concerned with epistemological rigour is a far cry from the familiar portrait of an idealist metaphysician building castles of sand. Forster's excellent re-evaluation of the central issue in Hegel's philosophy is a major contribution to the study of Hegel's understanding of the skeptical tradition; it is also a valuable introduction to high points of German idealism.

David Lamb

Dr Lamb is senior lecturer in philosophy, University of Manchester.