



HEGEL'S NATURALISM IN BERLIN
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Reading across a wide swath of accounts by former Fellows at Wiko only makes one realize how unoriginal one's own account of Wiko is going to turn out to be. Running through all the accounts is praise for the helpfulness of the staff (all true), the friendly interactions between Fellows (all true), and the glories of Berlin (more than true.) What is left to say?

Wiko's great strengths also form some of its problematic aspects. Wiko throws together a large group of researchers who are required to have lunch with each other four times a week and dinner with their whole families once a week. This means that one has a series of great opportunities to learn about lots of different things. However, at the same time, one cannot do that and get anything else done. As one of my philosophical heroes, Hegel, told his students in his lectures, "The man who, on the contrary, would do every-

thing, really would do nothing, and fails. There is a host of interesting things in the world: Spanish poetry, chemistry, politics, and music are all very interesting, and if anyone takes an interest in them we need not find fault. But for a person in a given situation to accomplish anything, he must stick to one definite point, and not dissipate his forces in many directions.” Alas, Wiko is just like that: Spanish poetry, chemistry, politics, music (and, add to that, cultural studies, Renaissance painting, evolutionary biology, and then keep going). They are all on the menu, and they are all, as it were, being served up by masters in the field. How can one resist? Berlin’s own intrinsic attractions only compound the difficulty.

My own project had to do with writing a book on Hegel. I had already done two books on Hegel in 1994 and in 2000. In an earlier stay in Berlin in 2003–04 as a Humboldt *Preisträger*, I had drafted the bare outlines of a new book that was intended to show how Hegel’s philosophy of nature and natural science tied into his other accounts of the role that self-consciousness plays in human life. The idea, as it were, was that Hegel’s philosophy was a kind of naturalism that deserved closer scrutiny. In 2004, I wrote an article that outlined some of the main ideas at work, but in the time since then, I had become involved with a number of other things and I had not managed to get much further with the project having to do with the philosophy of nature and self-consciousness. All I really had was a big grab bag of notes on the project. One thing became clear to me. I would not be able simply to gather up the articles I had done over the last eleven years since my last book on Hegel, re-edit them, and produce a book out of that. That was a dead end, and the project required a fresh start.

By the time I arrived at Wiko, I probably should have had a clearer picture of what the project should look like, but instead I only had a plan, which, if I had had stuck to it, would have eventuated in a soggy, sprawling book trying to cover too much space and too many things at once. In the first months at Wiko, the unwieldiness of my original plan became clear to me, so I broke it up into separate projects. Presenting the project to the Fellows at an early Tuesday colloquium also helped to sharpen my own sense of what I was trying to do. The Tuesday colloquium series presents the formidable challenge of presenting specialized work to a highly intelligent but non-specialist audience and trying to make it both interesting and informative for them. That and later conversations with other Fellows helped me to form a clearer picture of what I needed to do.

It is no secret that one of the largest and most influential movements in mainstream philosophy (particularly in Anglophone philosophy) since at least the 1960s has been the

program to construct a completely naturalist philosophy. What is meant by “naturalism” here (to put it in only the most general and sketchy terms) consists in two broad claims, namely, that only causal explanations are genuine explanations, and only natural science is equipped to develop such causal explanations. This naturalist philosophy reached a high point of development in the systematic views of W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson in the 1970s and 1980s. That this severely limits any possible importance of the humanities is both obvious and something that has, of course, provoked much debate on its own.

Since the mid-1990s, a new response to this naturalist movement has emerged. One of the key pieces of the response and certainly the most influential in today’s philosophical world was given by John McDowell in his 1994 book, *Mind and World*, where he argued (among other things) that for there to be a proper account of the rational powers used by, for example, scientists in constructing their accounts of nature, we had to have an expanded conception of nature that outstripped the resources of those previous philosophically naturalist accounts. Such an account of the rational powers of human agents in general (and of natural scientists in particular) did not indicate that we thus required any kind of non-natural or supernatural account, but rather that “naturalism” had to be reshaped to make room for more than the “nature” that was outlined in the philosophies of, for example, Quine and Davidson. McDowell pointed to Aristotle and, very briefly, also to Hegel as offering some guidelines that would be of service to those looking for such an expanded naturalism. Since the publication of McDowell’s book, there has been a virtual flood of literature defending or attacking his position. (There were of course some influential articles and books arguing against this kind of naturalism published before this date, but to tell that whole story would take more space than I’ve got here.)

One of the most controversial elements of McDowell’s view was his suggestion – more or less heretical in certain Anglophone circles at the time – that there were resources within Hegelian philosophy that could be put to use in an academically respectable way to deal with this issue. (The story of the hostility to Hegelian philosophy in Anglophone circles is an interesting tale, but telling it here would be superfluous.) At the same time as McDowell’s book appeared (1994), I published a book on Hegel’s philosophy whose arguments, while not the same as McDowell’s, dovetailed with some of his views in key ways. Since that time, a number of other philosophers have also explored how the natural scientific picture of the world might also have a place in it for the kind of purposiveness that is such a key feature of human agency. Moreover, since that time there has also been

a debate between McDowell and Robert Pippin (probably the foremost proponent of the ongoing importance of German idealism for contemporary thought) about how far Hegel's own thought might take us down the road to getting a better handle on those problems.

Despite what seems like a deep human need to believe that the world somehow or another responds to our aspirations (or that something beyond the world so responds), there is nothing in the scientific conception of nature that holds out any hope for such a responsiveness. Nature does what it does independently of what we would like to have happen.

Nonetheless, in Hegel's version of naturalism, nature does not set our goals for us, even though we are still naturally constrained in the goals we do in fact set. For example, that we have brains that can hear certain kinds of structured sounds as music does not in itself determine whether we develop sonatas or madrigals. Humans are self-conscious and therefore self-interpreting primates, and in being such odd creatures, they make themselves at odds with themselves. Their nature is, as it were, to put their nature into question. When a non-self-conscious animal seeks to actualize its purposes in the world, it acts in terms of a law of its own nature, but for the human agent, its nature is always an open question. The human species as self-conscious primates, Hegel concluded, has developed to be deeply historical and social in character, and it cannot be understood apart from the various struggles over what has authority and who sets the terms of authority.

In Hegel's telling of the story, the ancients found themselves at home in their world because they had the idea of the world as a kind of organic unity (where "organic" is to be taken metaphorically rather than literally). In particular, the Greeks had a dual vision of the world as both organic (and thus as making sense) and as chaotic (as tragic, not intelligible). In trying to cobble together a sense of the world as a whole as both intelligible and as tragic, they were led to both a philosophical conception of the world as making sense to reflective thought and a tragic conception of it as guided by whims of the gods. Moreover, as they developed this conception philosophically, it became increasingly clear to them that the metaphorically organic conception of the world was completely at odds with its tragic character. The development of the modern sciences (among other things) put the nail in the coffin of the organic view.

Nonetheless, the sense that we can somehow be free and capable of setting our own destinies within the constraints of the natural world formed the motivating point for the

modern world. Hegel saw the task of his philosophy as showing both how, in the wake of the Renaissance and the French Revolution, we have come to be committed to certain things such as human rights and to impartial morality and how these commitments bring in their wake certain ground-level tensions among themselves when they were elevated to the level of metaphysical thought. Philosophy can offer a kind of reconciliation to the necessity of these commitments and the tensions that necessarily accompany them, but not a reconciliation of the metaphysical tensions themselves. It is also hopeless to think that any political state can overcome any of these tensions. To use Hegel's own metaphor, the modern agent must therefore become an "amphibian" that lives within such tensions, and to be a successful "amphibian" also means to exercise something like Aristotle's conceptions of the virtues.

To spell all of that out means going into lots of detail. God may be in the details, but so is the devil. Working out the details of that story took my year at Wiko. The book will appear in 2012.