

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 any philosophy student knows the challenge of skepticism lies at the heart of any serious epistemology. Although Hegel's contribution to the theory of knowledge has been underplayed by most commentators Forster's account of his critical responses to 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 its various modifications and comparison of the newest skepticism with ancient skepticism*. Hegel attributed greater significance to the ancient tradition and, as Forster argues, the elaborate system of defences erected around his mature writings were to protect his philosophy from Pyrrhonism. For Hegel 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 . . . skeptical problems . . . had a decisive impact at a certain historical point in the development of human culture".

The second part of Forster's investigation considers Hegel's account of skepticism and culture. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* the sophists, 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 Greek polis to the Roman Judeo-Christian 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.

For Hegel the destructive force of ancient skepticism was two-fold: first, in what Forster describes as "concept

instantiation" – a sharp division between conceptual thought and reality, concepts and their instances. The second problem was the general method of equipollence or "isosthenia" (equal force on both sides), setting into opposition equally strong arguments on any issue. This method was employed by the Pyrrhonists to produce a suspension of belief. For example, a skeptic might ask whether concepts like "God", "freedom" or "justice" have any instances and then adduce arguments of equal force on each issue to achieve a suspension of judgement. 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 claims about the subjective mental states of others or knowledge of the external world. Lacking equipollence modern skepticism was castigated by Hegel for its dogmatism, resting on beliefs themselves vulnerable to skeptical attack. Whereas ancient skepticism aimed at the suspension of all belief, its modern variant merely suspended some beliefs, asserting others dogmatically, such as the Cartesian certainty of subjective mental states.

So if the greater challenge came from the ancient tradition then Hegel had to overcome the problems of concept instantiation and equipollence. This he accomplished, argues Forster, in his mature works, such as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where all alternatives to his philosophical system were shown to be incoherent by means of an exhaustive phenomenological method which eschewed dogmatism, admitted no presuppositions, simply allowing each philosophical standpoint to condemn itself by means of its own criterion of certitude. Nowhere is this "method" more aptly demonstrated than in Hegel's employment of "self-defeating skepticism" against the skeptics themselves. Thus with supreme irony the method used to combat skepticism (a total embrace of skepticism) becomes the hallmark of the Hegelian dialectic. Recognizing that one metaphysical standpoint fares no better than another against skepticism, Hegel pushes each alternative to his own philosophy into self-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 security for his system.

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 an important contribution to our 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.