Review

Susan M. Dodd and Neil G. Robertson (editors). *Hegel and Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 408 pages.

Limitations of Canadian Hegelianism?

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This extensive collection of essays is a thorough elaboration of the now well-established thesis that Hegelian philosophy and Canadian socio-political history have an intimate relationship. The Hegelianism claimed to predominate in Canada is not, of course, exactly the same as that expressed by Hegel himself and to a large extent the difference between the authors consists in what alterations to classic Hegelianism are required by the Canadian experience. Canadian Hegelianism tends to consider the Absolute as a process rather than a finished state. Dialectical resolution is seen as an ongoing dynamic that attempts to integrate apparently different or contradictory aspects of Canadian history. For example, Canadian history has required collaboration and negotiation between groups, most recently expressed in multiculturalism, which would be expressed through this form of Hegelianism. Thus, Canadian Hegelians propose a certain interpretation of what is termed “the Hegelian middle” (using Emil Fackenheim’s term for Hegelian reconciliation) where one position brings out

its opposite as a reaction, such that positions that are initially opposites can be subsequently brought together in a higher synthesis.

The collection centers on five Canadian “Hegelians”—Emil Fackenheim, James Doull, George Grant, Charles Taylor, and Henry S. Harris—who have either made significant contributions to Hegelian scholarship, or its application to Canadian issues, or both. This list is notable for the absence of Leslie Armour, given his encyclopedic co-authored work (with Elizabeth Trott) on the history of philosophy in Canada, another book written for a general audience applying the work of Canadian philosophers to current social issues, and a multitude of essays in which exactly the topic of this collection is addressed.

Grouping these five as Hegelians overlooks or minimizes the fact that both George Grant and Emil Fackenheim explicitly rejected Hegelian philosophy for reasons pertaining to its inability to adequately formulate the relationship between particularity and universality. Charles Taylor also rejected the final Hegelian resolution, though he continued to look for new forms of reconciliation. They argued that Hegelian philosophy is compromised by a certain subsumption, or erasure, of particular traditions—Grant referring to Canada, Fackenheim to the Jewish people—and thus a deficient universality. Moreover, the Hegelian philosophy is defined by its intention to reconcile the “mere ought” characteristic of Kantian philosophy with historical existence. The concept of “actuality” refers to an existing historical state in which ethical and scientific ideals have become immanent. This is claimed to overcome the tension between universalist striving and particular, real existence in an immanent process of the realization of freedom. The concept of “actuality” requires that there

be some historical state in which the contradictions of historical existence, and the tension between historical existence and universalist aspiration, have been in principle overcome. James Doull, Charles Taylor, and Henry S. Harris are committed to some version of this central Hegelian idea that philosophical reconciliation exists immanently in a given social form, whereas Grant and Fackenheim reject it. A more fundamental problem is that, if the Hegelian absolute is understood as an ongoing (that is to say, unfinished) process, it becomes more like a Kantian regulative idea than an Hegelian actuality—that is to say, it stands outside history in order to judge it rather than being an immanent teleology in a potentially universal social form.

The scholarship on these five authors in this collection is excellent. The application to Canadian issues, with two significant exceptions, follows established paths—which would have been much more evident had Armour's work been taken into account. The central problem of such application is whether the oppositions inherent in Canadian history can be fruitfully described and overcome in a manner drawn from Hegelian dialectic. But resolution of dialectical oppositions is described in the various essays of this collection in many different ways: as compromise, tension, consensus, moderation, communication across differences, promise, etc. The cumulative effect is to suggest that any sort of difference will be framed as dialectical opposition, and thus as Hegelian, by these authors.

One may wonder what is at stake in the thesis that structures the collection. Why is it significant to notice and substantiate a convergence between the purported reconciliation of opposites in Canadian history and the specific form which dialectical resolution takes in

Hegelian philosophy? The thesis not only asserts the predominance of such a convergence but also sets out a direction for the resolution of contemporary issues. Following Hegel, the state is the arena for the historical resolution of contradictions. Following the Canadian version of Hegel, since contradictions are not finally resolved, the various positions retain a certain independence. Thus a compromise is suggested in which each position, and group, maintains something of its separate existence under the umbrella of the state. The thesis thus grounds a social-democratic, or perhaps left-liberal, politics in which the claims of different and competing groups are resolved by and through a benign state. However, it remains unclear whether this politics should be understood in a Hegelian or Kantian form—as an actually-achieved immanence within Canadian society or a regulative ideal standing outside immanence. If it remains an ideal, then it does not contain the warrant of a universal resolution in “actuality” as the collection claims or, at least, implies. It would be a *polemos* whose assertion in a Hegelian guise of “actuality” conceals its polemical character.

Only in two essays does this limitation of the Hegel-Canada synthesis surface. Barry Cooper argues that Canadian Hegelianism does not represent the historical character of Canada at all but is only the self-understanding of Laurentian Canada. By this, he means basically the union of Upper and Lower Canada or, in more contemporary terms, the Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal axis. To this, he opposes the free trade understanding of what he calls “the West” but which could more accurately be described as Calgary-centred southern Alberta. There are good reasons for thinking that he is right about this, but the argument could be taken further to identify more fragments of the current Canadian state. Graeme

Nicholson argues that Canadian history should be understood as a development from a central state-authority toward a more balanced federal union. While Nicholson relies on Doull and Hegel to make his argument, it is, in the end, most un-Hegelian in that it is a development away from the state, not toward it, that suggests that political legitimacy rests on the formalization of the informal practices of a people. In short, one must think the fragments, their historical “unification” through Empire and subsequent state, and the consequent incomplete project of the Canadian state to inculcate a national identity surpassing that of the fragments. One must think the origin of political legitimacy in the ways of life of these fragments and ask whether, or how, a federal unity could be constructed that would not be a mere subsumption. This would be a lively political thinking, but it would be very little Hegelian.

There is no doubt that this collection is an important contribution to a long-standing theme in Canadian philosophy that should be widely read and discussed in greater detail than can be attempted in this short review.