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Frederick Beiser. *German Idealism. The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2002. XVI + 726 S. ISBN 0-674-00769-7.

A recent surge of Anglophone interest in German Idealism and early German Romanticism has resulted in nothing less than a publishing boom of studies in this area. Frederick Beiser's work was crucial in preparing the ground for this development of English language studies of German Idealism and early German Romanticism. In *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy Between Kant and Fichte* (1987) and *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought* (1992), Beiser made a compelling case that many German philosophers of the immediate post-Kantian period and the issues that they raised were worthy of much more attention than they had hitherto received in the English-speaking world.

*The Fate of Reason* not only wove a story of the themes that characterized the immediate post-Kantian period (all centered around what Beiser calls the „authority of reason“), but it also provided a much needed context which enabled the contributions of the immediate post-Kantian philosophers to be appreciated. In *The Fate of Reason*, Beiser carefully analyzed: the effects of the controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi con-

cerning Lessing's alleged Spinozism (1780-85); the profound effects which the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) had upon the philosophical climate of the period; K.L. Reinhold's attempts to establish a foundation for Kant's *Critique*, which found their fullest expression in his *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* (1791); and the effects of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) on the German philosophical mood of the period.

Beiser's work imbued the philosophical drama that unfolded on the German philosophical scene of the late 1700s and early 1800s with new life. This reawakening of the key controversies and the figures who were crucial players in this drama has opened exciting new paths of study. As a result of Beiser's innovative work, the contributions of the early German Romantics (figures such as Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), and Hölderlin), too long considered to be of merely literary significance, are beginning to receive attention from philosophers in the United States.

There has been a tendency to give Hegel all the credit for the great strides in post-Kantian German philoso-

phy, and Beiser's earlier work helped to correct this limited reading of the history of German philosophy. His most recent study continues in a similar vein: giving a voice to thinkers who have been sorely neglected in the English-speaking world and presenting a well grounded alternative to the tradition of reading German Idealism as a movement shaped primarily by Hegel. Beiser is an impressively astute philosophical historian of philosophy who consistently offers a rich, historical framework with which to come to a deeper, fuller appreciation of key figures who are often overlooked, and his most recent book is no exception.

Beiser's study of German Idealism from 1781-1801 is divided into four parts; each part is so comprehensive and far-reaching that one can almost speak of four books in one. Beiser begins with ten detailed chapters on Kant's critique of idealism. In the final chapter of this section on Kant, he carefully dispels the „stubborn myth“ that „Kant dropped off the philosophical stage in the 1790s“ (p. 180) and presents the *Opus postumum* as an important contribution to the history of German Idealism. Section II of the study is dedicated to an examination of Fichte's critique of subjectivism, an examination that attempts to clear the waters that have muddied a clear reception of Fichte's thought and of German Idealism. In the eight chapters that constitute this part of the study, Beiser takes on the difficult tasks of showing, „how Fichte evades both solipsism and a transcendent metaphysics“ and of explaining „[Fichte's] idealist principles and his teaching about the limits of human knowledge“ (p. 218). That

is, Beiser steers a middle path between the two basic and „utterly irreconcilable“ interpretations of Fichte: the reading of him as a subjective idealist and the reading of him as an absolute idealist. In the four chapters of Part III of the study, Beiser moves to an analysis of the absolute idealism that he argues characterized the work of three important early German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin. The book concludes with a treatment of idealism in the most protean figure of the period, Friedrich Schelling, a thinker who moved in and out of the Romantic circle, and whose philosophical positions on thinkers such as Kant and Fichte were ever changing. Beiser connects each of these parts to tell his enlightening story of German Idealism's struggle against subjectivism.

Beiser rejects the „seductively simple“ account of the history of German Idealism, according to which it is one long move towards an inflated self-contained subjectivism, arguing that the „development of German Idealism is not the culmination but the nemesis of the Cartesian tradition (i.e., the doctrine that the subject has an immediate knowledge only of its own ideas, so that it has no knowledge beyond its circle of consciousness)“ (p. 2). In Beiser's history of German Idealism, it is not subjectivism that triumphs, but rather the struggle against subjectivism that emerges triumphantly, a struggle that Beiser characterizes in terms of an „intense effort to break out of the circle of consciousness“ or „egocentric predicament“.

The egocentric predicament is the problem created by the transcenden-

ce of our ability to know whether our ideas of the world and the world actually correspond, a problem that might leave us trapped in an utterly subjective world with no real connection to external reality. According to Beiser, German Idealism is compelling *not* because it leads us to the subject, trapping us there, but because it leads, surprisingly perhaps, to the development of a robust realism and naturalism. German Idealism has suffered because of the general misperception that all forms of idealism amount to anti-realism. The connection that Beiser makes between realism and idealism, seemingly odd bedfellows, at least for those bred on the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, can only be made because Beiser vehemently rejects any subjectivist interpretation of German Idealism.

He claims that the general tendency to read German Idealism as a form of vulgar subjectivism is rooted in a failure to distinguish between two very different forms of idealism: „the two versions of idealism correspond to two senses of the term „ideal“, the ideal can be the mental in contrast to the physical, the spiritual rather than the material, or it can be the archetypal in contrast to the ectypal, the normative rather than the substantive. Idealism in the former sense is the doctrine that all reality depends upon some self-conscious subject; idealism in the latter sense is the doctrine that everything is a manifestation of the ideal, an appearance of reason“ (p. 6). Featured in Beiser’s story is idealism in the second sense mentioned above, and so a fresh, new story of German Idealism emerges, one which frees it from the

confines of the subjectivist interpretation to which it has all too often been doomed.

In Beiser’s version, „the story of German Idealism becomes a story about the progressive de-subjectivization of the Kantian legacy, the growing recognition that the ideal realm consists not in personality and subjectivity, but in the normative, the archetypal, and the intelligible“ (p. 6). Beiser’s story of German Idealism is told in terms of the unfolding of neo-Platonism, with its „ultimate heirs“ identified as the Marburg Neo-Kantians, Hermann Cohen, Paul Natort, and Ernst Cassirer.

Throughout the four parts of the study, Beiser maintains a focus on the meaning of idealism itself and the reaction against subjectivism carried out by the idealists of the period under consideration. Beiser’s sustained attention to the very meaning of idealism does indeed reveal that German Idealism from 1781-1801 was *not* a „grandiose form of subjectivism“, but rather a reaction against any sort of subjectivism, a reaction whose final goal was to break out of the egocentric predicament and do nothing less than prove the reality of the external world. In short, the battle against subjectivism, leads German Idealism towards a robust realism.

Beiser’s study is also dedicated to correcting the widespread misperception that the young Romantics played merely a transitional role in the post-Kantian period. Beiser convincingly argues that the young Romantics were crucial players in the development of German Idealism: indeed, „the early romantics [not Hegel, as commonly believed] were the

true founders of absolute idealism“ (viii). The absolute idealism that Beiser imputes to the Romantics is a kind of objective idealism, one that attempts to explain the reality of the external world on the basis of idealist principles, but which does not attach the forms of experience to a subject, but rather to the realm of pure being as such. The ideal, on Beiser's reading of the Romantics' breed of idealism, is the archetypical, intelligible, and structural, *not* the subjective, mental, or spiritual.

Beiser's privileging of the early German Romantics in his tale of German Idealism will put Hegelians on guard. Indeed, Beiser openly asserts that his study „is a reaction against the Hegelian legacy“ and further that Hegel was a „tortoise among hares“ (p. 11), the hares being his predecessors in Jena, who never created grand systems, and who were treated with contempt in Hegel's rewriting of the history of philosophy. As Beiser puts it: „There is not a single Hegelian theme that cannot be traced to his predecessors in Jena, to many earlier thinkers whom Hegel and the Hegelian school either belittled or ignored“ (p. 10). Beiser rejects the teleological reading of history that followed in Hegel's wake. One consequence of this rejection is that in his daring and original study, Beiser does not read German Idealism as a progression toward Hegel or a decline from Kant, but rather presents German Idealism as a much more nuanced movement and looks carefully at the contributions of individual thinkers on their own terms.

Beiser argues that the German Romantics were absolute idealists, but stresses that their idealism had little

to do with sweeping claims regarding the dependency of reality upon the self-conscious subject. Their idealism was far less subjective, and while it did commit them to the claim that „everything is a manifestation of the ideal, an appearance of reason“, they did not conceive of this manifestation of the ideal as a subjective, mental or spiritual appearance of reason, but rather its normative or archetypical manifestation. Absolute idealism is not subjective idealism with a subject inflated to comprehend the whole of reality, but a form of realism. Moreover, as absolute idealism derives „the transcendental subject from its place within nature“ (p. 4), this kind of idealism is also connected to a certain kind of naturalism that is rooted in the Romantics' view that the absolute is „nothing less than the whole of nature“ (p. 356), with nature understood as some sort of organic whole. Beiser stresses that the naturalism of absolute idealism is not simply empirical naturalism „which explains everything in the phenomenal world according to natural laws, but which leaves the noumenal world untouched. Rather, it maintains that we can explain not only empirical consciousness but transcendental self-consciousness according to its place in nature“ (p. 355). So, far from trapping us in an isolated subject cut off from the world, absolute idealism is shown to throw us into the world, with no clear-cut divisions between subjects and objects, with everything conceived as a part of a living, breathing whole of nature.

Beiser also corrects the picture of the absolute idealism of the Romantics as a breed of neo-foundational-

lism—on this point, he is in the good company of the leading German scholars of Romanticism, Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, who have each done work on the early students of K.L. Reinhold (J.B. Erhard, C.I. Diez, F. Weißhuhn, C.C.E. Schmid, F.C. Forberg, J.P.A. Feuerbach, and F.I. Niethammer, among others) and have carefully traced the development of romantic skepticism regarding the feasibility of establishing first principles for philosophy. Yet, there is, despite agreement on the point of anti-foundationalism as a formative element in the philosophical thought of the early German Romantics, a strident point of contention between Frank and Henrich's characterization of the early German Romantics, on the one hand, and Beiser's, on the other.

Frank, for example, argues that the anti-foundationalism that develops in the post-Kantian period of German philosophy is precisely what distinguishes figures like Feuerbach, Niethammer, and the early Romantics, from the group of German Idealists, such as Fichte and Schelling. Frank draws a sharp line between early German Romanticism and German Idealism (see especially my translation of his lectures, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, forthcoming with SUNY Press). Frank traces idealism to its articulation by Hegel that consciousness is a self-sufficient phenomenon, one which is able to make the presuppositions of its existence comprehensible by its own means. Frank contrasts this kind of idealism and the accompanying view of the self-sufficiency of consciousness to the conviction that characterizes the

early German Romantics, namely, that self-being owes its existence to a transcendent foundation which cannot be dissolved by consciousness. Frank links this view of the primacy of Being to the romantic position that the true foundation of self-being is a puzzle that cannot be handled by reflection alone: to solve the puzzle we need to turn to art.

Beiser makes reference to the tensions between his idealist reading of the Romantics and Frank and Henrich's anti-idealist reading, telling us that Frank and Henrich's sharp distinction between German Idealism and early German Romanticism is the result of a „much too narrow“ (p. 354) interpretation derived from focusing too much attention of a few early manuscripts. A serious limitation of such a focus, Beiser claims, is that „it completely underrates the Platonic heritage of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel“ (p. 355). Given Beiser's claim that: „the idealist dimension of absolute idealism comes from its rationalism“ (p. 353), a rationalism unpacked in Platonic terms, we begin to see one aspect of the Platonic heritage that we would do well to take into account. Beiser also points to the Platonic renaissance that held sway in the late 1790s and early 1800s in German speaking lands, a renaissance that did indeed influence the early Romantics. Not surprisingly, when Beiser discusses the early German Romantics in Part III of his study, one of his central themes is the Platonic legacy that guided these thinkers (p. 355 ff.).

Beiser's account of romantic philosophy as a breed of absolute idealism does pay serious attention to its

roots in Spinoza and to the strong strands of naturalism present within it. As Beiser also claims that „absolute idealism involves a greater degree of realism than critical idealism [does]“ (p. 355), one begins to see a strongly realist reading of the Romantics' idealism. On Beiser's strongly realist reading of idealism, when does idealism cease to be idealism and become a strange hybrid of realism and idealism that is uniquely romantic? Which is to ask, can we so easily reject Frank's view that early German Romanticism is *not* really a form of German Idealism at all?

Beiser loads the absolute idealism which he claims characterizes the young Romantics with a heavy dose of Spinozism, Platonism, and vital materialism. The connection to vital materialism, whose supporters held that the essence of matter was force rather than extension, proves critical in coming to a full understanding of the romantic conception of nature, a crucial aspect of their philosophical project.

Beiser's story nicely accommodates central themes attended to by the early German Romantics, especially, the role of aesthetic experience in their general framework for understanding reality and the coherence theory of truth that they endorsed.

Beiser indicates that for the early German Romantics, the metaphysical claims of absolute idealism are such that to regard nature as an organism and as a work of art are one and the same: „The universe is nothing less than a natural work of art, a work of art is nothing less than an artificial organism. Hence, the realms of truth and beauty, the natural and the aesthetic, coincide“ (p. 374). In

connection with this point concerning the intimate relation between truth, beauty, and the world, Beiser refers us to Friedrich Schlegel's description of the general standpoint of idealism: „Idealism considers nature as a work of art, as a poem“ (p. 374). Beiser's reading of the early German Romantics as absolute idealists, while at odds with Frank's views does not, for the most part, mislead him in his interpretation of the major strands of early German romantic thought. Yet there is a strand of his argument which does seem to entail a somewhat distorted view of the early Romantics.

One reason why the early German Romantics have so long been neglected is that their work is read as part of the tradition of classical German Idealism, and in the company of such grand system builders as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, their work, which was not designed with any grand-theory goals in mind, is often dismissed as incomplete and unimportant. Frank's strong and compelling case against the move to read the Romantics as idealists at all is part of an effort to free them from the dark, heavy shadows cast upon them by the grand system builders of classical German Idealism. Beiser, in sharp contrast, argues that we can understand the historical significance of the early German Romantics only if we come to an understanding of their absolute idealism and hence read them as German Idealists. Beiser's solution to the problems of neglect that have beset a proper reception of the early German Romantics is to present them as part of the constellation of classical German Idealism (it is important to keep in mind, howe-

ver, that Beiser explicitly states that his work „does *not* pretend to be a contribution to what the Germans call „*Konstellationsarbeit*“ (ix)). Beiser's portrait of the early German Romantics clearly shows that they were *not* subjective idealists, and he convincingly highlights the strong doses of realism and naturalism present in their thought. In his reassessment of the role that the grand system builders played in German Idealism, Beiser urges us to keep in mind that, „Hegel exaggerated his own originality and individuality“ (p. 10), and that many of his ideas can be traced back to his predecessors in Jena, whose work has far too long been ignored. This move clears space for the contributions of the early German Romantics to come into view.

Yet, for all of his careful excavating work, there is something unsettling about Beiser's suggestion that the early German Romantics' use of the fragment was part of a disorganized way to present their ideas; the fragments lacked systematicity and completeness which would be provided by the likes of Schelling or Hegel: „What was merely fragmentary, inchoate, and suggestive in Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel became systematic, organized, and explicit in Schelling“ (p. 467) and „[w]hat Hölderlin, Schlegel, [and] Novalis ... had left in fragments-what they regarded as a mystical insight transcending conceptual articulation-Schelling would now try to rationalize and systematize“ (p. 553). Although the study seeks to clear space on the map of ideas for thinkers squeezed out by Hegel, Beiser claims that „in unsurpassed fashion

[Hegel] summarized and integrated into one system all the themes his less scholastic and organized contemporaries had left in fragments or notebooks“ (p. 10). With claims like this, Beiser underestimates the philosophical significance of the fragment and the very theme of incompleteness that the Romantics develop in their work.

Though Beiser frees the historical sky of the dark shadow cast over German Idealism by Hegel and therewith casts much needed light on the early German Romantics, his reading seems, at points, nevertheless guided by the lens of the classical German idealist system builders, leading him to reduce some of the Romantics' achievements, including their rejection of closed systems for the presentation of their ideas, to mere imperfect forms that awaited completion by system builders like Schelling and Hegel. As Beiser correctly indicates, Novalis did „nurture systematic ambitions“ (p. 410), yet he fails to give sufficient attention to the fact that Novalis' conception of a system was quite unlike that of Schelling or Hegel. Novalis' aspiration to fuse realism and idealism, an aspiration discussed by Beiser (see pp. 433 ff.) presents us with difficult philosophical problems. The first question that needs to be addressed is: what did Novalis' fusion of realism and idealism amount to? Beiser's answer is that it amounted to absolute idealism. I offer a tentative word of caution that perhaps we would be in a better position to appreciate the early German Romantics on their own terms, if we would unpack the uniquely romantic fusion of the realism and idealism in a way

that did not reduce their contributions to pieces of unfinished work that found its culmination in Schelling and Hegel's systems, that is, if the net we cast to catch their thoughts were not crowded with system builders. The *romantic* aspiration to fuse idealism and realism was related to their rejection of understanding reality in terms of categories of being and their turn towards processes of becoming, and to the ontological and epistemological problems that accompany such a shift in focus.

Beiser's reading of the early German Romantics as absolute idealists battling against subjectivism does shed new light on the Romantics' connections to and critiques of Kant and Fichte's idealism. Beiser's impressive study of German Idealism's struggle against subjectivism (1781-

1801) concludes with a detailed account of Schelling's pivotal role in the development of absolute idealism, in particular his break with Fichte and his important contributions to *Naturphilosophie*.

Beiser's study uncovers the Platonic moorings of German Idealism, clearing space for a realist reading of idealism. Moreover, with Beiser's reading of the Romantics as absolute idealists, a new debate is opened concerning the early German Romantics' relation to classical German Idealism, just the sort of debate that keeps philosophical interest in past historical periods alive and well. Anyone interested in the period of German philosophy from 1781-1801 will benefit tremendously from a careful study of Beiser's work.