

**Review: Vieweg, K.
(2019) *Hegel. Der
Philosoph der Freiheit.
Biographie.* München:
C.H. Beck, 824 pp.**

JASON M. YONOVER

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A GERMAN PHILOSOPHER is known to have summarized Aristotle's life, "in place of the usual biographical introduction," with the following sentence: "[He] was born, worked, and died."¹ Regardless of what may have occasioned it, this move has sometimes been taken to indicate that what really matters are the arguments made by a thinker, and not the conditions under which they were developed.

The German philosopher quoted is, however, not Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831!). Indeed Hegel takes a very different tack in his engagement with the history of philosophy, consistent with his broader historicism according to which everyone is "a child of [their] time."² Hegel namely infers from this claim that "philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts," and so for instance begins a treatment of the philosophy of Spinoza: "First of all we must [...] glance at the circumstances of Spinoza's life."³

Given such 'circumstances' within Hegel's own thought, it should be considered altogether strange that, until Klaus Vieweg's recent tome, the most prominent biographical treatment in Hegel's native language remained that of his student Karl Rosenkranz—from 1844.⁴ Vieweg's book must therefore be considered a remarkable achievement already in the simple sense that it finally supplements the literature with a comprehensive historical account of Hegel's life from a new and scholarly standpoint.

The work, presented as an "intellectual biography" (20),⁵ is primarily comprised of nine chapters that discuss Hegel along the various geographical stations of his life, from his childhood in Stuttgart and studies in Tübingen to his first major professorship in Heidelberg and subsequent fame in Berlin. Most chapters are preceded by a brief overview before division into subsections and so more detailed analysis, a practice that helps orient the reader. Since less data is available concerning Hegel's early years, the chapters generally grow

1. See Arendt (1978: 297) for some discussion.

2. Hegel (1991: 21); emphasis removed.

3. Hegel (1896: 252).

4. See Buck-Morss (2009: 49n82): "It is astonishing that Hegel has found no modern German biographer to replace Rosenkranz definitively." In English, Pinkard (2000) is of course the standard reference.

5. All translations are my own.

progressively longer, with the final portion on Hegel's life and eventual death in Berlin constituting the largest segment of text. Following an initial preface that highlights the book's central thesis—i.e., that *freedom* is the fundamental concern of Hegel's thought from start to end (18)—Vieweg returns to this idea continuously, shedding light on several of Hegel's major works, and more urgently, on historical matters that have been neglected if not also forgotten, which should enrich scholarship on Hegel in all languages, across emphases and even disciplines.

For instance: Vieweg's contextual account of Hegel's ethics and political philosophy, or his 'philosophy of right,' is particularly stimulating and in-depth. Given that it's developed over hundreds of pages, throughout portions of each chapter, and eventually engages also Hegel's logical framework, I can only convey a minimal outline of the portrayal here (and then express a partial skepticism). But in short, with his biographical emphasis, Vieweg builds on prior work by him and others to develop an unorthodox interpretation of Hegel as a cautious strategist whose actual views simply can't be deciphered without knowledge of the burdensome political conditions to which they respond. According to this line, Hegel becomes part of an insubordinate peer network from a young age. Early friends in Stuttgart into and throughout the 1780s will go on to actively sympathize with the French Revolution beginning in 1789, like August Friedrich Hauff, who is later imprisoned for revolutionary activities (38). Although Hegel is known to have toasted to the storming of the Bastille every 14th of July with a glass of champagne, his status among such political actors and thinkers is largely overlooked. Vieweg goes to great lengths in clarifying it and in making the case that Hegel never abandons his progressive commitments.

Still, despite a few exceptions—for instance Hegel's apparently relaying correspondence from German sympathizer Carl Friedrich von Penasse to key representative of the French revolutionary movement the abbé Sieyès, which seems to have secured a spot for Hegel in secret police records alongside a couple of later infractions (153)—Vieweg's proposal that Hegel "lives dangerously" (20) ultimately appears too eager. The picture painted seems rather to show that, while Hegel may well have *thought* dangerously (for instance defending

a right of revolution, which I also find in Hegel),⁶ he was careful to avoid taking on too much personal risk, in contrast to some of his peers. Especially in Berlin, Hegel guides students to liberatory stances—according to their own testimony—and, to be fair, also defends them when they get into trouble in some prominent cases (see 463 concerning Victor Cousin). But meanwhile, in order to avoid too much turbulence personally, Hegel is for example evading reactionary censors, virulently anti-Semitic opponents, and others through convoluted and supposedly even deliberately misleading texts that deal with issues like the relation of philosophy to the world, or the status of the monarch. Of course, this all might well be perfectly consistent with Hegel’s own idealism, according to which “theoretical work [...] brings about more in the world than practical” (cited on 323). And either way, the biographical resources that Vieweg mobilizes may challenge our understanding of Hegel’s political thought on numerous fronts. Yet critics of Hegel who expect consistently active engagement in revolutionary networks following Vieweg’s prefatory comments might nonetheless go unsatisfied.

Regardless of possible hyperbole concerning Hegel’s political engagement, there is much to learn beyond the most obvious links to the concept of freedom in Hegel’s thought, too. Scholars of Hegel’s aesthetics and indeed art historians, for example, will likely be fascinated by the rich accounts of what Hegel would have seen, heard, and read throughout his lifetime. (Among so many other things, I set aside in this review what Hegel would have tasted, though Vieweg details for instance Hegel’s wine-related expenditures on several occasions.) Hegel eventually disagrees with peers who consider art the highest organ of thought (212), but he nonetheless sees in art the free expression of the human spirit in one of its highest forms, i.e. one of several shapes of ‘absolute spirit,’ and embarks upon an intense life-long engagement with visual art, music, and literature from an early age. Already in school—at the age of nine—one of Hegel’s teachers gifts him an eighteen-volume collection of Shakespeare’s works (42). Friedrich Schiller, once called the German Shakespeare (685n33), also exerts a crucial early influence as Hegel heartily takes up his writings while likewise pursuing more classical works like Homer’s *Iliad* or the most important

6. Vieweg argues for a right of rebellion in Hegel from several angles, both here and in other work, only some of which I find plausible. I offer some discussion in Yonover (2021), where I develop an original interpretation of Hegel’s stance by utilizing resources from his aesthetics, philosophy of right, and philosophy of history.

tragedies of Sophocles, which Hegel uses to practice translation (44). Beyond his treatment of Hegel's early years here, Vieweg's discussion of Hegel and the theater scene in Bamberg (319f.) as well as the art worlds of Nuremberg (356-359) and especially Berlin (545-556) stand out, and then inform an insightful discussion of Hegel's aesthetics (612-632).

Because Hegel takes art so seriously, these sections of the text also help extend our sense of Hegel's philosophical interlocutors, which I would propose as the most important success of the work Vieweg has presented us (both in the context of art, which is of course intimately tied up with philosophy as well as other pursuits in the period, and beyond). Vieweg sheds important light on Hegel's relation to Goethe throughout several chapters, which will likely be of interest to many scholars working on the period (e.g. 345); but less obviously, for instance, Vieweg also notes that in criticizing or even making fun of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative Hegel takes the side of the fascinating literary figure Jean Paul (183)—who also rejects with erstwhile Nuremberg secondary school rector Hegel a limited focus on immediately practical training in education (331); whom Hegel will later forcefully endorse for an honorary doctorate in Heidelberg (426, 431f.); and whose several other links to Hegel deserve much more attention.

To make this point more clearly: no longer can one pursue Hegel's thought simply in conversation with that of Kant. As Vieweg points out, Kant's philosophy was by no means the central interest for the young Hegel, for example (77f., 84). He was rather equally, if not more influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and perhaps thinkers discussed less often in connection with Hegel like Epictetus, or likewise figures unknown today like Hegel's teacher at Tübingen Carl Phillip Conz. More work is needed, but Hegel likewise translated the former already in the context of his early classical studies, and the latter would publish a translation of the *Enchiridion* himself (44). (Conz, a friend of Schiller's, was also later involved in a German-language edition of Benedict Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, a text Hegel may have encountered already at a young age and in any case later worked on in the original Latin. Hegel also owned a collection of Conz's poems, several of which engage Spinoza and related matters, but are long forgotten.) Among countless other rich connections detailed by Vieweg, Hegel's dialogue with skeptical thinkers ancient and modern over the course of his lifetime offers yet another exciting way in to Hegel's thought (see especially 92-95 for early

influences). Interestingly, Hegel's first formulation of his notion of freedom as "being with oneself in the other" obtains in an early essay on skepticism (227). And reference to the value of skepticism may additionally help us transition to a first criticism of the book.

Most obviously, on the level of *form*, the volume contains only an index of persons, and no subject index. While nothing unusual for a German-language publication, and despite a detailed table of contents, this absence might be particularly felt here as it could make things unnecessarily difficult for the scholar hoping to read selectively within this extensive study and return to it over time. In addition to the commentator keen to learn about Hegel's relation to skepticism (who, for instance, may not know to check for references to the author of commentary on Pyrrho Gottfried Ploucquet), let's similarly consider someone working on Hegel's account of the market economy or 'civil society,' and so Hegel's understanding of economics. This scholar can easily check the index of persons for references to historical economic thinkers like Adam Smith and James Steuart, whom Hegel studied (172 etc.). But without a subject index, one may not easily locate—because one may not think to look for—Vieweg's noteworthy discussions of Hegel's plausible exchanges with: his patron Johann Noë Gogel III, a banker and wine dealer in Frankfurt (151); his friend Paul Wolfgang Merkel in Nuremberg, a prominent businessman who would have influenced Hegel's understanding of industrial developments there and beyond (343f., 347); or his contact Georg von Buquoi, a wealthy and intellectually-inclined entrepreneur who published a *Theory of National Economy* in 1815 and whom Hegel visited in Vienna (558); etc.

A further criticism concerns rather the *content* of Vieweg's book, which begins with an epigraph from Joseph Willm's 1836 *Essai sur la philosophie de Hegel*: "Let us hope that a detailed biography will soon be made available, written neither with hatred *nor favor* [...] that would sketch Hegel in *all* his facets" (emphasis mine; n.p.). While Vieweg clearly avoids any excess animosity, or indeed any animosity at all, he also concedes that he hasn't always been able to restrain a notable sympathy for the object of his study (29). This raises the question concerning how much progress Vieweg makes beyond the original "congenial biographer of Hegel" (n.p.), his student Rosenkranz, to whom Vieweg's work is dedicated. Such sympathy has both advantages and disadvantages.

The primary *advantage* of Vieweg's enthusiasm must be that it will have significantly enabled him to complete the project, the result of many years of

research. Especially with a volume so thick, this is no trivial point. Hegel himself proposed that “nothing great is accomplished without passion”—echoing, interestingly, his teacher at Tübingen Jakob Friedrich Abel, who had argued numerous years prior that “nothing great [...] has taken place without passion” (54). While Hegel and his early instructor primarily have in mind world-historical feats, one can see how this idea might also apply to the intimidating task of composing an in-depth biography. In tension with this line of thinking, however, Friedrich Schlegel—Hegel’s eventual enemy but also one-time neighbor in Jena, whose lectures he also attended there (199, 205)—proposed that “in order to write well about something, one shouldn’t be interested in it any longer.”⁷ Of course, Schlegel might well go too far here, especially given the energy demanded by a scholarly undertaking as ambitious as Vieweg’s; but still, more balance between passion and disinterestedness is in any case needed here, particularly in the case of a biography with an intellectual emphasis.

The most obvious *disadvantage* of enthusiasm is otherwise that the philosophical dimension of the enterprise may suffer. As Vieweg nicely frames the importance of skepticism to Hegel’s own thought, “the descent into hell of thoroughgoing skepticism clears the mind’s path to the ascent into heaven, opens the way to new knowledge” (268). In order to really see what is stake in Hegel’s thought and understand how it might be or rather *is* relevant to us today, it’s crucial that we put all the pressure on it that it deserves, and avoid domesticating or even neglecting many of its elements. In the former case: does Hegel really anticipate an ecological perspective on nature (482, 511), for instance? Or in the latter case: can Vieweg’s defense of Hegel from accusations of Eurocentrism get any traction at all (606), despite apparently good intentions, without also confronting for example Hegel’s infamous and ridiculous—but also influential—account of the African continent in lectures on world history? Such clearly misguided elisions do much more harm than they help, also when we know that Hegel will prove to be a rich interlocutor for thinkers across the African diaspora. ‘The true is the whole,’ as Hegel would have stressed. The most careful and productive path forward is then to rather confront such tensions, which indeed likewise makes room for Hegel’s thought to be developed from a contemporary standpoint.

In conclusion, this criticism raises questions concerning the book’s

7. Schlegel (1991: 4).

audience. If the volume were for the uninitiated reader who has grown curious about Hegel, then it could perhaps be both too much and too little: *too much* detail as far as Hegel's context is concerned, and *too little* philosophical treatment of what is at stake in Hegel's thought, which arguably demands more frequent engagement with potential objections and the like that would then hopefully draw in a philosophically-minded but fresh audience. If the book were for the specialist, however, then its semi-brief overviews of Hegel's major works may not be all that necessary or helpful, especially when they largely depart from the biographical story told and when connections to Hegel's life could have been worked out further (see 259-306 on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 361-413 on the *Science of Logic*, and 464-533 on the *Philosophy of Right*). Vieweg acknowledges such difficulties prior to his discussion of Hegel's *Science of Logic* in particular (361).

Of course, it's impossible to please everyone entirely. But it's nevertheless clear that any reader with an interest in Hegel will find much to learn from Vieweg's project, which should inspire a range of diverse and new engagements with Hegel's thought.⁸

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