

## Pleasantville

Annual Conference of the Hegel Society of Great Britain,  
6–8 September 1999, Oxford

The Hegel Society of Great Britain annually ensconces itself in the fortified quaintness of Pembroke College, Oxford, whose charms of exclusivity are as menacingly kitsch as its dining table mats, which picture an idyllic escape that is merely the quadrangle outside, as if to insist to even those seeking distraction from dinner conversation that there is nothing beyond this heritage experience. In the junior common room, the opening address promised a more comparative and contemporaneous conference than previous years. A division of labour was suggested in which more purely philological and historical investigation of Hegel would be ceded to comparable organizations in Germany, while the British Society would concentrate on Hegel's relevance today. However, if this signalled an emerging incest taboo in the self-preservative logic of the Society, the gestures towards exogamy were largely shy of the transgression required of experiences of recognition.

Thus, Catherine Malabou (a student of Derrida) recounted her discovery, through an investigation of the concept of 'plasticity', of Hegel's seemingly anticipatory resistance to deconstructive readings. Jason Gaiger ridiculed Danto's post-philosophical thesis of the end of art through a defence of Hegel's relevance to contemporary art in his account of art's sensuous particularity. Although Gaiger's agnosticism towards philosophical aesthetics as such (himself practising a kind of philosophically informed art criticism) made this a problematic defence. Dieter Wandschneider ventured the perilous thesis of Hegel's relevance to contemporary natural science. Although his admission that he had only looked for those instances where Hegel's philosophy of nature was confirmed and not those where it was contradicted indicated a rather dogmatic limitation to speculative logic.

However, if the gestures towards transgression often turned out to be a policing of boundaries – implying that just as philosophy prior to Hegel was to find its fulfilment in him, so philosophy after Hegel is to have been preconceived in him – there were nonetheless many fascinating and inventive papers and there was much to learn. The problem of Hegel's concept of nature proved a recurrent theme. Nicholas Walker gave a fascinating paper on Hegel's concept of Universal History, arguing for its distinction from claims to a naturalistic metaphysics that have often been the source of its infamy. William Maker proposed that Hegel's account of the ethical relation to the other could be found in the relation of autonomy between logic and nature. Although the objection that this merely presented a model of exclusive indifference was difficult to refute. Another theme, which was well presented by Kenneth Westphal and Bob Brandom, was the increasing recourse of post-analytical philosophy to Hegel's writings, largely through the filtering lens of pragmatism, in order to help resolve various antinomies of naturalism, particularly where Hegel's dialectic of recognition enables a critical enrichment of pragmatism's utilitarian critique of naturalism. Whether pragmatism can survive this infusion was left for listeners to query.

The Hegel Society of Great Britain appears to be thriving in its cloistered locale. The combination of Hegel's increasing significance for Anglophone philosophy with the Society's, albeit hesitant, openness to contemporary traditions promises much.

**Stewart Martin**

# Scientifically challenged

Annual Conference of the Society for European Philosophy,  
8–10 September 1999, Cambridge

In his opening address Andrew Bowie noted that, while the conference did not have an overall theme, a significant number of panels dealt with the relationship between philosophy and the sciences. This is an issue which is rarely explicitly thematized in Continental philosophy. The topic is close to my heart, so I listened to Bowie's comments with a mounting sense of excitement. I imagined a kind of turbulence in the air, as if a giant pendulum had swooped across the room. Were we about to witness a questioning of the consensus on the anteriority of philosophy to science and the birth of a new approach?

Sadly, no. Despite a few hopeful signs – such as Adam Beck's paper on Heidegger, Iain Grant on Schelling, and the final plenary session on 'realism' and 'anti-realism' – it became increasingly clear, as the days went by, that what I had fancied as a swing in the direction of a renewed engagement with the sciences was really just the movement of a large axe being dropped into the grinding position.

In a panel on 'Philosophy and Science in Nineteenth-Century Idealism', Alison Stone began by explaining that, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel suggested that the task of philosophy is to construct a systematic account of the world from the raw materials provided by the natural sciences. This sounded promising. However, she went on to show that, in so far as constructing such a system involves modifying the claims of the sciences by highlighting their contradictions, philosophy, as Hegel understood it, is capable of producing its own kind of knowledge of nature which beats the sciences at their own game.

The panel on 'Nietzsche and Science' proved to be equally disappointing. What I had hoped would be a much needed examination of Nietzsche's indebtedness to the science of his era turned out to be a trawl through Nietzsche's often contradictory pronouncements on science, philosophy and art. On this occasion, it was art that emerged as the winner, with philosophy and science coming in second and third place respectively.

The conference ended with a plenary session on 'Realism, Science and Continental Philosophy' involving Neil Gascoigne, Alessandra Tanesini and Christopher Norris. This was a disconcerting experience. For although each of the speakers was meant to represent a different philosophical position, I found myself agreeing with them all. I felt like a compass in a magnet factory. I began to suspect that what was at stake here was not any substantive epistemological issue, but a claim concerning the boundaries between disciplines. This was confirmed when a member of the audience complained about the 'colonization' of philosophy by the sciences, insisting that scientific descriptions of the world were parasitic upon phenomenological accounts. In a world in which philosophy and the humanities tend to be undervalued (and, therefore, underfunded), fear of scientific imperialism is understandable. But the position won't be improved by turning the tables.

For those with no particular interest in this issue, there was much else to enjoy. Continental philosophy may be somewhat retarded in its thinking about the sciences, but a brief glance at the programme showed that it is still a rich and diverse field of inquiry, with panels on almost everything imaginable – although I was alarmed to notice that the subject of gender was missing. There were, however, a significant number of women presenting papers. All in all, it was an enjoyable and well-organized conference. So, happy anniversary SEP – and many happy returns.

**Alan Murray**

*Next year's conference will be held at the Tottenham campus of Middlesex University, London, 6–8 September 2000.*