

PLATO AND HEGEL

Two Modes of Philosophizing about Politics

Gary K. Browning

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PREFACE

In the years since this thesis was written a number of significant academic studies on Plato and Hegel have been published. Of particular importance for the arguments advanced in my thesis are those studies which have been devoted specifically to a comparison of Plato's and Hegel's political philosophies. These recent writings on Plato and Hegel are included in the revised bibliography appended to this thesis and in the remainder of this Preface the impact of these studies on my own understanding of the political philosophies of Plato and Hegel will be set out.

A number of interesting recent analyses of Hegel's political thought are contained in the collection of articles on Hegel's political philosophy edited by Z. A. Pelczynski entitled, *The State and Civil Society (Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy)*.¹ The articles by Z. A. Pelczynski and M. J. Inwood within this collection relate Hegel's political thought to Plato's and hence bear directly upon issues which are central to my thesis. In Pelczynski's article, 'Political Community and Individual Freedom in Hegel's Philosophy of the State'² Hegel is presented as deriving political inspiration from the sense of community fostered by shared values and ethical ideals which he perceived as animating the Ancient Greek Polis and the ideal community of Plato's *Republic*. Pelczynski goes on to explain the distinctiveness of Hegel's political thought as residing in its concern to unite provision for individual freedom with a revived sense of political community. Inwood in his article, 'Hegel, Plato and Greek 'Sittlichkeit'', echoes Pelczynski in emphasising the significance of the political community for both Plato and Hegel in shaping man's identity and in providing a cultural framework of shared values and norms. At the same time, however, Hegel's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* is held to suffer from its failure to recognise the innovatory character of its political arrangements. This latter criticism of Hegel's account of the *Republic* is also voiced in Inwood's earlier book, *Hegel*.⁴

While the observations of Pelczynski and Inwood are generally compatible with the line of argument followed in my thesis, they nevertheless served as the point of departure for a reformulation of

my own comparative understanding of the political philosophies of Plato and Hegel which I undertook in a series of two articles. In the first of these articles, 'Plato and Hegel: Reason, Redemption and Political Theory'⁵, a general comparison of the approaches to politics implied by their conceptions of reason is undertaken. The integrative role assigned to a 'rational' political community in uniting individuals and in framing a shared cultural identity in both their political philosophies is highlighted. On the other hand their political philosophies are seen as being sharply divided by the contrasting features of their conceptions of reason. Plato is explained to be concerned to re-design the structures of political life according to the dictates of ideal, transcendent principles of reason whereas Hegel is shown to be aiming to 'redeem' the imperfections of political life by recognising the reason underlying actual political experience. The historicist, deterministic implications of Hegel's conception of reason are seen as more problematic for the maintenance of a genuine respect for individual agency and human freedom in this article than was admitted in my thesis. Again, the imaginative, mould-breaking creativity of Plato's political theorizing is accorded more extensive consideration than it received in my thesis.

In my subsequent article, 'Hegel's Plato: The Owl of Minerva and a Fading Political Tradition'⁶, Hegel's interpretation of Plato's political thought is subjected to a concentrated critical analysis. Drawing upon material in the opening chapter of this thesis, the strengths and weaknesses of Hegel's understanding of Plato are reviewed and appraised. Hegel is seen as appreciating the affinity between Plato's ideal of an integrated, cohesive political community and the ethical harmony exhibited in the traditional Greek polis. Hegel's interpretation of Plato, however, is held to suffer from its failure to recognise that the ideal commonwealth of the *Republic* does not mirror actual Greek political experience but is an imaginative, decidedly original political vision. More generally, Hegel's account of Plato's political philosophy is criticised for its imputation to Plato of an Hegelianized conception of philosophy. The implications of this latter criticism for an assessment of the validity of Hegel's own system are pursued more explicitly in this article than they were in my thesis. The distinctiveness of Plato's and Hegel's conceptions of philosophy explored in this article are also highlighted in similar terms in a recent article by Bertman, 'Wisdom, and Philosophy: Plato

and Hegel.⁷ Bertman emphasises the audacity and originality of Hegel's claim to possess wisdom and to be able to express it in a complete and systematic manner.

Hegelian scholarship in recent years has benefited from the publication of English translations of important but hitherto untranslated works and writings of Hegel. The availability in English of the *Berne Fragments*, *The Life of Jesus* and the *Jena System, 1804-5; Logic and Metaphysics* promotes understanding of his early thought and first efforts to frame a philosophical system amongst English readers.⁸ Likewise the publication of *The Philosophical Propaedeutic* admits to a wider audience an initial outline of his system.⁹ The translation of Hegel's *Letters*, for the most part, merely alerts English to the mundane pressures and interests with which Hegel was concerned.¹⁰ Nonetheless Hegel's attempt to explain his system in an uncomplicated way to Duboc, a manufacturer merits attention in that its insistence on truth being a process reinforces the explanatory priority assigned to relating Hegel's political thought to the several parts of his system within my thesis.¹¹ The publication of Harris' study of Hegel's Jena period, *Hegel's Development: Night Thoughts (Jena 1801-1806)* in conjunction with his earlier painstaking study of Hegel's development provides a comprehensive account of the development of Hegel's thought.¹² A number of critical studies of Hegel's philosophy which analyse crucial aspects of his system in the light of contemporary philosophical theory have also been published in recent years, such as Rosen's examination of Hegel's dialectic and Pippin's review of Hegel's idealism.¹³ Inwood in his major study, *Hegel* and in his editorial introduction to a collection of articles entitled, *Hegel*, has sought to refine debate on Hegel by attempting to clarify the critical terms of reference to be used in evaluating Hegel.¹⁴ In the latter publication the criteria governing successful interpretations of Hegel are set out, namely that they should seek to be intelligible, interesting and correct though these aims are recognised as frequently coming into conflict.¹⁵ Singer's concise commentary, *Hegel*, is notable for striking a judicious balance between recognising the necessitarian and schematic implications of Hegel's system and exploring the possibilities of interpreting Hegel interestingly as a philosopher explaining the inter-related conditions of human agency and meaningful behaviour.¹⁶ The most significant recent studies of Hegel's political philosophy are contained

in the collection of articles edited by Z. A. Pelczynski entitled, *The State and Civil Society (Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy)*.¹⁷ The articles by Plant and Walton entitled 'Hegel on Identity and Legitimation' and 'Economy, Utility and Community in Hegel's Theory of Civil Society' respectively represent particularly interesting accounts of Hegel's conception of civil society and the operation of the market. Both commentators confirm the significance of the reservations Hegel held over the economic transactions of civil society to which attention was drawn in my thesis.¹⁸

Amongst the numerous recent studies on Plato's *Republic* Annas' *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* is especially notable for the painstaking care with which the arguments of the dialogue are presented and explored.¹⁹ Critical attention is also drawn to aspects of the *Republic* which are pointed up in Chapter 2 of my thesis. She highlights the importance of the *Republic's* account of the prevailing imperfection of moral and political practice and also observes the significance of Book 1 and the dialogue form for the overall argument of the *Republic*. Hall's book *Plato* presents a considered examination of Plato's political thought and argues plausibly against designating Plato a totalitarian.²⁰ According to Hall, Plato's ideal state is a vehicle for realizing individual excellence rather than an end in itself and Hall also considers that Plato is reasonably optimistic over the prospect of achieving the ideal state in practice. Hare's recent concise study, *Plato*, however, presents a more balanced assessment of Plato's political thought in which Plato's authoritarianism is highlighted and explained.²¹ The *Laws*, a previously somewhat neglected dialogue has received more critical and scholarly attention in recent years, notably in Stalley's *Introduction to Plato's Laws*, a new literal and annotated translation of the dialogue by Pangle and in Klosko's *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*.²² Stalley's book supplements rather than supersedes Morrow's scholarly study of the *Laws*, *Plato's Cretan City*, for it is concerned to relate the arguments of the *Laws* to contemporary political issues and debates.²³ Klosko's book and Melling's recent study, *Understanding Plato*, emphasise the importance of the turbulent atmosphere within contemporary Greek city states for an explanation of the course of Plato's political development as is suggested in my thesis.²⁴