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## Review

# Hegel's social ethics: Religion, conflict, and rituals of recognition

Molly Farneth

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In her elegant monograph on the multi-dimensionality of Hegel's theory of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Molly Farneth invites her reader to explore how Hegel's social ethics – defined by Farneth in terms of the logic and practices of conflict and reconciliation – is bound up with *Sittlichkeit*. Specifically, she aims to argue that 'Hegel shows what domination looks like and suggests that there is an alternative to it, a way of coping with conflict and forging solidarity' (p. 2). Ethical life occupies such a critical position for making sense of the dialectic of conflict and reconciliation, because it is articulated in terms of spheres of social freedom typified by recognitive relationships and intersubjectively constituted agency. For Farneth, Hegel's social ethics is inextricably linked with his epistemology, so much so that there is a formal parallel between how ethical and epistemological conflicts emerge and how they might be overcome. There is therefore reason to suppose that Hegelian theory is of immense relevance to contemporary pluralistic democratic society.

The first chapter of book presents a general overview of the principal argumentative steps in the subsequent substantive six chapters, as well as an account of where Farneth fits in the current Anglo-American schools of thought concerning Hegel. Farneth situates herself as part of the 'post-Kantian' reading of Hegel, typically associated with scholars such as Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, and Robert Brandom. I have, though, some slight quibbles about how exactly Farneth articulates the interpretive taxonomies: Farneth appears to frame Anglo-American debate exclusively between the traditional spirit monist interpretation of Hegel as a pre-Kantian metaphysician and the Pippin–Pinkard–Brandom reading of Hegel as evolving Kant's transcendental insights by developing an account of normativity that is socio-historically instituted. Somewhat problematically, Farneth seems to neglect a major third interlocutor: the revised metaphysical reading of Hegel that tends to see him as a *post*-Kantian Aristotelian. As such, my concern is that not only does Farneth potentially misconstrue the precise nature of Anglo-American



Hegel debates, she also potentially risks oversimplifying the concept of a post-Kantian thinker.

In Chapter 2, Farneth articulates and defends a nuanced reading of Hegel's discussion of Sophocles's *Antigone* that helpfully moves beyond the traditional hermeneutic turf wars between pro-Creon and pro-Antigone readings of Hegel's reflections on the masterpiece: the *structure* of Greek ethical life is what causes tragedy, because individuality and universality cannot be adequately reconciled in Hellenic culture. As she convincingly argues, 'Hegel shows that the tragedies that afflict Greek *Sittlichkeit* are the inevitable result of that shape of spirit' (p. 32). Importantly, Farneth draws a distinction between tragic conflict and non-tragic conflict: conflict becomes tragic when the relevant actors are blinkered by discursive myopia and unable to make sense of individuality and universality together. That Antigone herself acknowledges her own guilt in transgressing the polis law in favour of rigidly adhering to the divine law '... is not an abasement or a humiliation but her recognition that the repercussions of her actions extend beyond the intentions of her one-sided character' (p. 26). For Farneth, non-tragic conflict is not necessarily bad – a progressive challenge to patriarchal gendered norms involves seeing difference emerge and challenging the alleged rationality of immediate unity. In this way, Hegel's discussion of *Antigone* is amenable to the development of a feminist ethics both because *Sittlichkeit* reveals how norms are never fixed and infallibilistically constituted and because difference's emergence can motivate what Iris Marion Young famously dubbed the *politics* of difference.

The focus of Farneth's attention in Chapter 3 is on explaining how religious practices are ways of coping with the fragmentation of modern ethical life: while Greek *Sittlichkeit* is defined by the tragic conflict between the divine law and the human law, the form of intractable conflict typifying modernity concerns alienation brought about by the collision of Faith with Enlightenment: although society has progressed from seeing individuals identifying with 'given' social roles and norms, this problem of immediacy has now been replaced with the problem of alienation. Faith articulates individual freedom through the prism of religious experience that transcends social and political contingencies, whereas the Enlightenment articulates individual freedom by rejecting social and political contingencies in favour of universal and timeless rational foundations. Crucially, the culture war underpinning the conflict between Faith and Enlightenment over which normative practices are meaningful and authoritative masks, according to Farneth, a general form of alienation ironically shared by both Faith and Enlightenment: each form of consciousness expresses alienation from actual and embodied/embedded existence in the concrete world by trying to secure norms independently of discursive practices that shape and sustain those very norms. However, for Farneth, Hegel sees Faith's commitment to religious rituals of sacrament and sacrifice as crucial for making sense of the dialectical movement from conflict to reconciliation:



‘Religious practices, Hegel claims, can train subjects’ habits and dispositions to accord with the dictates of reason’ (p. 53).

Detailing how exactly this unfolds and is supposed to work is the principal focus of Chapter 4 and its discussion of the judging and wicked consciousness. Farneth’s argument in this section is that confession is best construed as the paradigmatic form of a ritual of recognition. Construing Hegel’s treatment of confessional practices in terms of the dynamic qualities of the dialectic in forgiveness, Farneth claims that ‘nondominating, nonassimilating reconciliation requires the doubled structure of reciprocal recognition’ (p. 73). In other words, according to Hegel, one conceptualises forgiveness in terms of overcoming resentment and recognising affective conditions on judgement and agency. Although Farneth restricts her discussion of the ‘doubled’ structure of recognition to the level of interpreting Hegel’s reflections on confession and forgiveness, it may have been worth her flagging a well-known philosophical issue with the concept of intersubjective recognition itself: not only does the concept of intersubjective recognition fail to explain how power relations structure intersubjective recognition; the concept also fails to show adequate sensitivity to how forms of recognition themselves produce and endorse unequal power between people. In other words, the problem with the ‘doubled’ structure of recognition is that it is naïve and insensitive to the workings of identity power and prejudice. The advantage of flagging this philosophical issue is that it would have enabled Farneth to go into considerable more detail about the structure of intersubjective recognition, drawing explicit attention to conditions that directly affect and structure judgements and features of agency. Chapter 5 sees Farneth conclude her interpretive reflections on Hegel’s social ethics by explicating how Hegel articulates the connections between religious practices of confession/forgiveness/sacrifice and the properties of recognitive relationships at the level of Absolute Spirit.

In Chapter 6, Farneth presents Hegel’s social ethics as meeting Alasdair MacIntyre’s challenge to the model of reconciliation: since there is such pluralism and difference in contemporary liberal democratic society, it seems impossible for dialectical reasoning to get off the ground. However, for Farneth, ‘[a] Hegelian social ethics recommends a model of public discourse that is pluralist and agonistic’ (p. 113). While I am sympathetic to the ways in which Farneth articulates a critique of MacIntyre, I found that her account was ironically lacking sufficient epistemological weight to support Hegelian *social* ethics: although she engages with the work of contemporary Christian theologians concerned with the nature of authority, I think bringing out the relevance of Hegel here would be considerably better served by additionally engaging with contemporary reflections on the epistemology of disagreement.

The monograph concludes with a fascinating and stimulating discussion of Hegel’s social ethics and the ways it is connected to democratic authority. In Chapter 7, Farneth explicitly and convincingly draws a distinction between the



politics of recognition and Hegel's account of recognition. As she elegantly writes: 'Hegel's idea of recognition is not about the recognition of fixed identities but, rather, about the recognition of *subjectivities*' (p. 118). For Farneth, what constitutes the contrast is that the politics of recognition is committed to fixed and stable identities. However, there is scope for Farneth to be more critical about the politics of recognition and the claim that it is invariably committed to reified identities. The principal substantive philosophical argument Farneth makes is that even though Hegel himself was no democrat, in 'Ethical Life' in the *Philosophy of Right* he insists that representation 'is not merely a matter of tallying the votes of abstract individuals or tracking the will of an indeterminate "public". Rather, it is a matter of getting the legitimate and determinate concerns of actual groups of people concretely integrated into the deliberative process' (p. 120). From this perspective, then, Hegel's conceptual resources enable him to be far closer to deliberative democratic social arrangements advocated, respectively, by Dewey and Habermas. Consequently, a crucial question that arises concerns whether or not deliberative democracy outside the formal bureaucratic mechanisms of the state is possible and desirable.

*Hegel's Social Ethics* is an impressive work of scholarship and its final chapter is perhaps the most thought-provoking and philosophically rich of all the complex and engaging discussions Farneth has with her reader. The monograph is an important work in bringing to the fore the enduring philosophic relevance of recognition and its democratic potentialities and qualities.

Paul Giladi  
University College, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland  
Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6BH, UK  
paul.giladi@gmail.com