

Hegel's Theory of Imagination. By JENNIFER ANN BATES. State University of New York Press. 2004. pp. xlv + 202. \$50.

In this book, Jennifer Ann Bates engages in a very detailed and well-supported exegesis of Hegel's various discussions of the imagination. Although many of his comments on the subject have already been extensively analysed, Bates's book promises to be the first monograph to concentrate exclusively on Hegel's theory of the imagination and to bring together, in a unifying and challenging interpretation, most of Hegel's writings on

the subject. Because of this, and because of the book's scholarly quality, it is indispensable reading for anyone interested in Hegel's account of the role of the imagination in our mental, communicative, and creative lives. In addition, the book is also very informative about the general development of Hegel's philosophy, as well as its similarities to and differences from the theories of his predecessors, notably Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. Its direct relevance for aesthetics is, however, limited by the fact that, apart from rendering Hegel's elucidation of the differences between his own and the German Romantics' views on irony and genius, Bates provides only a brief summary of some of the main aspects of Hegel's (and Kant's) aesthetic theories.

As the primary aim of her book, Bates identifies the defence of the claim that the imagination is 'the key player in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*' (p. xviii), despite the fact that Hegel does not (with one exception) mention it in his work. The first two parts of Bates's book (consisting, respectively, of five chapters, and of one chapter) are reserved for the exposition and interpretation of Hegel's comments on the imagination in texts other than the *Phenomenology*, while the third and final part addresses the issue of the role of the imagination in the *Phenomenology*.

Bates uses the first part of the book to provide a detailed outline of the development of Hegel's views, from his early writings via the *Geistesphilosophie* lectures to the *Encyclopaedia*, on the role of the imagination in the mental life of individual subjects. Her main conclusion is that Hegel comes to identify the imagination with the conscious activity inherent in the dialectical steps (and, in particular, their negative moments), which constitute the progressive development of thought from unconsciousness via object-consciousness towards self-consciousness as rational (or absolute). The different imaginative activities in play at the various stages of this process correspond thereby to different moments or forms of the imagination.

In the second part, Bates presents Hegel's thoughts, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, on the role of the imagination in interpersonal life

and, notably, in the creation of artworks. This is meant to clarify further Hegel's theory of the imagination, as well as the context of the only mention of the imagination in the *Phenomenology*, namely Hegel's criticism of the German Romanticist conception of genius. Bates elucidates how Hegel conceives of artistic creation as an imaginative activity that tries to balance the artist's deep and emotional subjective reflection on man's inner life with the historically developed means and requirements of an intersubjectively understandable expression in concrete works of art. If successful, the artist will articulate in his art the spirit of his time; and the resulting history of artworks will reflect the progressive development of the society's thinking towards the attainment of self-consciousness.

The third and last part of Bates's book is concerned with the defence of her main thesis about Hegel's imagination. According to Bates, the primary purpose of the *Phenomenology* is to invite the reader to pursue for himself the dialectical development of thinking. This means, in the light of Bates's previous interpretations of Hegel's other works, that the reader is meant to make use of his imagination in order to ascend dialectically towards an awareness of the rational nature of thinking and, in particular, of the imaginative activity essential to it. The imagination is thus implicitly the 'key player' in the *Phenomenology* because it enables the reader to 'think through to its end' the development of spirit (p. xviii). But, as Bates suggests, it is not explicitly discussed in Hegel's text because the imagination is—in contrast to, say, sensation, perception, or understanding—not itself a step in that dialectical progress towards self-consciousness.

Bates's interpretation of Hegel's theory of mind is generally fascinating and original. However, an important problem with her conclusion is that, if the imagination is really the 'key player' in the dialectical progress towards self-consciousness, the question of why Hegel does not at all state or discuss this fact in the *Phenomenology* or any of his other writings remains unanswered. As Bates shows, a lengthy exegesis of Hegel's texts is necessary to recognize fully

the significance of the imagination for his epistemology. But this seems, somewhat implausibly, to suggest that Hegel himself was not absolutely clear about the epistemological role of the imagination implied by his own theory of the relation between mind and world.

Another potential weakness is that Bates does not try to order and connect systematically the many different activities and roles of the imagination that Hegel has described in his various writings. For instance, the three moments of the imagination introduced in the *Encyclopaedia* (that is, the reproductive, the symbolic, and the naming imagination) seem to mirror closely three of the four activities assigned to the imagination in the *Geistesphilosophie* lectures of 1805–1806 (the fourth activity is the fixation of images in the unconscious mind). But Bates does not really clarify the general similarities and differences among these and the other imaginative activities postulated by Hegel, nor all of the subtle shifts in his different descriptions of them. Even if it is granted that our thinking develops in dialectical steps, Bates does not succeed in showing that the activity involved in this progress is indeed of the same kind as, say, the activity involved in visualizing, supposing or otherwise imagining something, or as the activity involved in creating artworks.

This lack of (interest in) systematization is perhaps related to the fact that Bates does not clearly draw or specify several important distinctions essential to the full characterization of imaginative activity: that between activity and passivity; various kinds of activity (that is, spontaneity, voluntariness, deliberateness, or artistic creativity); imaginative representations and imaginative abilities; and between the general ability to form mental representations and the special ability to be creative in thought or expression. As a result, it ultimately remains unresolved, for instance, in which sense Hegel (or indeed Bates) takes recollection to be both 'reproductive' and 'creative', or the activities of forming mental images and of creating artworks, to pertain to the same fundamental activity or faculty.

What all these points may be understood to reveal is that Hegel and the German Idealists

appear to be interested in a rather different kind of 'imagination' than many other philosophers, such as Hume, Wittgenstein, or Sartre. While the former have focused on a certain (transcendental) activity necessary for cognition, the latter have targeted a certain (psychological) activity essential to the formation of imaginative representations (for example, visualizations or supposings). Furthermore, many of the latter take these imaginative representations—in contrast, say, to perceptions, memories, or beliefs—to be uninformative about the world and hence to lack any function in cognition. And this suggests a possible alternative explanation of why the imagination is not dealt with in the *Phenomenology*. Since Hegel's work is primarily concerned with the deficiencies of specific *cognitive* representations (such as sensation, perception, or understanding) and how these deficiencies may be overcome by means of a dialectical progress towards absolute knowing, it is perhaps not surprising that the *non-cognitive* imaginings do not figure in his text.

That Bates assumes an epistemological role for the imagination without much argument seems intimately linked to the fact that she remains firmly within the Hegelian cosmos. Her discussion of Hegel is not very critical, at least not when concerned with his later, most developed views; and Bates frequently adopts a language highly reminiscent of the philosopher's own. It would, however, have been helpful—in particular for readers not well acquainted with Hegel—if she had translated more of his ideas into a less metaphorical terminology, and made more use of examples to illustrate them. Nevertheless, Bates succeeds impressively in elucidating the major aspects of Hegel's thoughts on the imagination and of his dialectical approach to the acquisition of knowledge and the constitution of the self. And her book should definitely be among the first choices for anyone intending to study Hegel's theory of imagination.

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