

the review of  
**metaphysics**

a philosophical quarterly

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Self-consciousness and the Critique of the Subject: Hegel, Heidegger, and the Poststructuralists by Simon LUMSDEN

Review by: Michael Baur

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (DECEMBER 2015), pp. 395-397

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24636496>

Accessed: 21-10-2019 12:56 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Philosophy Education Society Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Metaphysics*

these other philosophers more clearly than they did themselves. What is more, he also develops those ideas further than anyone else I can think of, adding his own insights as he goes along. The result is a coherent and compelling defense of second-orderism. I would certainly recommend this book to any philosopher interested in ontological commitment or second-order logic, and given its clarity, I would recommend Part II to students as well.—Robert Trueman, *Robinson College, Cambridge*

LUMSDEN, Simon. *Self-consciousness and the Critique of the Subject: Hegel, Heidegger, and the Poststructuralists*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. xvii + 265 pp. Cloth, \$45.00—The aim of this book is an important and far-reaching one: to facilitate a dialogue between two philosophical perspectives—one represented by Hegel and the other represented by two of Hegel's best known poststructuralist critics (Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze)—on the question of subjectivity. As Lumsden rightly notes, the question of subjectivity is bound to be at the center of any encounter between Hegel and the poststructuralists, since poststructuralist thinkers typically hold that Hegel represents the apotheosis of modern philosophy, and that a pernicious "metaphysics of subjectivity" lies at the heart of what is problematic about modern philosophy. But what if Hegel's thought is free of the metaphysics of subjectivity that the poststructuralists have so commonly attributed to him? In pursuing this question, Lumsden intends to show that Hegel's thought is more defensible than has commonly been acknowledged, and that Derrida and Deleuze misinterpret Hegel insofar as they fail to appreciate the ways in which Hegel's post-Kantian thought destabilizes the modern subject in much the same way that their own poststructuralist thought aims to do.

In setting the scene for a dialogue between Hegel and poststructuralism, Lumsden quite rightly recognizes the important contribution of Martin Heidegger. As Lumsden explains, Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy's "metaphysics of presence" and its attendant "metaphysics of subjectivity" provides the framework for the poststructuralists' critique of modern philosophy and of Hegel as modernity's consummate spokesperson. Lumsden refreshingly avoids the unhelpful jargon of all-too-many Heideggerians and provides as good an introduction as any to the basic concerns and arguments at work in Heidegger's critique of modernity and thus also at work in the subsequent, poststructuralist critiques of Hegel.

Lumsden's explanation of how Derrida appropriates and transforms Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence is equally clear and reliable in its main outlines. At times, however, Lumsden seems to oversimplify Derrida's thinking, and thus tends to understate the real force of Derrida's critique of Hegel. According to Lumsden, Derrida's

interpretation and critique of Hegel is based on the idea that Hegel is a “robustly metaphysical” thinker who is animated by a “precritical monistic spirit,” and whose concept of “spirit” is “an expanded version of self-consciousness” and thus an instance of modernity’s dubious metaphysics of subjectivity. Lumsden is correct, in my view, to say that such an interpretation of Hegel is an oversimplification that does not do justice to Hegel’s thought. Yet Lumsden may be guilty of his own oversimplification when he suggests that the force of Derrida’s critique of Hegel depends primarily on the critique of the metaphysics of presence as Lumsden has explained it in this book. Followers of Derrida will be likely to complain that Lumsden’s explanation overlooks key elements in Derrida’s thought (such as Derrida’s very pro-Hegelian commitment to the strategy of “immanent critique”), and thus underappreciates the complexity of Derrida’s grappling with Hegel. Similar concerns might also be raised about Lumsden’s treatment of Deleuze. Lumsden correctly observes that Deleuze offers a novel approach to “difference,” one in which “difference” operates as a kind of “transcendental empirical” that perpetually escapes containment by Hegel’s systematic theorizing. But Lumsden spends no time in explaining or even acknowledging that Deleuze’s account of “difference” emerged out of his radicalized rethinking of Bergson’s equally radicalized notion of time. Because of this, Deleuzeans will surely be tempted to conclude that Lumsden does not fully appreciate the real uniqueness and subversiveness of Deleuze’s challenge to Hegel.

Summarizing one of his key claims, Lumsden notes: “It is . . . the contention of this book that once the significance of Hegel’s response to the problems that beset Kant’s critical philosophy is understood, a philosophical dialogue between Hegel and poststructuralism becomes possible. To date, such an exchange has not taken place.” I believe that Lumsden is entirely correct to point out that Hegel’s attempt to problematize the post-Kantian account of subjectivity (and also to problematize the related dualism of concept and intuition in Kant and Fichte) is quite similar to attempts by Derrida and Deleuze to problematize what they regard as the questionable metaphysics of presence and metaphysics of subjectivity in Hegel. Thus Lumsden has begun to make a potentially compelling case for the claim that if poststructuralist thinkers had understood Hegel more adequately, they might have recognized some of their own disruptive, problematizing strategies already at work in Hegel’s thought. But I believe that Lumsden is wrong to say that the “dialogue” or “exchange” he is seeking to facilitate has, to date, “not taken place.” For there already exists a fair amount of very suggestive secondary literature aiming to show how Hegel’s critique of his predecessors can be understood as anticipating (and in some respects trumping) the poststructuralists’ later critique of philosophies of subjectivity. (Some interesting contributors to this already existing secondary literature include John McCumber, John Russon, and Richard Dien Winfield, none of whom is mentioned in Lumsden’s book.) One might thus say, in good poststructuralist fashion, that the dialogue which

for Lumsden “has not taken place” is actually a dialogue that has “always already” been going on, though in ways that unavoidably exceed and escape Lumsden’s own and our own self-representations as individual subjectivities.—Michael Baur, *Fordham University*

MAHAJAN, Sanjoy. *The Art of Insight in Science and Engineering*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2014. xvii + 349 pp. Paper, \$30.00—The title of this book tantalizingly suggests that it is about the insights that science and engineering give us into nature and reality. However, such is not its purpose. The book is subtitled “Mastering Complexity,” which suggests it may be about highly complex systems (such as climate and economic systems) and how to gain insight into them. That is not its purpose either, though this is closer to the mark. In order to understand the purpose of the book and its value, readers need to know something about how one masters any branch of science, but especially physical science. One of the reasons—some might say the main reason—that physics and engineering are difficult is not the mathematics per se; it is that most real world problems involve either equations that cannot be solved in closed form—that is, no exact answer can be found, or there is incomplete information. The student therefore must learn how to make approximations that keep the essential nature of the problem intact, but permit a solution. What can be neglected because it will not significantly affect the calculation, and what is really important? What assumptions can be made about missing data or knowledge of system dynamics? This kind of insight one gradually learns over many years of study and working problems. Of course it applies in many other fields of study as well—economics, population dynamics, and climatology, to mention a few. The purpose of Mahajan’s book is to help students of science and engineering gain this insight. It should be noted that this insight has more of an analogical than a univocal character, which means that the ability to approximate in, say, quantum field theory is different from that in mechanics, though proficiency in one will aid the student in acquiring proficiency in the other.

Mahajan organizes his book in three parts, corresponding to different ways of dealing with what he terms “complexity.” Part one covers different ways of organizing complexity; part two discusses how to discard complexity without losing information; and part three talks about ways to discard complexity with loss of information. In all three parts, the subject is developed by solution of quantitative problems. There is very little theoretical or abstract discussion of the methods, and the reviewer did not find the connection between the examples and the chapter headings to be particularly obvious in most cases (though the worked-out examples were interesting). For example, part one is divided into two chapters, “Divide and Conquer” and “Abstraction.” The