

Will Dudley

Understanding German Idealism.

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This book attempts the difficult task of introducing German idealism to new readers. It appears in the series 'Understanding Movements in Modern Thought', and shares features with the other volumes in that series, such as the absence of notes to the text and the inclusion of questions for discussion and revision. Its author, Will Dudley, is known for his earlier and well-received *Hegel, Nietzsche and Philosophy: Thinking Freedom* (2002), which considered the two philosophers' critical developments of Kant's account of autonomy. Some reviewers judged that book to be better on Hegel than on Nietzsche, given Dudley's evident preference for the former, and a similar judgment could be made of this new book. In what follows, I shall focus on its reliability and utility as a guide for students, pointing up aspects which teachers who may use or recommend the book might want to bear in mind.

Given the breadth and complexity of German idealism, Dudley has had to be selective, which is fair enough. But he rather blithely informs us that his principle of selection is simply importance: the book will deal with 'the most important aspects of the most important works of the most important thinkers' (2). One feels tempted to qualify this statement by adding 'from Hegel's point of view'. The most notable exclusion is that of the early romantics. What is problematic is not so much that they are not treated, but that they are excluded from the movement itself, being brought to our attention only in the conclusion as *critics* of German idealism. Dudley's situating them in this way repeats Hegel's own tendentious distancing of idealism from romanticism. This helps Dudley to construct a strong story leading from Kant to Hegel, but means that there is just less to German idealism on his account as compared with other presentations, for example such as Frederick Beiser's.

According to Dudley, 'German idealism is best understood as the philosophical manifestation of the modern demand for rationality and freedom' (183). What drives the development of the movement is the repeated resurgence of skepticism and the consequent attempts to overcome it. The book starts with Hume's skeptical challenge to the rationalist enlightenment and Kant's 'Copernican' response to Hume. The third chapter then deals with the skeptical rejoinders to Kant's philosophy developed by Jacobi and Schulze, before touching on Reinhold's renewal of the Kantian project in response to them. And so on through Fichte and Schelling, leading up to Hegel's attempt to answer the yet more radical threat posed by ancient skepticism. This works well, though perhaps the various types of skepticism and objects of skepticism could have been differentiated more clearly. Once again, though, there is a narrowing of focus here. The skeptical problems seemingly created by Kant are surely only part of the explanation for the development

of the more thorough-going idealisms of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Equally important, and similarly rooted in Kant's dualisms, are what one might call the problems of alienation identified — indeed experienced — by many of the post-Kantians (if not indeed by Kant himself): the dissociation of the self split between duty and inclination, the self cut off from nature, etc. Some of these issues do eventually get mentioned by Dudley, but overall they are insufficiently integrated. Significantly, emphasizing this aspect of the story of German idealism would provide one reason to include the romantics, as these issues were clearly more important for them than skepticism was, which in fact they were happy to take on board.

Dudley's sympathies result in a narrative which presents Hegel's philosophy as 'the logical culmination of German idealism' (194). The reader gets little sense why anyone — then or now — might prefer Kant, Fichte or Schelling to Hegel. That said, the chapter on Hegel is particularly good, delivering a very clear account of his 'foundationless ontology' and ranging over the entirety of his philosophical works. One issue which is side-stepped is the singularity of Spirit — Dudley prefers to talk about 'spiritual beings'.

Dudley's approach for the most part is to give succinct accounts of the main works of the thinkers he examines. He sticks closer to the texts when dealing with Jacobi, Reinhold, Fichte and Schelling; the treatments of Kant and Hegel are more wide-ranging. Fichte is covered up to 1799, Schelling to 1809. One noteworthy feature is the almost complete absence of discussion of interpretative debates. There are brief mentions of the contrasting two-world / two-aspect construals of Kant's transcendental idealism (17-18, 54; no references given), but that's it. This is in a way refreshing, given the tendency of commentators to approach the German idealists (especially Hegel) through a thicket of different interpretations, and it helps in giving students a clear story; but it also runs the risk of presenting too tidy a narrative.

Experts on the thinkers covered will no doubt be able to find points to quibble with, but for the most part Dudley is reliable. The only place where I have serious criticisms is the final section in the chapter on Kant, dealing with the *Critique of Judgment*. Dudley ties aesthetic judgment too closely to Kant's account of reflective judgment. This leads to claims such as this: 'Aesthetic judgments of natural beauty emerge, Kant claims, from our efforts to comprehend our experience by developing universal concepts, principles and laws that describe and predict the behavior of particular phenomena' (41). This surely bases aesthetic experience far too firmly on explicit cognitive, indeed scientific, endeavor. This is a shame, as the rest of the chapter on Kant is very good.

This book fulfils its remit admirably. However, given the breadth and complexity of the movement, teachers will want to suggest other ways in which the story can be told.

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