

ERIC S. NELSON

INTRODUCTION: HEGEL, DIFFERENCE, MULTIPLICITY

I. HEGEL AND THE QUESTION OF DIFFERENCE

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) has long been criticized as a philosopher of unity, totality, and identity. In multiple ways, which cannot be adequately addressed in a short introduction, philosophy after Hegel is shaped by its resistance to his thought. In confrontation with Hegel’s philosophical system, to briefly mention only a few examples: Kierkegaard expressed the irreducible significance of the singular individual; Marx analyzed the importance of material relations that are irreducible to spirit’s and the subject’s activity; Levinas has stressed the asymmetrical priority of the Other over the self-assertion of identity; and Deleuze and Guattari have undone Hegelian totality through a plane of becoming and multiplicity.¹

Hegel himself noted early on in *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (1801) how from the “products of mere reflection identity cannot construct itself as totality.”² Mediation cannot be purely intellectual from an abstract principle of identity. It requires contradictory relations (that is, both a relationship and tension) between identity and non-identity. The dynamic movement of the dialectic destabilizes and overturns the moments of stasis, forced harmonization, and monolithic unity that appear in Hegel’s thought. Another interpretive strategy arises from these tensions and indicates ways of reinterpreting Hegel’s own thought through the moment of difference, as in Theodor W. Adorno’s articulation of the primacy of the moment of non-identity in dialectics that Hegel’s positive dialectics of identity cannot abandon or overcome.³

One axis of interpretation of the contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* on Hegel elucidates the tensions between identity and difference in Hegel’s own works and their reception. Some go further in considering to what extent Hegel can be considered a philosopher of difference, multiplicity, and non-identity

ERIC S. NELSON, Associate Professor, Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Specialties: European, Chinese, and comparative philosophy and hermeneutics. E-mail: hmericns@ust.hk

despite the importance he gives to concepts such as identity, totality, and unity in the dialectical formation of his philosophical system.

II. EUROPE, CHINA, AND THE QUESTION OF INTERCULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Another axis of interpretation found in this special issue concerns Hegel and questions of Chinese and non-European philosophy and forms of life. Hegel has been criticized as a powerful instance and representative of the Eurocentric prejudice characteristic of modern Western philosophy that marginalizes and excludes non-Western philosophical discourses. This ethnocentric bias, which still markedly shapes contemporary academic philosophy and belies its claims to infinity and universality, excludes non-Western intellectual discourses from the genuine philosophical realm of argumentation, conceptualization, and reason. They are positioned prior to the origins of philosophical reflection in ancient Greece with the Pre-Socratics. Philosophy is identified with one historical lineage, characterized by specific issues and concerns that Hegel ideologically portrays as promoting a culture of scientific and conceptual thinking as well as individual dignity and freedom, extending from a classical Greek origin to Western modernity.

Nonetheless, against the culturally essentialist vision of philosophy as the exclusive and essential property of one tradition, as the hermeneutical philosopher Georg Misch, has—appropriately in my mind—pointed out in a comparison of Socrates and Confucius, the consistent application of the same criteria would exclude much of the history of Western philosophy, including Socrates as the paradigmatic figure of a philosopher:

The assumption that Greek-born philosophy was the “natural” one, that the European way of philosophizing was the logically necessary way, betrayed that sort of self-confidence which comes from narrowness of vision. The assumption falls to the ground directly [when] you look beyond the confines of Europe. The Chinese beginning of philosophy, connected with the name of Confucius, was primarily concerned with those very matters which according to the traditional European formula were only included in philosophy as a result of the reorientation effected by Socrates, namely, life within the human, social, and historical world. The task of the early Confucians was to achieve a rational foundation for morality which should assure humans their dignity and provide an ethical attitude in politics.⁴

Both Eurocentric and anti-Eurocentric analyses of Hegel’s corpus need to be contextualized and analyzed by examining the contexts

and motivations of Hegel's shifting interpretations of the Chinese world and Chinese thought. On the one hand, Hegel described Chinese thought as abstract, imagistic, and pre-philosophical, Confucianism as simplistic moralizing, and Chinese ethical life as a patriarchal and paternalistic form of Oriental despotism.⁵ Hegel's arguments operate within his dialectical account of the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. Consequently, on the other hand, we find that Hegel failed to consistently banish the idea that there are no Chinese and non-Western forms of philosophy, and endeavored to philosophically interpret non-European forms of thought that other contemporary histories of philosophy had already excluded from philosophy. Another dimension to be considered is how a number of Hegel's discussions of Chinese discourses are more concerned with internal European political-theological debates about politics and religion than with Chinese realities.

The image of "China" operative in Hegel's discourse is an ambivalent image of the primitive and natural and of alternative modernities linked with rationalism and the Enlightenment. Hegel's depictions are to some extent implicit confrontations with the philosophy and political theology of Spinoza, Leibniz, and the European Enlightenment rather than a more direct engagement—even if only in translation—with actual Chinese discourses. Accordingly, to provide a few illustrations that are in need of more detailed consideration, the discourse of "Oriental despotism" is linked with the critique of modern Western absolutism; Hegel's depiction of Confucius aims at undermining the European image of Confucius as a philosopher of Enlightenment in opposition to faith, and the *Yijing* is simultaneously alleged to be a primitive form of "imagistic thinking" and abstract, mathematical, and modern through its association with Leibniz's interpretation of images, language, and mathematical thinking.

III. OVERVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The young Hegel might well have taken a different path that would have had deeper affinities with Chinese thought according to Brook Ziporyn's contribution. Ziporyn thoughtfully examines how Hegel—informed by Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and his collaboration with Schelling on the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (1800–1803)—came close to Chinese philosophy's understanding of the center or middle (*zhong* 中) in works such as *Faith and Knowledge* (*Glauben und Wissen*, 1802). Hegel's approach to the question of the absolute in this context is comparatively analyzed in

relation to *zhong* 中, which is one of the key concepts of Chinese philosophy. Ziporyn clarifies how the experience of the beautiful is the this, the absolute, the center, in its concrete sensuous presence. This Chinese moment of the middle is subsequently lost in Hegel's further pursuit of the absolute.

Mario Wenning insightfully explores in his essay questions of magic, mysticism, and rationality in Hegel's later interpretation of Chinese philosophy and religion. Wenning focuses on Hegel's assessment of the significance and implications of Confucianism and Daoism in his late *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and how this approach departs from his earlier more critical and dismissive interpretations. In these later lectures on religion, Confucianism is construed as a natural magical religion centering on the cultic functions of the Emperor. Daoism is in contrast elucidated in a more positive manner as a rational mysticism—one with affinities with Hegel's own philosophy—that is centered in the speculative employment of reason.

Jean-Yves Heurtebise investigates in a historically rich and nuanced piece how Kantian Orientalism and racial theorizing informs and continues to resonate in Hegel's philosophy of history. Heurtebise contextually reviews Hegel's questionable Orientalist assertions concerning Chinese and Asian thought in relation to Kant's anthropology that formed a significant transition point in the Western interpretation of the Chinese. Despite Hegel's dialectical critique of anthropology, and its Kantian form, Heurtebise critically unfolds how Kant's anthropological works continued to inform Hegel's more historically oriented conception of peoples, their patterns of thinking, and cultures that are interpreted as expressions of the "spirit of a people" (*Volksgeist*).

Justin E. H. Smith carefully traces the impact of Hegel's conception of philosophy and his discourse on Chinese philosophy on the nineteenth-century Europeanization of the idea of philosophy. Smith clarifies in particular (1) how Hegel occupies a pivotal, if not always innovative, role in the transition between earlier and later conceptions of philosophy, which increasingly gave it a primarily European character; and (2) the adoption of philosophy as a modernizing discourse and field in late-nineteenth-century China, where the civilizational and cultural-geographical nature and extent of philosophy became crucial issues.

John McCumber examines Hegel's unreliable constructions of "China," which were formed on the basis of secondhand reports of missionaries and merchants, in relation to questions of his hermeneutical and critical interpretive strategies with regard to the non-Western world. McCumber reveals how Hegel's interpretive and

critical strategies develop from key concepts of his thought. Even as Hegel's Eurocentric interpretive tendencies are undeniable, Hegel's vision of society is one in which the full diversity and multiplicity of humanity can be developed and individuality and individual forms of life are allowed to flourish. McCumber considers in an intercultural way how Hegel's social vision of the socially mediated flourishing of individuality is enacted and practiced in *imihigo*. *Imihigo* is a Rwandan social practice in which individuals publicly express to the community their unique contributions.

In Tom Rockmore's contribution, he critically assesses the standard portrayal of the relationship between the thought of Hegel and Marx, as it was classically formulated by Engels, and elucidates the categorial interpretation of experience that he shows are expressed in the works of both Hegel and Marx. Rockmore critiques the idea that Marx can be adequately interpreted as inverting Hegel's idealism into a materialism, elucidating in contrast how Marx's categorial understanding of experience under the conditions of capitalism and industrial society is a modification and application of Hegel's dialectical employment of categories. As a consequence of this analysis, Rockmore concludes that Marx can be taken to be an advocate of the thinking of experiential categories that is also manifest in Hegel and German Idealism.

Jeffrey A. Bernstein lucidly considers Leo Strauss's interpretation of Hegel on religion, faith, and God based on Strauss's significant and revealing autumn quarter 1958 seminar that he held on "Seminar in Political Philosophy: Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*," which stressed Hegel's debt to Spinoza. Bernstein articulates Strauss's reservations concerning Hegel's thinking, situating it in the problematic of Hegel's elucidation of divine personality as a subject rather than a substance. Despite Hegel's defense of faith in response to the Enlightenment, Strauss critically assesses his interpretive move away from substance toward the subject as a denial of divine personality, which is necessary for religious faith, and consequently as a moment of modern secularization.

Emilia Angelova's contribution offers a subtle analysis of being's thought-event and the concept of a "relation-world" with respect to the works of Hegel and Jean-Luc Nancy. She delineates how Hegel's principle of identity is not as inimical to non-identity as commonly conceived. She indicates how Hegel's discourse of identity can be reconceived in terms of Nancy's being-with as the co-constitution of world. Contrary to the standard view of Hegel on the representational character of thought, Nancy's reinterpretation of Hegel demarcates how thinking is confronted by that which it lacks and does not think, occurs in a differential relation-world

between self and other, and demands a transition away from the problematic political heritage of Being's identity with representational thinking.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is of course inadequate to the complexity and depth of Hegel's thinking either to dismiss it as mere Eurocentrism and "identity thinking" or to uncritically read it as a pure system of concepts, isolating it from its historical context and complicity.

The papers gathered in this special issue offer suggestive ways of addressing and reflecting on questions of non-identity in relation to Hegel's philosophy, which is typically and all too reductively identified with a philosophy of identity, from a variety of critical and comparative perspectives. We can through these readings hopefully encounter and engage possibilities and limits for reading and retracing Hegel today as a thinker of difference and cultural difference.

THE HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
Hong Kong, SAR, China

ENDNOTES

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1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9, 249.
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 158.
3. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). On Adorno's thinking of non-identity and alterity, see (forthcoming) Eric S. Nelson, *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (Albany: SUNY, 2019).
4. Georg Misch, *The Dawn of Philosophy: A Philosophical Primer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 44.
5. On the inappropriateness of Hegel's assessment concerning Chinese thought and the Chinese language, which he considers to be imagistic and non-conceptual, see Eric S. Nelson, "The *Yijing* and Philosophy: From Leibniz to Derrida," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (2011): 377–96. I consider the effects of Hegel's Eurocentric conception of philosophy on later concepts of philosophy as intrinsically Western in Eric S. Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).