

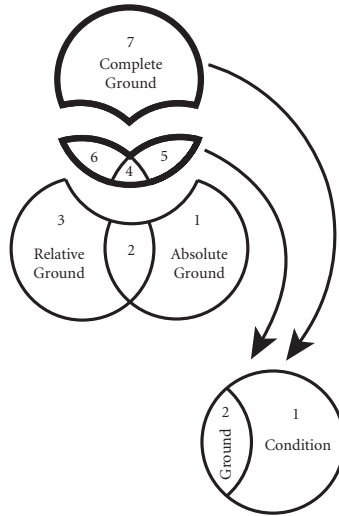
## Book Reviews

*A Commentary to Hegel's Science of Logic*, by David Gray Carlson.  
New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. Pp. xiii + 632. H/b £90.00.

David Gray Carlson's *Commentary* has some important limitations, and they should be admitted at once. It is very much a commentary rather than an interpretation: there is no framing at the beginning of the text to orientate the reader, no attempt to develop and sustain a distinctive characterization of either Hegel's method or project in the work, and the emphasis is on articulating the structure of Hegel's transitions rather than on explaining their significance. In addition, as a resource for scholarship the book is hampered by its exclusive reference to A. V. Miller's English translation, and by its almost complete lack of engagement with the secondary literature on Hegel's *Logic* in German. But these weaknesses are substantially mitigated by some unique strengths of the work. The work compensates for its lack of dialogue with the German secondary literature by extensive engagement with recent Continental approaches to Hegel, most importantly Adorno but especially Žižek. And if there is any text in the canon that could do with a good structural articulation, it is Hegel's *Logic*. This is due both to the way in which the significance of each stage in the argument is defined by its relation to other stages, and to the incredible length and density of the text.

Carlson's primary device for clarifying the argumentative structure of each move of the text is a complicated Venn diagram called a Borromean Knot. This is a figure that Jacques Lacan has found significant and made prominent, but though there is also some discussion of Lacan in the commentary (to my mind the most interesting discussions in the text are those in which Hegel's concepts are compared with Lacan's), there is no general discussion of the comparative significance of the Knot for both thinkers.

Here is an example:



How effective is this device? Your mileage may vary, as they say, but I found it frequently useful, occasionally enlightening, but often uninformative. I will not pursue the general criticism of using a picture to try to clarify Hegel's famously non-representational thought—the reader of the *Logic* needs whatever help they can get—but a sign of its limitations might be that I frequently thought that the device would better capture Hegel's thought if each sub-region included within it increasingly fine markings to represent the distinctions made at previous points in the *Logic*, the transitions could be animated to get at the dynamic character of Hegel's claims, and they could be animated such that they moved in opposite directions at once (so as to represent the distinctive bi-directionality that characterizes Hegel's logical categories). Now, I do not suppose that Carlson's failure to do this is any criticism of his execution, but it indicates the limitations that any pictorial or formal approach to Hegel's *Logic* faces.

Of course, the commentary is more than simply the diagrams, but they play the primary role of a thread unifying the book. The other theme Carlson sounds most frequently and returns to in his conclusion is that of self-erasure. Specifically, Carlson identifies not only the transitional movement but also the enduring and continuity of logical categories with their self-erasure, for example, 'All of these remarks are ways of saying that Ground is self-erasure pure and simple. *Self-erasure* is the ground of all finite things' (p. 308). Though Carlson sees self-erasure as only part of a transition (e.g. p. 337), it functions as the fundamental description of the work of the categories and of the transitions between them.

The problems attendant to the relative neglect of the constructive element of the transitions come to the fore particularly strongly at the end of the

commentary, in Carlson's use of the theme of self-erasure to respond to criticisms of the *Logic*. This strategy suggests that what initially appeared to be an inevitable but superficial disadvantage of his graphic method of presentation may be a deeper defect in Carlson's analysis. In responding to Stanley Rosen's complaint that Hegel can account for the dissolution but not the generation of logical forms, Carlson argues that,

the only form there is in Hegel's system *is* self-erasure. There *is* no distinction between forms and their "oscillation". For Hegel, these are the same thing, and so he *has* accounted for the creation of forms when he accounts for the dissolution of forms. (p. 607)

Now, on the one hand I am sympathetic to Carlson's general view that Hegel can be defended from this type of attack, but on the other hand it strikes me that Carlson's terminology undermines his line of defence. 'Erasure' does not obviously contain a constructive or selective element, and in this defence it is not supplemented by any, and so the way in which 'self-erasure' bears the weight of the reply to Rosen appears to undermine the very possibility of a meaningful and determinate outcome of Hegel's dialectical moves. It is one thing to argue—correctly, in my judgement—that many of the arguments of the *Logic* could in fact go in different directions and establish connections between concepts in a different order; in this sense, there is an element of indeterminacy in the dialectical progression. And Carlson is certainly right to hold that for Hegel, conceptual forms are to be identified with the transformations that they describe. But it is quite another to imply that there is no net gain, as it were, in the formal complexity and subtlety of our understanding as we track these transformations, and to imply that we have an arbitrary beginning from a lower standpoint after each instance of self-erasure. Carlson wants to reject this implication, tying self-erasure to self-creation, but the book develops neither a specific articulation of self-erasure as self-creation nor an account of that which is added to self-erasure to constitute self-creation. So I think that the book presents a dilemma. Either self-erasure is the fundamental notion, and then it is hard to understand how there could be a net gain in the transitions of the logic, even as a matter of the form or pattern or transformation (it makes sense to fix something that has broken, but not something that has disappeared); or there is a further story to be told about the function of self-erasure within the broader process of the transformation of thought, but then it is this story that must bear the weight of the reply to Rosen.

Perhaps the way to put the point is that it is unclear how the memory of the erased conceptualization is represented in Carlson's analysis, despite Carlson's repeated recognition that recollection is essential to the dialectic. It drops out of the diagrams for largely unavoidable reasons, but the metonymy of self-erasure for the larger pattern of self-transformation unhelpfully implies that it drops out of the actual mode of thought represented by the diagrams as well. This makes the book something of a paradox, since

its procedure is to draw the structure of Hegel's concepts, only to erase them quickly. Now, there is much to recommend such a paradox as a presentation of Hegel's repeated expansions into mediation and contractions to immediacy, and if this could be done with sufficient speed, we would have animated Hegel's *Logic* in the cinematic sense of 'animation'. But even this would require that a memory of the previous frame linger in our minds as the next is flashed before us, and it is no doubt this resonance that accounts for another theme that Carlson refers to several times, namely Žižek's notion that there is a 'silent fourth' that intervenes through observing Hegel's triple progressions at crucial points to move the dialectic forward. But the more central the notion of self-erasure is to Carlson's account, the more it appears that such a fourth must be present at every stage of the dialectic, and thus that the hermeneutic task is to make that fourth visible each step of the way. If the diagrams are supposed to be the technique that allows us to do so, then they have largely failed for this reader. But perhaps this is merely a personal limitation, and the diagrams will enable other readers to construct for themselves the film that, on Carlson's account, lies behind the pages of Hegel's *Logic*. (I would like to thank David Gray Carlson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.)

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Purdue University*  
*West Lafayette, IN 47907*  
 USA

CHRISTOPHER YEOMANS

doi:10.1093/mind/fzq056

Advance Access publication 23 September 2010

***Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's Meditations,***

by John Carriero. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. 544.

H/b £62.00/\$90.00, P/b £19.95/\$27.95.

Anyone picking up a new monograph on perhaps the most closely studied of all the canonical texts in Western philosophy is likely have at the back of their mind the question: 'Can there really be any mileage in wading through yet another book on Descartes's *Meditations*?' But it will take only a few pages of John Carriero's outstanding book to convince most readers that the answer, in this case, is a resounding 'yes'. There is a real sense of excitement here, a sense that it may be possible not, of course, to step back into the seventeenth century, since we cannot shed the baggage of all that has happened since, but at least to get closer to the actual problems that Descartes was addressing, and the actual solutions he was trying to offer, as opposed to those that have been foisted upon him by the mainstream commentators of the last fifty years or more.