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Robert Stern (1962–2024)

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Bob Stern was well known and respected around the world for his ground-breaking work on Hegel, Kant, Løgstrup, Peirce and others. He also earned the deep affection of colleagues and students for his great enthusiasm, inexhaustible stamina and good humour in philosophical debate, and his unfailing kindness and generosity towards others.

Stern's contribution to Hegel studies was considerable and wide-ranging, covering Hegel's phenomenology and metaphysics, as well as his moral and political philosophy. He published numerous important essays (partly or wholly) on Hegel, as well as the following highly influential books: *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* (1990), *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism* (2000), *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the* Phenomenology of Spirit (2013), *Hegelian Metaphysics* (2009), *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (2012), *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation* (2015), and *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics* (2019).

Members of the Hegel Society of Great Britain (HSGB) owe Stern a special debt, as he was a leading figure in the Society for many years. He edited the *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* (now *Hegel Bulletin*) from 1991 to 1997, and he was President of the HSGB from 2004 to 2011. He co-organized numerous conferences for the HSGB and helped promote the work of a great many young scholars and students. Indeed, he provided practical support and inspiration for more people than he could ever imagine.

In this piece, we would like to say a little more about Stern's academic contributions to the study of Hegel and the post-Kantian tradition more broadly.

Stern's career began, as noted above, with *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* (1990), a monograph based on the PhD thesis he wrote at Cambridge. In this work, Stern argues that Hegel is a conceptual realist about the structure of objects, and that this takes us beyond Kant, who (in some complicated sense) thought that *we* bring the structure to objects. This thought that we can move beyond Kant, and draw upon Hegel to do so, was a key theme throughout Stern's work.

This theme showed up again in Stern's next monograph, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (2000). With this work, Stern explicitly turned from metaphysics to epistemology, and carefully explored

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the prospects of transcendental arguments and whether they might provide an adequate response to scepticism. In the end, he found such arguments wanting. And part of the problem here is that, once again, they're too Kantian, that is, too concerned with how *we* must conceive things, rather than getting to the nature of things themselves.

In his first work, Stern had hit upon what he thought was the structure of the object. This involves the concrete universal and Hegel's thought that universality, particularity and individuality are interdependent. Now perhaps Hegel got this wrong. But why not consider his proposal, and think through the structure of objects themselves, rather than settling for how *we* must conceive things? For one, it's not like turning transcendental resolves a whole host of philosophical issues. Indeed, familiar problems remain, and in addition, we now seem to have a whole new host of problems related to the transcendental as well. So why not turn to the 'things themselves'?

Stern's focus upon epistemology also saw him develop an interest in the classical American Pragmatists, about whom he learned much from his friend and colleague at Sheffield, Chris Hookway. Here, he agreed with Peirce that we do not have to defeat all scepticism. Instead, for any particular sceptical challenge, we can ask whether it is adequately motivated, that is, whether there are reasonable — 'real', rather than 'artificial' — grounds for doubt.

Stern also found traces of this line of thought in Hegel, and once more, he saw this as a useful way to move beyond Kant. For instance, he thought that Hegel's discussion in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* displayed a similar critical attitude towards scepticism. One key passage is the following:[1]

> if the concern about falling into error sets up a mistrust of science, which itself, untroubled by such scruples, simply sets itself to work and actually cognizes, it is still difficult to see why on the contrary a mistrust of this mistrust should not be set up and why one should not be concerned that this fear of erring is already the error itself. (*PS*: ¶74)[2]

Stern's interest in scepticism fed into his lifelong discussion with Stephen Houlgate about Hegel's method.[3] A key topic for both of them is Hegel's claim that philosophy or 'science' must be preceded by 'total *presuppositionlessness*' (*EL*: §78R).

In a review of Houlgate's book, *Hegel on Being* (2022), Stern writes: 'I am happy to agree with Houlgate that Hegel does intend his method to be presuppositionless, and we also broadly agree about what this means' (Stern 2023b: 321). Stern and Houlgate disagree, however, on what motivates and justifies Hegel's 'presuppositionless' science of logic. For Stern, this science is justified

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solely by Hegel's phenomenology, which undermines the assumptions of 'natural consciousness' by subjecting them to immanent critique or what Peirce would call 'real doubt'. For Houlgate, by contrast, Hegel's presuppositionless science is also justified by the modern demand for *freedom*, which requires that we first free ourselves, at one go, from everything that is simply given or presupposed. Stern's response to this proposal was characteristically subtle and robust:

> even if we see 'the principle of freedom' as what for Hegel really underlies the concern with presuppositionlessness, this need not mean that this commits him to the idea that free thought must begin with no assumptions and so be presuppositionless in this sense: for, thought can still be free as long as it is always able to reflect further on the presuppositions with which it starts, even though it cannot reflect on them all at once from a position that makes no assumptions whatsoever. (Stern 2009: 228)

Stern and Houlgate continued this debate until Stern's death, and the lively discussions between them helped both reach a deeper understanding of the considerable complexities involved in simply *beginning* philosophy.

Despite their differences regarding presuppositionlessness and freedom, Stern and Houlgate agree that Hegel is a conceptual realist. In advocating conceptual realism, however, Stern also advocated a realism in ethics. He thought that Hegel's position naturally led to a sort of ethical realism about natural kinds, or *a post-Kantian perfectionism* (a phrase from Douglas Moggach that Stern especially liked). Stern thought that normativity was just part of the world. It was clear that a well-watered rose was doing *better* than one deprived of water, and it was likewise clear that we could flourish better or worse as the rational beings we are.

Yet Stern came to wonder if this picture was enough to fully capture our ethical practices. He thought it helped make normativity non-mysterious, but perhaps could not explain the unique and particular form that ethics can sometimes take, namely that of *moral obligation*. Stern turned to this topic for his third monograph, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (2012). In this work, he contrasted Kant's view that we obligate ourselves through our own reason with Hegel's more social view of obligation and Kierkegaard's appeal to God. In the end, he concluded that Hegel provides good reasons to depart from Kant's view, but that Kierkegaard provides good reasons to depart from Hegel's view. And finally, to complicate matters further, Kant's view also provides good reasons to depart from Kierkegaard's view, so the book ends with us turning around in a circle.

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Stern found a way out of this circle with his final monograph, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics* (2019). Here's Stern himself, from his excellent interview on what it's like to be a philosopher:

> what particularly interested me about his [Løgstrup's] writings is that he seemed to resolve the *aporia* in ethics that I had put forward in my previous book *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard*. […] Løgstrup now struck me as an additional fourth figure who conceives of ethics in a way that gets over the difficulties faced by those other three. For, unlike them, he explains our ethical obligations to others without any appeal to the authority of reason (cf. Kant), interpersonal authority (cf. Hegel), or divine authority (cf. Kierkegaard). Instead, he argues that we are required to act simply by virtue of having power over other people, which makes them vulnerable to us and so requires us to respond to them with care or love.[4]

Does this emphasis on love move Stern away from Hegel in the end? He thought not. In this final monograph he noted that, in contrast to Kant, Løgstrup claims that 'to truly meet the [ethical] demand and to truly express love, compassion, trust, and hope is for any sense of duty to be displaced' (Stern 2019: 227). And once again Stern took Hegel to be a useful ally, through whom we can move beyond Kant:

> In this view, Løgstrup could perhaps have found a surprising ally in the early Hegel, who equally contrasts love with acting out of obedience to a law, and uses Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in support of his view. (Stern 2019: 227, n.58)

Stern defended a similar position in one of his final works: his impressive and profound essay on Hegel and Martin Luther. In that essay Stern argues eloquently that, for both thinkers, a life lived in love is one that fulfils the law, but in which the 'obligation and constraint' of the law 'drop away' (Stern 2023a: 53). In such a life, therefore, we find freedom in *doing good*, not just in thinking that we ought to do so.

Stern's late interest in Luther was perhaps surprising, given how his philosophical career began. Yet—besides being an interest he shared with Houlgate—it testifies to his lifelong concern to explore, in dialogue with Hegel and a wide range of other writers, how to think and live in the wake of Kant.

Bob Stern was an outstanding and influential philosopher, and he was tireless in his work on behalf of the profession. Beyond his service to the HSGB

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he served as Head of Department at the University of Sheffield, editor of the *European Journal of Philosophy*, President of the *British Philosophical Association*, President of the *Aristotelian Society* and Chair of the Philosophy section in the last REF (2021). He was also a Fellow of the British Academy.

Most importantly, Bob was a wonderful human being, a joyful, loyal friend and teacher, and a loving husband to Crosby and father to Adam and Lucy. He is greatly missed.

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Notes

1. For further discussion, see Stern 2013: 45–51.
2. Abbreviations used:

EL = Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic (with the Zusätze). Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

PS = Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. and ed. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3. See, for instance, Stern 2009: 209–37.
4. See Stern 2023c.

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