doi:10.1017/hgl.2020.22

Hegel Bulletin, 41/3, 465–468

Review

Molly Farneth. *Hegel's Social Ethics: Religion, Conflict and Rituals of Reconciliation*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-681-17190-6 (hbk). Pp. 165.

Culture wars—conflicts ostensibly based on competing value regimes—are a commonplace feature of public life in the twenty-first century. Debates about abortion, equal marriage and the teaching of history, to name just a few examples, often pit traditionalists and conservatives against liberals and progressives in ways that can seem intractable. Particularly where questions of faith versus non-faith are concerned, culture wars all too frequently descend into a dialogue of *bad faith*, with both parties refusing or simply unable to accept the basic standards of judgement of the other as valid. Where, in a secular, post-metaphysical society, would a form of authority be located that could ultimately legislate such disputes? This is the question Molly Farneth poses in her recent book, which argues that Hegel's philosophy can offer insights into how and why culture wars emerge, and how we might work towards resolving them.

Although many analytically-minded scholars sympathetic to post-Kantian interpretations of Hegel often emphasise the 'sociality of reason' in the *Phenomenology*, much of this scholarship remains primarily concerned with Hegel's *epistemology* rather than with his ethics. Meanwhile, thinkers in the continental tradition have tended to focus on questions of social power and conflict. *Hegel's Social Ethics* builds a bridge between these perspectives. Through a careful reconstruction of Chapters VI–VIII of the *Phenomenology*, Farneth's book shows how the sociality of reason offers a theoretical framework capable of grounding ethical practices for dealing with conflict and reconciliation in religiously diverse communities.

Chapter 2 sets the stage by returning us to Hegel's analysis of the deficiencies of Greek *Sittlichkeit* as revealed in the tragedy of *Antigone*. With Antigone bound by the strictures of divine law, and Creon forced to uphold the law of the state, there was no means of reconciliation, and Antigone's suicide the only possible outcome. Hegel was, as Farneth notes, 'critical of Greek *Sittlichkeit* as a form of life that takes the authority of its laws and other norms to be fixed and given' (32) precisely because it tended to produce these kinds of properly 'tragic' conflicts.

If in Greek *Sittlichkeit* those standards were located in an external (natural/divine) realm, the alienation that accompanies the collapse of this perspective

for Hegel forces new shapes of spirit—faith and enlightenment—to seek their standards within themselves. Herein lie the origins of modern culture wars for Farneth: both faith and enlightenment justify themselves according to standards that the other finds illegitimate and, moreover, neither recognises in itself the repressed trace of its own reproach of the other (46). Farneth's key move in Chapter 3 is to show how resolving the conflicts between faith and enlightenment over the meaning of their shared reality depends on the deep interconnection between Hegel's epistemology and his social ethics: the social determination of concepts means that 'meaning' is never either arbitrary or immutable: no individual or group has a monopoly on it in a given sphere. For Farneth's Hegel then, 'meaning' is just not only a linguistic term but an eminently practical one as well.

The sociality of reason, in other words, provides one of the conditions according to which the subject of Chapter 4, 'Rituals of Reconciliation', become possible. The second condition is reciprocal recognition, which as we have seen is absent from the dialectic of faith and enlightenment, and only comes into play with the judging and wicked consciousness. Here, Farneth's lively examples which continue throughout the book bring into focus how her account bears on conflicts of contemporary social significance. The conscientious objector, who merely has to convince a panel of her commitment to pacifism, rather than the merits of pacifism itself, reveals the deficiency of a purely conscience-based ethics in which individuals have only to affirm their personal conviction without the need to be held accountable by any shared standard. Abstract conscience thus underpins an ethical model based on judgement and the attribution of personal guilt, which can only be transcended through the practices—drawn from religion, indeed—of confession and forgiveness. Confession and forgiveness, on Farneth's account, are both the condition and result of reciprocal recognition.

When the wicked and judging consciousness do finally engage in reciprocal recognition, as Farneth notes, 'something else appears in their midst', and 'Hegel calls this 'God'' (95). Importantly, Farneth does not read bold metaphysical claims back into the *Phenomenology* at this point (Chapter 5), but rather (consonant with Hegel's afterlife in psychoanalysis) interprets 'God' as a third position or space that corresponds to Hegel's version of the transcendental subject, now socialised and with a body (for those among us inclined to read Kantian transcendentalism as a disembodied model of subjectivity). The crucial points here are that individuals participate in absolute spirit through dialogue with the other, and that absolute spirit *emerges out of* and consists in nothing other than this process.

At this point in the book, Farneth turns to the question of how her insights into Hegel's social ethics might help us to understand and tackle the real conflicts we face in a world in which religiosity and religious diversity persist in (actually or aspirationally) democratic, secular (even if only in the minimalist sense of religiously plural) societies. Chapter 6 deals with the question of what it means to

https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.22 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be committed to a form of religious belief, while Chapter 7 examines the implications of Hegel's social ethics for democratic authority. Farneth's main conclusions in these regards are twofold. First, she asserts that since disagreements within and about religious and ethical issues are a constant, a 'Hegelian social ethics recommends a model of public discourse that is pluralist and agonistic' (113). In other words, speech must be free, but speakers are and must understand themselves as accountable for their speech. Second, she proposes a model of 'restorative justice' based not only or indeed primarily on judgement and punishment, but on the institutionalisation of secular rituals of confession and forgiveness.

Consistent with the post-Kantian tradition, Farneth's Hegel is thus a *pragmatist*, for whom conflict is simply a fact of modern societies to which we must respond by developing institutions and practices capable of dealing with it. However, whereas some liberal/rationalist engagements with Hegel tend to be rather overly optimistic when it comes to the capacity for conflict resolution through reciprocal recognition, Farneth resists this kind of triumphalism. For her (and for her Hegel), living alongside people we disagree with and resolving our conflicts with them is hard work, and there is never any guarantee of success. Perhaps surprisingly, this realistic perspective about social life and the limitations it imposes on us makes Farneth's work all the more (cautiously) optimistic.

By analysing some of the most important *practical* ethical consequences of the sociality of reason, then, this book significantly expands post-Kantian Hegel interpretation, but its strengths extend far beyond that. Farneth convincingly demonstrates the importance of Hegel's account of religion, indeed of originally religious rituals more broadly, for elaborating social practices in a (post-)secular society. Moreover, she makes a compelling case for the eminent applicability of Hegel's social ethics to real-world situations of conflict and its resolution, even if designing such applications remains, quite rightly, well beyond the scope of this book, or even this field. Indeed, where Farneth's book can be said to leave questions, it does so in such a way as to invite dialogue with other, related theoretical perspectives.

For instance, her account depends to a significant extent on all participants in the process of restorative justice acting in good faith, which as we know cannot always be presupposed. Sometimes, acting in bad faith is not a strictly deliberate matter but one of not knowing what we don't know, to (rather uncomfortably!) paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld—a fact that Farneth's account of the dialectic of faith and enlightenment masterfully exposes. Such cases, say where one party is initially unable or unwilling to come to the table, or to confront themselves critically, may be challenging; but, on Farneth's view not irresolvable: they depend, namely on there being a 'third' capable of creating a situation in which the two can recognise their own mutually imbricated flaws. Given the *de facto* diversity of human societies to which Farneth points, the existence of such a third (which, significantly, on

https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.22 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Farneth's account need not be the state) should almost always be possible, at least in theory.

As highlighted for instance by conflicts over the payment of reparations, though, there can be strong socio-economic incentives for parties not to reconcile, which are, moreover, often institutionally constituted and protected by that big third, the state-capital nexus. Moreover, the very problem with culture wars is that usually one side (and sometimes both) is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) concerned with gaining or maintaining power, in which case the 'values' component is actually rather a proxy for an underlying political struggle. How exactly these dynamics intersect with Farneth's account of Hegel's social ethics is a fascinating question that only further dialogue, for instance with historical-materialist or political-economy oriented perspectives, could illuminate.

Cat Moir
The University of Sydney, Australia
cat.moir@sydney.edu.au

https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.22 Published online by Cambridge University Press