Eclipse of Grace
Eclipse of Grace

Divine and Human Action in Hegel

Nicholas Adams
To Peter Ochs
People talk of reason as if it were an actual entity, and of the good Lord as if he were nothing but a concept.

J.G. Hamann
Contents

Acknowledgments  ix
Preface  xi

1 Introduction  1
2 Absolute Knowing  17
3 The Absolute Idea  117
4 God Existing as Community  166
5 Eclipse of Grace  220

Bibliography  228
Index  235
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the British Academy for a Small Project Grant in 2008 to pursue study of Hölderlin and Novalis in Berlin. I am grateful to Timothy Jenkins and Peter Ochs for their challenges and encouragements, to David Ford and Sarah Coakley, whose skepticism about the need to spend so much time buried in German Idealism did not prevent them sending along graduate students in search of enlightenment, to Nicholas Walker for improved translations of the *Phenomenology* and for his probing questions about my generous interpretations at certain points, to Cyril O’Regan and Ian Cooper for their insights into how temporal forms of thinking are flattened in Hegel and Hölderlin, to Nicholas Boyle for providing the hospitality that made these conversations possible, to John Webster and Bruce McCormack, who strengthened my resolve to write a book suitable for graduate students in systematic theology, to the many students who read drafts and assessed its suitability for their peers, and to Rebecca Harkin at Wiley-Blackwell who willingly agreed to commission this book, on the condition that I produce something on Hegel that was actually readable, and who has remained steadfastly encouraging throughout the process. Her service to contemporary theology through the publication of an extraordinary range of material is unmatched. I would like to thank Janet Moth for expert copy-editing and skilful negotiation with typesetters. I would also like to thank Heidi Adams for her generous support, and most particularly for help in preparing the index. Finally I am grateful to Terry Pinkard for permission to use his as yet unpublished translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the basis for the commentary in chapter 2. All errors are my own.

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book:
x  Acknowledgments


Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions in the above and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.
Scholarship on German Idealism has been transformed in the last twenty-five years by two phenomena. The first is the production of high-quality critical editions of post-Kantian philosophical texts. The second is the “constellation research” of Dieter Henrich, Manfred Franks, and their colleagues.¹ These two developments are making possible a shift in scholarship away from the bold encompassing overviews that characterized scholarship after the First and Second World Wars.

Such overviews were at the time vital. Whole traditions of detailed scholarship had been arrested, and the cohorts of graduate students who transmitted the traditions from one generation to the next in many cases no longer existed. After the deaths of thousands of young scholars, twice over, who had been developing different facets of the intellectual traditions, it was necessary to reconstitute those traditions through lectures aimed at equipping a new generation of scholars. These lectures were extraordinarily influential, of course, because they were in some cases the sole means of transmitting an entire tradition of intellectual endeavor. This can be seen in the case of Hegel in the persistent influence of Alexandre Kojève’s lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit at the École des Hautes Études from 1933 to 1939 (assembled from notes and published after the Second World War), which shaped the

imaginations of more than one generation of French philosophers. This approach amounted to packing a tradition in a suitcase so that it could be transported from place to place, and in some ways prefigured today’s publishing trend towards volumes that summarize vast areas of scholarship for the beginning student. It is important to remember that Hegel was mediated very significantly through the interpretations of Feuerbach and Marx (Kojève himself was a Marxist who, in the wake of Heidegger’s Being and Time, turned to Hegel for a more sophisticated metaphysics than was offered by Marxist materialism). It is also important to remember that the dominant intellectual strands in philosophy in the earlier parts of the twentieth century were Neo-Kantianism and various responses to Nietzsche’s critiques of the Kantian traditions, neither of which had Hegel’s legacy as their focus. Hegel’s diminished status at that time made attempts at capturing his principal contributions, such as Kojève’s lectures or Hyppolite’s commentary on the Phenomenology that built on them, all the more significant. There was in the 1960s a significant flourishing of interest in Hegel, including in his religious thinking, in Germany. It culminated in Hans Küng’s Menschwerdung Gottes and Theunissen’s Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist (together with a number of responses, including a well-known lecture by Pannenberg): these texts drew on scholarship (including English and French contributions) over a twenty-year period from a variety of significant philosophical figures, whether on the “left” (Adorno, Bloch, Habermas, Marcuse) or more traditional interpretations (Albrecht, Bruiare, Chapelle, Fackenheim, Fulda, Gadamer, Garaudy, Ritter, Rohrmoser, Splett). These works

play little role in this study, but are cited here in order to show the flourishing of interest in Hegel, not least in his theological thought, in this period, where it can sometimes look as though Fackenheim’s contribution (well known because in English) stands alone. This tradition receives a thorough review both in Cyril O’Regan’s *Heterodox Hegel* and in Martin Wendte’s *Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel*.<sup>5</sup> It is not obvious that this had much of an immediate impact on theology outside Germany, beyond an interest in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, which entered the English-speaking cultural imagination via the left-wing intelligentsia. Theunissen’s intelligent and profound investigation of passages from the *Encyclopaedia* concerning absolute spirit has stood the test of time, however, and is one of the major works that still rightly appears in theological engagements with Hegel. It is an unusual work, in that the main central section is a long commentary on a dozen or so paragraphs from the *Encyclopaedia*; I have taken Theunissen’s textually detailed approach as a model for this current study, as well as taking up his concern with Hegel’s handling of false oppositions.

A number of influential texts in English in the last quarter of the twentieth century brought Hegel back into the English-language mainstream. Charles Taylor’s *Hegel* (1975), Gillian Rose’s *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), Jürgen Habermas’ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985, trans. 1987), and Robert Pippin’s *Hegel’s Idealism* (1989) brought Hegel’s legacy to bear on contemporary philosophical problems in ways that have proven highly generative in the twenty-first century. It was Rose and Pippin who inspired my own forays into Hegel’s *Phenomenology* during graduate work in Cambridge in the early 1990s. They completely transformed a younger generation’s imagination as to what Hegel was about and why he might be important. They led, in part, to the development of a number of different transmissions of Hegel’s philosophy, including rapprochements between analytic, pragmatist, and continental philosophy in work by figures such as Robert Brandom, Paul Franks, John McDowell, Paul Redding, Robert Stern, and many others. They have also shaped more aggressive attempts to rehabilitate Hegel as a major figure of contemporary influence, such as the work of Stephen Houlgate, Terry Pinkard, and Kenneth Westphal.<sup>6</sup>

---


In France two magisterial contributions, one by a Cuban and the other by a Hungarian, are changing the way Hegel’s religious thought is interpreted. The first is Emilio Brito’s *La Christologie de Hegel: Verbum Crucis* (1983). This study, written in Spanish but published in French translation, is a painstaking interpretation of Hegel’s texts relating to Christology, in the early writings, the *Phenomenology*, the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, combined with a seemingly exhaustive engagement with the secondary literature. The scale and the mastery of detail, both of Hegel’s texts and of Hegel’s interpreters, are intimidating. The second is Miklos Veto’s *De Kant à Schelling: Les deux voies de l’idéalisme allemande* (1998 and 2000). This major work traces the two paths that stem from Kant’s philosophy, one that leads via Fichte to Hegel’s conception of reason, the other that leads to the late Schelling’s concern with the ground of reason. Rather than seeing these as rival interpretations of a single Kantian legacy, Veto argues that they are better viewed as divergent paths with distinct developments. His study is noteworthy for its focus on Leibniz rather than Spinoza as the significant backdrop to the way Kant’s philosophy developed, owing to Leibniz’ concern with a dynamic metaphysics. This may also partly explain the unusual concern with the question of evil, which takes up a considerable part of the study.


---

interpretations of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Dale Schlitt’s descriptions of Hegel’s Trinitarian thought, Andrew Shanks’ championing of Hegel as a model figure who insists on thinking through the shapes of Christian life (with a noticeable focus on the figure of “the unhappy consciousness” from the earlier part of the Phenomenology), Cyril O’Regan’s thorough and charitable investigations into the whole range of Hegel’s theological thinking, including Hegel’s engagements with the Gnostic strands of German thought, William Desmond’s battling with Hegel in the development and articulation of his own “metaxalogical” project, and Martin de Nys’ introduction to Hegel’s relation to theology. Karl Barth’s short article on Hegel in Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century, from 1947, remains a major point of reference for many theological students in seminaries, despite its limited focus on one aspect of Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: it is wholly inadequate as an introduction to Hegel for theologians. John Milbank’s chapter “For and Against Hegel” in Theology and Social Theory (itself one of the fruits of Gillian Rose’s work) is not intended as an introduction to Hegel, and cannot serve as one, yet along with Barth’s essay it is often the only thing on Hegel theological students read. Milbank’s essay falls into a familiar trap: it treats Hegel’s logical investigations as, at root, contributions to ontology. Hegel is thus criticized for his accounts of the subject, of negation, and of infinity; too much emphasis is laid on necessity and system (as if an inexorable logic drives the ontological claims), and not enough effort is made to discern the ways in which Hegel’s logical contributions call false oppositions into question and offer alternative ways of thinking – where ontological claims show themselves in certain ways rather indefinite and amenable to rival modes of logical handling. I offer a radical alternative to Barth’s and Milbank’s ways of reading Hegel.8

The two phenomena named at the beginning—the availability of critical editions and the development of constellation research—have altered the landscape further since then. It has become possible to undertake detailed textual interpretation, on the one hand, and to gain a sense of the extraordinarily fertile intellectual context in which Hegel’s texts were produced on the other. I spent a useful sabbatical in Berlin becoming acquainted with work on the importance of Hölderlin and Novalis for an appreciation of the shape of German Idealism and its critics, especially Hölderlin’s investigations into being and Novalis’ explorations into the difficulty of representing the subject. The classic trio of Fichte–Schelling–Hegel as respondents to Kant is no longer a compelling way of thinking about the idealist tradition. Fichte is in fact a distorting figure in the tradition: his project warps the reception both of Kant (who is often treated as far more systematic, in a dull way, than he actually is) and of Hegel (who is often thought to be more totalizing—and frankly bizarre—in his philosophical ambitions than is warranted by the evidence of the texts). The images of Kant and Hegel are significantly distorted in many students’ imaginations by the shape of Fichte’s rationalism. Henrich’s interest in championing of Hölderlin as a philosopher and Frank’s explorations of Novalis as a critic of Fichte encourage a much broader set of investigations into questions of self-consciousness and language than a concern with just Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, Schelling’s System of Transcendental Idealism, and Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit is likely to stimulate. Indeed it makes less and less sense sharply to distinguish early German Romanticism from German Idealism the more one sees the shared intellectual concerns, in Kant and Fichte, that stimulated both traditions. Frank’s work has shaped the strongly anti-Hegelian project of Andrew Bowie, which is focused on questions of how philosophy can articulate more than conceptual thinking can grasp. Bowie’s project is brilliant, and marks a high-water mark of writing about German philosophy in English. In some ways his rightly influential Schelling and Modern European Philosophy is an atheist retrieval of the medieval insight that God exceeds what human language can conceptually articulate (where God is substituted in Bowie’s work by other terms such as truth or being), and for this reason is (along with his two major works Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche and Music, Philosophy and Modernity) important work for theologians to read. It is compelling on Hegel’s failure to do justice to aesthetics, but has relatively little to say

Karl Barth, “Hegel,” in Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (tr. B. Cozens, London: SCM, 1972), pp. 384–421; John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 147–176. For those seeking a good theological introduction to Hegel I recommend Burbidge and Shanks followed by O’Regan. Burbidge frames his account as a series of answers to questions posed by Lessing; Shanks offers one of the best accounts of why Hegel’s account of reconciliation remains compelling; O’Regan is long and difficult but superb.
about Hegel’s approach to truth. The constellation philosophy project, and parallel scholarship in the USA such as that of Frederick Beiser, have vastly enhanced our understanding of how figures such as Hamann, Herder, Lessing, and Jacobi (in the eighteenth century) and Hölderlin, Novalis, Tieck, and the Schlegels (in the nineteenth century) are vital to an understanding of the development of ideas developed in the texts and lectures by the better-known figures such as Hegel and Schelling. Schleiermacher is the wild card here: as his theological reputation becomes largely a concern only of aficionados and historians, his philosophical contributions are coming to be re-evaluated through the work of Manfred Frank and Andrew Bowie.

The turn to the texts, facilitated by readily available critical editions, has made possible a textually oriented interpretive approach to Hegel which stands in sharp contrast to the bold overviews of the twentieth century. Commentaries are obviously textually attentive given the genre. The newer development is detailed and textually attentive work even in thematic and argumentative studies. This can be seen supremely in the writing of Stephen Houlgate, who engages at a level of textual attentiveness unmatched by most other Hegel scholars, with the notable exception of Theunissen, and, in a more narrowly focused way, by Peter Dews, whose remarkable chapter on Hegel in his The Idea of Evil is a model for theologically minded readers who wish to describe, in English, Hegel’s approach to theologically significant topics.

It is customary to begin any work on Hegel with a polemical attack on the inadequate accounts of Hegel that characterize encyclopaedia articles on his thought and with caveats about what is possible given the vastness of the secondary bibliography. I have chosen to begin with a statement of the field, or at least one way of viewing part of it. It can be summarized. There is a tradition of bold overviews of Hegel (Kojève, Barth, Milbank); there is a tradition of English-language philosophical engagements with Hegel (Rose, MacIntyre, Pippin, Pinkard, Houlgate, Westphal, McDowell, Brandom, Stern, Franks); there is a tradition in French scholarship of attention to detail (Brito, Vetö); there is a tradition, in English, of theological engagement with Hegel (Hodgson, Schlitt, Shanks, O’Regan, Desmond); and there is a tradition of contextual study of German philosophy including Hegel (Henrich, Frank, Beiser, Bowie).

10 Frederick Beiser, The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
In the midst of this complex scholarly situation, I wish to identify one problem for theologically minded readers. It is that theological interest in Hegel tends to focus on Hegel’s “religious” thought, even though some of his more important contributions for theology lie in his philosophical arguments (Theunissen and Wendte are notable exceptions). Philosophers, when assessing Hegel’s contemporary importance, tend to focus on the *Phenomenology* and the *Science of Logic* and to ignore the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Houlgate and Dews are exemplary exceptions). The problem is that there is no easy division between “philosophical” and “theological” work in Hegel: it is all philosophical, and it is all concerned with God in various ways. There is no “religious dimension” in Hegel (negatively to echo Emil Fackenheim) any more than there is a religious dimension in Descartes or Kant: the work is saturated and permeated with religious concerns.

Theological interest in Hegel tends to exhibit a further curious feature: it is overwhelmingly concerned with questions of ontology. It is Hegel’s approach to being, or more specifically to thinking being, that is often the focus. This concern is then allied with other questions such as what Hegel’s Christology or Pneumatology or theodicy might be. This is curious because Hegel himself is quite explicit that his primary interest is in logic rather than ontology. He certainly has emphatic ontological commitments (although I would prefer to say that he develops a distinctive system of classification): how could a philosopher not? But his contributions are not principally to ontology, and are not presented as contributions to ontology. They are contributions to logic, and are heavily advertised as such. At the same time he shows almost no interest in contributing to Christology or Pneumatology or theodicy, doctrinally conceived: and it is very hard work for scholars to reconstruct what such contributions might look like, as the impressive studies by Brito and O’Regan make clear.

This study thus takes a new tack in the English-language bibliography. It advances a simple proposition: Hegel’s importance for contemporary theology lies in his contributions to logic. Wendte makes a persuasive theological case for taking Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* together, and I develop this insight along complementary and more emphatic lines. This proposition is defended (following the model established by Theunissen in *Hegels Lehre*, and developed by Wendte), through commentary on texts: *The Phenomenology of Spirit, Science of Logic*, and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. These texts are enormous, and I am selective. I attempt to show how Hegel’s logical investigations display certain theological interests, without being contributions to doctrine. Hegel receives doctrines, above all the doctrine of the Trinity, and draws attention to certain logical features; in my reading he does not attempt to alter the doctrines themselves but rather to alter how those doctrines are received philosophically. I argue, as a secondary matter, that the shape of Hegel’s
approach to Christian doctrine is broadly Johannine, although in a rather vague way that cannot be pinned down.

Besides the outstanding work of Martin Wendte, there are to my knowledge no theologically oriented studies of Hegel that are primarily concerned with his logic, and for that reason this study exhibits two easily noticed features. The first is that it is developed through detailed commentary on texts rather than through bold overview. My argument is simple and is best demonstrated by showing how Hegel’s texts exhibit certain features. The second is that I engage with rather little of the English-language secondary literature. This is in part a reflection of my reading habits: the preparation for this book was largely oriented to Hegel’s texts (which I read slowly), to other philosophical primary texts of the period, and to secondary texts which deal with the philosophical context in which Hegel wrote. The latter have no immediate bearing on my argument. It is also in part a reflection that for the most part I am not arguing against any interpretations in particular. The theologically oriented interpreters do not make claims whose details I wish to dispute here: I take a different approach entirely. There are plenty of claims to dispute, to be sure, but again they have no immediate bearing on my argument. It is theological interpreters’ silence on matters of logic that are relevant to this study, and I aim to fill that silence. Finally, it is in part a reflection of the scale of the task: I rather exuberantly take on three big texts, each of which has a gigantic (and high-quality) secondary bibliography and I am aware that it cannot simply be ignored or dismissed. There is a lot of rubbish written about Hegel, to be sure, but a great deal is superb: Hegel has a tendency to make thinkers work harder, often with happy results. My selections are a matter of compromise and realism about what is possible within the scope of a book of this kind and length. If my broad proposals find a positive reception, there will be plenty of detailed further work to be done.

I am convinced that Hegel’s importance for theology lies in his philosophical arguments, rather than in his treatment of theological or “religious” topics. This book aims to spread that conviction. It also has a secondary purpose. My experience of teaching Kant and Hegel to postgraduates is that students tend initially to respond in one of two ways to the difficulty of the texts. The first is to seek refuge in the commentators; the second is to seek refuge in bold overviews. In extreme cases some students (even rather good ones) find it more congenial to read commentators than to read the text, on the grounds that the commentators are more accessible; and some students find it more impressive, at first, to talk about ‘Hegelian philosophy’ but soon get bogged down in rather unfocused discussions of “sublation,” “dialectic,” and “negation.” These tendencies are, I think, displays of fear. I have thus written a text whose secondary aim is to produce fearless (but respectful) theological readers of Hegel. I cannot claim that every reader will magically
become capable of making sense of Hegel’s texts; but there have been good results with test subjects, and I am confident that few readers will emerge with a desire to read only commentators or to produce bold overviews with only tangential relation to the texts. The text of this study is laid out in a way that makes reading Hegel’s texts as attractive and compelling as possible.
This book is a study of portions of three texts by Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Science of Logic*, and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. The subtitle “Divine and Human Action in Hegel” is grander than is strictly warranted: not all of the relevant texts in Hegel’s corpus are surveyed, and of those that are, only small portions are considered in detail. This reflects a decision not to offer an overview of Hegel’s thought, but to engage with particular texts in a sustained fashion. The book is for readers who wish to understand Hegel’s significance for theology, and covers one aspect of that significance: Hegel’s development of a logic in which false oppositions (between subject and object, thinking and being, individual and community, divine and human, philosophy and theology) are overcome. It is in this context that one can best evaluate whether Hegel gives a problematic account of the relation between divine and human action, and determine whether there is in his work an eclipse of grace.

Those who teach the classic German theological texts of the twentieth century – by Barth, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Balthasar, Rahner, Pannenberg, Moltmann – face a well-known problem. Hegel’s philosophy is an important source for understanding these texts, both as an explicit reference (the texts engage with Hegel) and as an implicit influence (the texts are shaped by his thinking in various ways). Yet there are few studies of Hegel that equip graduate students in systematic theology with what they need. Theologians tend to write about Hegel’s “religious” thinking; philosophers tend not to engage with Hegel’s theological significance, owing to a lack of interest in theology by philosophers in general. There are good introductions to German philosophy, such as Andrew Bowie’s *Introduction to German...*
Philosophy and Terry Pinkard’s German Philosophy 1760–1860, but connections to the theological tradition are few and far between in their pages.1 There are likewise good introductions to the German theology, such as the Cambridge Companion series on individual figures, but connections to the German philosophical tradition in these studies are rather half-hearted. The unhappy consequence is that students must read philosophical works by philosophers reluctant to engage with the theology and theological works by theologians whose focus is other than philosophy: it is left to the students to make the connections as best they can. This book aims to make some of those connections through a theologically informed engagement with Hegel’s philosophical texts.

There has never been a better time for theologians to read Hegel and his contemporaries. There are excellent critical editions from the publishing house Felix Meiner of the major works, together with inexpensive Suhrkamp republications of older editions. There are good translations, often with carefully produced apparatus and indices. There is plentiful contemporary commentary and analysis in English, French, and German. The work is available as never before, and there is secondary material to suit all levels of reader from beginner to archive researcher.

There has never been a more perplexing time for theologians to read Hegel. There is an increasing gap between the wirkungsgeschichtlicher Hegel passed down from lecture hall to lecture hall, whose influence on theologians is visible in nearly every text by Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and von Balthasar, and the textual Hegel who can be studied in the latest critical editions. The Hegel who is “historically effective” is almost a different figure from the Hegel one encounters through detailed engagement with texts. Again and again one encounters bold claims about Hegel in classic works – bold claims which then shape later thinking – which do not stand up to scrutiny when one reads the actual texts. This is not surprising: those making the bold claims were repeating and developing what they learned as students more often than they were offering commentary on texts. There are thus two Hegels: the received wisdom about Hegel’s ideas, which has an influence on the theologians, and the actual texts, which contain what Hegel actually said, which may have had rather less influence in the past, but which are shaping current scholarly engagement with Hegel. Encyclopaedia articles on Hegel tend to repeat the received wisdom; the latest scholarship on Hegel tends to explore the texts. Keeping track of both Hegels is strenuous labor. Worse, there seem to be as many Hegels as there are interpreters, and the old quip about the Bible being a nose of wax that can be reshaped to suit

---

any reader seems to apply just as much to Hegel. Hegel’s own texts seem so irremediably vague as to require translation into an alternate idiom just to get started with what his basic questions are, let alone permit disagreements on details.

The philosophers who champion Hegel today are prone to justify Hegel’s relevance on the grounds that it speaks to their contemporary concerns, rather than the (much more plausible) grounds that it continues to be generative and offers a powerful critique of the poverty of much contemporary philosophy in English. Worse, those philosophers often neglect Hegel’s theological interests and some even deny (astonishingly) that Hegel has a metaphysical project at all. Theologians wanting help with Hegel’s perplexing remarks about God, the Trinity, Jesus Christ, Spirit, the Church, and so on find rather quickly that the philosophical commentaries in English are rather timid on (or simply uninterested in) these questions. It is small wonder that Barth’s famous essay “Hegel” in Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century remains a primary source for theologians, even though it is largely based on a questionable reading of a dated edition of a single work.2 Barth’s essay is easy to read, magisterially confident in tone, and neatly places Hegel as a modern Pelagius. (It comes as a real shock to students who know Barth’s Church Dogmatics to read the various versions of Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion and to discover just how neo-Hegelian Barth actually is in many significant respects.) Hegel is more inaccessible than ever: the secondary literature is massive and refers to a bewildering number of German editions whose paginations do not agree.

This book will not solve these deep problems. It does acknowledge them, however, and is intended to provide encouragement and assistance to systematic theologians, Christian ethicists and their graduate students who know they should read Hegel but scarcely have time to devote to serious study of Kant, let alone the figures who succeed him.

This book will be focused on texts, not a figure. More specifically it will be concerned with small portions of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, the Science of Logic, and the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Happily these texts are available in recent translations, and the discussions here will be oriented to the latest paperback critical German editions in a way that makes reference to the translations straightforward.

The renaissance of interest in Hegel by American and British philosophers is for the large part bypassed here. The exceptions are Stephen Houlgate and John Burbidge. These two commentators write with deceptive simplicity and lack of pretension and it is easy for the unwary reader to assume that their arguments lack the intellectual force of more flamboyant figures like Žižek

or writers with a more authoritative style like Habermas. It is purely a matter of branding. I consider Houlgate and Burbidge to be far superior to them, when it comes to Hegel, in nearly every way, and I draw extensively on their insights. The reason for not thoroughly engaging other philosophers is that while they provide excellent commentary on Hegel’s epistemology they offer almost nothing of interest on Hegel’s significance for theology, for it is not in the area of epistemology that Hegel’s theological significance lies. Some theologians (above all Andrew Shanks and Peter Hodgson) have promoted Hegel’s significance for theology, and these (very different from each other, as they replay the nineteenth-century split between “left” and “right” Hegelians) are largely in the service of a broadly liberal theology attempting to engage contemporary culture. This is valuable and fascinating work, but it is of limited use to the systematic theologians and Christian ethicists who are the imagined readers of this study. Those theologians need an account of Hegel’s logic, because this generates the German philosophical lexicon through which many of the imaginative theological moves in the twentieth century are cast. Hegel’s theological innovations are quite secondary in significance to his production of the powerful philosophical lexicon.

Finally, and more eccentrically perhaps, this book is not much interested in Hegel’s theological ideas. Hegel wrote from time to time about the Trinity, he had an identifiable Christology, and he was utterly fascinated by the Church. There are good studies of this and my argument will be misunderstood if I am taken to deny it. Their absence from this study certainly calls for some explanation, which I shall offer now.

This book is for theologians who want to know what it is about Hegel’s philosophy that was important for the great German-speaking theologians of the mid twentieth century, and what remains generative about that

---

3 See Emilio Brito, La Christologie de Hegel: Verbum Crucis (tr. B. Pottier, Paris: Beauchesne, 1982); Dale Schlitt, Hegel’s Trinitarian Claim: A Critical Reflection (Leiden: Brill, 1984); Andrew Shanks, Hegel’s Political Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Cyril O’Regan, The Heterodox Hegel (New York: SUNY, 1994). For a superb overview of how Hegel is generally taken to handle the different doctrinal loci in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, see Martin Wendte, Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel: Eine logische und theologische Untersuchung (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 232–279. Wendte notes that the big Christological studies of the 1970s by Künz and Yerkes failed to say anything of significance about the unity of the divine and human natures (Wendte, Gottmenschliche Einheit, p. 52); Brito does have an account of this, however, both in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (St. Christologie, pp. 287–295) and in the Encyclopaedia (pp. 510–516). Wendte brings out much more dramatically than Brito the logical significance of this unity, however, and brings it to bear on a discussion of the Science of Logic, which Brito does not consider significant. Many of my claims echo those of Wendte. O’Regan towers above them in the subtlety with which Hegel’s theological thinking is reconstructed and placed in its various contexts (including Luther, Boehme, and the Gnostic traditions).
philosophy for theology today. Part of the answer to that question about significance can be summed up in one name: Aristotle.

Hegel’s philosophy is, as I read its contributions to logic, a modern reauthoring of a series of Aristotelian insights.4 His thinking is dynamic and teleological; it generates extraordinarily technical meditations on ordinary practices of thinking; it is interested in the difference between investigations into phenomena (in Aristotelian terms: Physics) and investigations that are simultaneously into phenomena and the categories that describe them (in Aristotelian terms: Metaphysics); it is dialectical rather than deductive; it undermines and repairs false oppositions; it is ultimately interested in God.

Each of these requires further elucidation, but it is probably useful to have them laid out in this bald way at the outset. It should be clear that the primary interest here is philosophical rather than theological, but in such a way that philosophy cannot be readily split off from theology. Just as any serious study of Aquinas propels the reader to study Aristotle, so any serious study of Barth and his contemporaries and successors should stimulate serious study of Hegel. Putting it this way reveals a problem for contemporary theology. We teach Aquinas in our theological courses perhaps without enough attention to Aristotle, and we certainly teach Barth and his contemporaries without proper study of Hegel. In fact, in some well-known institutions we tend to teach theology as if it is such a different discipline from philosophy that we often engage in the disastrous practice of sending theologians off to the philosophy faculty to learn their philosophy. In many universities this is almost guaranteed to mean they receive a diet deficient in classical Greek or modern German philosophy. Theological students today are more likely to read Derrida than Hegel, and more likely to read Žižek than Aristotle. In no imaginable universe can this be a good thing.

This book will test five claims about Hegel’s logic: (1) it is a product of reflecting on Christian doctrine; (2) it is concerned with pairs of terms; (3) it stands independently of his heterodox doctrinal experiments; (4) its generativity for theology can be seen more clearly if one ignores those doctrinal experiments; (5) such doctrinal experiments are in any case fewer than sometimes supposed. The chapters on the Phenomenology of Spirit and the Science of Logic will develop the first two of these claims. The fifth claim will form the substance of the chapter on the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion; the third and fourth claims are the concern of the study as a whole. Aspects of these claims can be briefly introduced in advance.

---