

Review – *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*

*The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* is a wide ranging volume, giving a comprehensive overview of the central philosophers, movements, and concepts of this period. The list of contributors is impressive, including most of the central contemporary figures working in this area, and the volume contains 41 chapters (not including the introduction) – suffice to say a lot of ground is covered. Accordingly, a rigorous engagement with the content of the volume is impossible in a piece of this size; therefore the below focuses on introducing the text as a whole, only making some brief comments on the content.

The introduction states that the volume is intended to be of use to a range of readers from laypeople to undergraduates to experts. Arguably one of the ways that this is achieved is through the structure of the text: while some companion volumes tend to presuppose prior knowledge on the part of the reader and focus on debates within the literature, this one lends itself far better to being read by someone unfamiliar with the field. There is a section dedicated to chapters on particular philosophers; a section dealing with the dominant philosophical movements of the time (Idealism, Romanticism, Neo-Kantianism, and Existentialism); a section which covers developments in particular areas of philosophy (such as philosophy of mind, logic, ethics, etc.); and finally a section covering particular concepts and topics as they were dealt with in the nineteenth century (such as historicism, evolution, and the Other).

This makes the text a useful general introduction to a broad range of philosophers and ideas, and has the added bonus of making it very easy to navigate. The range of topics covered and the level of generality necessary in some of the chapters does mean that the pieces are sometimes more introductions than significant contributions to debates in the literature (although there are exceptions to this). However, these pieces are also of use to those familiar with the literature, as they essentially comprise short and concise statements by contemporary experts of their own interpretation of these philosophers or concepts from a broad perspective. Thus the material and mode of presentation chosen in each chapter is illuminating for understanding the author's own views as well as those of the philosopher they discuss.

The introduction also makes a case for the claim that these philosophers and ideas have important contemporary relevance; a claim that is echoed in a number of the chapters in the volume. This is another great advantage of the text – clearly an effort has been made to engage with readers from areas of philosophy which have historically been suspicious of some of the figures and ideas which the volume covers. For example, Paul Redding's chapter on Hegel contains a clear and careful discussion of the correct understanding of the term 'idealism' in relation to the views of the German (or absolute) idealists – this term has a very different meaning here to the way it is often understood, and Redding rightly points out that this is one reason for the historical neglect of some of these figures.

The other side of this effort to speak to the contemporary philosopher not well versed in the thought of this period is that at times it seems certain debates are skipped over: in particular in the chapter on Hegel as well as in Günter Zöllner's chapter on Fichte, there is a marked absence of discussions surrounding the question of whether and to what extent these philosophers intend their claims to be metaphysical. In both chapters the fact that there is an interpretative question here is mentioned, and the authors do allude to their own views on this question in places, but there is no

explicit discussion of these debates or the varying positions. This perhaps reveals a tension in the volume's intention to be useful to such a wide range of readers: it seems that an introductory volume should cover central debates surrounding interpretation; however a work designed to provide statements of experts' interpretations has less need to do this.

This tension is also apparent in Markus Gabriel's chapter on Schelling: while the early part of the chapter provides a very clear account of Schelling's philosophy of nature (using terms accessible to those unfamiliar with the latter's work, but without 'domesticating' his central claims); the section on the *Freedom* essay presents an unorthodox reading of the text (as essentially an account of predication) with little or no discussion of the more standard views. Again, this is helpful and illuminating as a statement of Gabriel's view (especially as so little of Gabriel's work is currently accessible in English), but not as a general introduction to the text and debates which surround it.

It is refreshing, though, to see the figures of this period all dealt with first and foremost as philosophers in their own right, and this again is in part due to the way that the text is structured. Many accounts of this period tend to follow a narrative in which whoever the writer takes to be the 'star' dominates, and other figures are then presented through the lens of this 'star' (they contributed to their development; they were surpassed by them; their views were devastatingly rejected by them; etc.). Having separate chapters by separate experts on each of the philosophers means that the text avoids this tendency, and each philosopher is treated in their own right rather than as a precursor or disciple of some other. The volume is also refreshing in its inclusion of figures who tend to receive less attention (such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey), and of areas of philosophy in this period that are often overlooked (such as the feminist implications of Romanticism).