

ROBERT STERN

Robert Arthur Stern

28 February 1962 – 21 August 2024

elected Fellow of the British Academy 2019

by

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Summary. Robert Stern was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield until ill health forced him to retire in 2023. He is best known for his work on two figures who had previously been outsiders in the analytic tradition in which he himself was educated and with which he remained associated throughout his career: Hegel, who had been largely disparaged within the tradition; and Løgstrup, who had been virtually unknown within it. Stern helped to re-establish the former and to establish the latter as esteemed members of the canon acknowledged by analytic philosophers.

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Overview

Robert Stern—or Bob, as I cannot resist referring to him in this memoir—was instrumental in shaping British philosophy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This was due partly to his unusual interests; or rather, to what were, when he began to nurture them, unusual interests. Many of them became mainstream. Bob himself proffered various explanations for this. Genuine modesty prevented him from acknowledging the significance of his own influence.

The interests in question were in the history of philosophy. At the beginning of Bob's career British philosophy was dominated by a species of analytic philosophy that not only proceeded largely independently of the history of the discipline, but involved an element of antipathy towards it. This already made such interests somewhat unusual. But what made them especially so was the cast of philosophers on whom Bob focused, which included (in roughly the order in which he focused on them) G.W.F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Iris Murdoch, C.S. Peirce, K.E. Løgstrup, and Martin Luther. Some of these, such as Hegel and Kierkegaard, had always been acknowledged as part of the canon, even within the British context in which Bob was working; but they had been considered of purely historical interest and, certainly in Hegel's case, they had been viewed as examples of the absurdities and excesses to which the vagaries of undisciplined philosophical reverie were liable to lead. Others, such as Murdoch and Løgstrup, had not at the time got as far as satisfying even the first of these conditions: that is, they had not yet been acknowledged even as part of the canon. Bob did much to clarify why all of these figures deserved attention—and deserved it for far more than their historical interest. This, combined with their own range, meant that Bob himself made important and historically informed contributions to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of philosophy.

He was correspondingly prolific. His publications included: *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object*;¹ *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*;² *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard*;³ *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*;⁴ and *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*;⁵ as well as many other collected volumes, new translations, scholarly editions, and articles.

¹Robert Stern, *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³Robert Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴Robert Stern, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2002; 2nd edn, 2013).

⁵Robert Stern, *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

I said that Bob's shaping of British philosophy was due partly to his interests. It was due also to his prominence within the profession. He spent thirty-four years at the University of Sheffield, for twenty-three of them as Professor and for four of them (2004–2008) as Head of Department. The Philosophy Department at Sheffield has always been reckoned one of the best in the country, and many who are themselves now prominent in the profession passed through it under Bob's tutelage. Bob also served as President of the Hegel Society of Great Britain (2004–2011), as President of the British Philosophical Association (2012–2019), and as President of the Aristotelian Society (2021–2022). He was editor of both *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* (1991–1997) and *European Journal of Philosophy* (2001–2012). And he was Chair of the Philosophy REF panel in 2021. His death from brain cancer, at the age of sixty-two, was felt keenly across all sections of British philosophy.

Personality

It is hard to write about Bob's personality without succumbing to hagiography. In particular, it is impossible not to dwell on the affection in which he was held by colleagues and students alike—for the warmth, the kindness, and the good humour that he brought to his various interactions with them. This was evidenced in the fact that so many of them flew in from all over the world to attend two events held in his honour at Sheffield during his final months. Bob was always robust in philosophical debate, but never aggressively so, only ever in a way that evidenced his own intense enthusiasm for the subject. Such enthusiasm was infectious. And his students were duly enthused. But I doubt that they would have been enthused to anything like the same extent had the affection in which they held him not been reciprocated. Bob's professional dealings with others in his Department were embedded in a culture of fun-laden conviviality. A noteworthy example was the annual 'Philosophy Rocks!' concert that he spearheaded, at which students and staff from the Department played music together and he was able to indulge his own passion for Bob Dylan.

He always pushed himself and others to fulfil their potential. And I do not just mean their academic potential. For example, he ran the Sheffield half marathon every year from 2002 to 2021, achieving his best time of just under one and a half hours in 2013. While it is true that his many achievements, both academic and non-academic, were fuelled partly by a competitive edge, he was also said to have described his running—half-jokingly no doubt, but only half-jokingly—as a Kantian duty to himself. Given that he wrote extensively about Kantian duty, the joke, in so far as it was one, would have come naturally to him; but so too the sense of duty, in so far as it was not a joke, would have been felt keenly by him.

His relation to religion was fascinating. He was brought up in a Jewish household. But he began to have doubts about religion in his early teens, and they persisted throughout his life. He never had any fierce antipathy towards the practice of religion, nor towards those to whom religion mattered; in his later life he had none at all. Rather his doubts were—unsurprisingly—of a philosophical cast. They were doubts concerning whether pronouncements about God so much as made sense, hence whether those who subscribed to conventional religious creeds had any real understanding of what they subscribed to. ‘At that point,’ he said in an online interview with Cliff Sosis,⁶ ‘it strikes me as more sensible to just walk away.’ Yet there was a sense in which he did not just walk away. He initiated and organised the highly successful annual series of talks ‘God and the Good’, which took place in Sheffield Cathedral from 2016 to 2022, and in which distinguished speakers discussed the relationship between religion and ethics for a public audience. Moreover, nearly all the philosophers to whom he devoted serious attention had a clear religious commitment of one kind or another, while even the few that did not stood in their own fascinating relation to religion.

No less fascinating, in fact truly remarkable, was Bob’s attitude towards his own death. He approached his death without a shred of self-pity. In that same interview with Sosis, conducted a few months after he had been diagnosed with brain cancer and when it was already clear that he did not have long to live, Sosis asked him whether he was scared of death. He replied that ‘curiously’ he seemed not to be: he just felt grateful for how lucky he had been in life with his family, his friends, and his work. He even remarked on how fortunate he was that the actual process of dying would for him be fairly manageable. ‘What I do regret,’ he said, ‘... is the effect that the outcome will have on others, particularly family and close friends.’

That comment was significant not least because of the testimony that it bore to how much Bob’s family meant to him. He was devoted to his wife Crosby and to his two children Adam and Lucy. It is said that his marriage to Crosby helped him to cultivate the mixture of the *bon vivant* and the bohemian that was so characteristic of much of his life (their wedding at Muncaster Castle was packed with glamorous guests, and their first home in Sheffield was noted for its bright red bathroom). However that may be, I am in no doubt that his marriage to Crosby, and his family life more generally, gave him the security that enabled him to be so profoundly at ease with himself.

⁶ *What is it Like to be a Philosopher?* <https://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/robert-stern>

Early life

Bob was born in Norwich. His father ran a jewellery shop. His mother played the rôle of a traditional housewife. Bob was the fourth of four sons. The other three had been born between 1943 and 1949. Bob arrived after a gap of thirteen years, and was well aware in later life that he had been a mistake. Apparently his mother cried throughout her pregnancy, while his father consoled her by reassuring her that at least this time they were bound to have a girl. Still, the age gap had its consolations for Bob himself. His three older brothers became kind avuncular figures in his life, and he grew up with the benefit of being in a close relationship with people at a very different and exciting phase in their own lives.

The family was part of an orthodox Jewish community within the city. His parents were active members of this community, and Bob was brought up to attend synagogue regularly, until his Bar Mitzvah. At that point, in common with many others of his age, he drifted away. Judaism was important to his father, but more because of its elements of practice and ritual than because of its intellectual content, which, to the extent that he thought about it at all, he was happy to take for granted. When Bob mounted any kind of challenge to his father's religious beliefs, his father did not really see the point of engaging in debate. His mother, by contrast, who was herself naturally sceptical and who was inclined to raise questions of her own about these beliefs, was happy to do so.

Bob was the first person in his family to be educated outside the state system. He attended a preparatory school in Norwich until the age of thirteen. The very first essay that he submitted to one of his teachers at that school received the lowest possible mark, along with some scathing comment about how hopeless it was. Bob was devastated. When he got home, he burst into tears. But his mother explained the issues to him and presented him with various arguments pro and contra. Bob wrote these down in a revised essay, submitted it to the same teacher, and got the highest possible mark. Much later he came to regard this as his first encounter with the notion that a good essay is one that contains balanced argument.

At the age of thirteen Bob became a boarder at Gresham's School in Holt, some twenty miles from Norwich. His mother continued to be influential. Shortly after he had started there, she gave him a copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*,⁷ which she correctly predicted he would find interesting. In fact he found it riveting. He was particularly struck by Durant's sympathetic account of the various strange views that the great philosophers of the past had defended, views whose strangeness seemed to be due simply to the fact that they had raised important questions that do not occur to most people

⁷Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greatest Philosophers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926; 2nd edn, 1933).

and had then approached these questions using no other resource than sheer hard thought. It was this book that first inspired Bob's love of the history of philosophy, and especially of bygone philosophical ideas that took him out of his intellectual comfort zone. But things might easily have taken a different turn, as he noted in his interview with Sosis. 'Thank goodness,' he said, 'my mother didn't buy me [Bertrand] Russell's awful *History of Western Philosophy*'⁸—the book which, for many of us within the profession, served as our introduction to the history of the subject. Russell's book is much more opinionated than Durant's and, more often than not, much more critical. In particular it did a considerable amount to foster the hostility to Hegel that I noted earlier: it might easily, as Bob went on to observe, have put him off Hegel altogether.

University life and early career

With the encouragement of a teacher at Gresham's, but to the slight concern of his parents, who had an eye to his job prospects, Bob decided to study philosophy at university. He applied to St John's College Cambridge and was duly admitted.

Given that his interest in philosophy thus far had been grounded in its history, Cambridge philosophy must have come as something of a shock to him. It was dominated, in line with what I have already indicated was true of most British philosophy at that time, by an ahistorical attention to the analysis of concepts, as well as by a profound respect both for science and, except where science itself demanded otherwise, for what passed, at least within that particular academic context, as common sense. A major figure in the Faculty was Hugh Mellor. Mellor used to ask (and at one point asked Bob) why a philosopher needs to study the history of philosophy, any more than a scientist needs to study the history of science. Actually, it is a good question. But part of the reason why it is a good question is that it has a number of good answers. Bob was later able to articulate these answers very effectively. (I do not know how well he was able to articulate them when Mellor put the question to him.) He went on to note that it is less clear in philosophy than it is in science whether we can afford to ignore bygone ideas; that the very strangeness of bygone ideas in philosophy, unlike in science, can in any case help us to think more critically about our own ideas, for example by forcing us to reflect on what we unthinkingly take for granted; and that we are in danger in philosophy, again unlike in science, not only of reinventing the wheel, but of inventing a less satisfactory version of the wheel that wobbles when it turns, or indeed a cubic version of it that does

⁸Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1945; 2nd edn, 1961).

not turn at all and whose ineffectiveness, if we did but know it, has already been demonstrated.

The Whiggish attitude in Cambridge at that time to philosophy of other times was reflected in the similarly parochial attitude to philosophy of other places and other cultures. Thus, in line with other British universities, there was no Eastern philosophy on the syllabus. And, although there *was* a little of the philosophy that used to be, and very often still is, referred to sweepingly as ‘continental’ philosophy, it was there under the sufferance of people like Mellor, whose attitude towards it was essentially dismissive. (A little later, in the early 1990s, Mellor became one of the leading and most vociferous protestors against the proposal to award the French philosopher Jacques Derrida an honorary Cambridge doctorate, a proposal that had not emanated from the Philosophy Faculty. The protest failed.)

Despite all of that, there were members of the Philosophy Faculty when Bob was an undergraduate who bucked the trend. Two in particular had a significant influence on him: Jonathan Lear, who was then at an early stage in his academic career but would go on to achieve international standing in the profession; and Edward Craig, who was already one of the more senior members of the Philosophy Faculty and would later occupy one of its two chairs. Bob was supervised by Lear; he attended lectures by each. Lear’s lectures were on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in whom Lear had begun to develop a keen interest. Craig’s lectures were based on his forthcoming book *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*,⁹ in which he offered a very distinctive account of Western philosophy over the last three centuries—distinctive, in particular, because of the prominence that it afforded Hegel and the sympathy with which it did so.

In preparation for Craig’s lectures, Bob read the notoriously demanding Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹⁰ This is a preliminary overview of the whole work that is nevertheless best read after the rest of the book, as a summary of it, by someone who already has enough of a grasp of what is going on to be able to negotiate its dense user-unfriendliness. (And it is worth noting that, with the possible exception of that reference to its user-unfriendliness, Hegel himself would have concurred with this verdict.) Bob was utterly bemused. He was not put off though. Craig’s lectures cast light, and Bob’s love of Hegel was kindled. Much later—ironically enough, or perhaps appropriately enough—he would write his own very helpful commentary on Hegel’s book.¹¹

Bob did extremely well as an undergraduate and decided to pursue a PhD. (In Cambridge at that time this did not require the prior obtaining of a Masters degree.) He was at first less interested in Hegel than in Kant, on whom he thought he might write his

⁹ Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹¹ *The Routledge Guidebook to the Phenomenology of Spirit*.

thesis, so he began by continuing to work with his undergraduate supervisor Lear. But Lear soon moved away from Cambridge, and Bob eventually found himself working with Craig. His interest in Kant persisted, but his interest in Hegel began to compete with it, not least because of what Bob saw as Hegel's devastating criticisms of Kant. The thesis ended up pitting these two great thinkers against each other on some central issues and declaring Hegel the victor.

It was during this time that Bob met Stephen Houlgate. Houlgate had recently obtained a PhD through the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages. He shared Bob's interest in Hegel and would himself become another significant Hegel scholar. Simply knowing Houlgate would no doubt have helped Bob to feel less isolated. He felt all the less so, however, when Houlgate took him to Oxford to attend his first conference of the recently established Hegel Society of Great Britain and he encountered the wider Hegel community for the first time.

When Bob had finished work on his PhD, Craig had a year's leave of absence and secured a rôle for Bob to take on various of his duties at his college, Churchill, for the year. This involved both teaching and administration. During that year, Craig also encouraged Bob to apply for one of the very prestigious and very competitive three-year junior research fellowships at his (Bob's) previous college St John's. He did so and was successful.

This was a very fulfilling period for Bob. It was during this second spell at St John's that he established friendships with a number of people who would later become significant British philosophers and who were then either students or early career professionals: Tim Crane, Jane Heal (now FBA), Angie Hobbs, Rob Hopkins, and Susan James (also now FBA). Angie Hobbs deserves special mention. She and Bob had already briefly met as undergraduates, which is when Bob had likewise met Crosby with whom Hobbs had coincidentally been at school. Hobbs was also later one of Bob's colleagues for many years in the Department at Sheffield. Rob Hopkins similarly deserves special mention: Bob taught Hopkins as an undergraduate and he too was later one of Bob's colleagues for many years in the Department at Sheffield.

It was also during this period that Bob played a leading rôle in the running of the recently founded student magazine *The Heckler*. This was livelier and more subversive than its more prestigious rival *The Varsity*. In particular, it was more politically aware. Those who ran it hoped that it would ruffle feathers. It did. Bob's own numerous contributions included some excellent cartoons.

This period was fulfilling, finally, because of Bob's major academic achievement during it, which was to convert his PhD thesis into his first published monograph. His examiners Michael Inwood and Michael Rosen had already encouraged him to try to publish some version of the thesis, and he was only too pleased to accede to their encouragement. The one regret that he had about the project was that he had wanted to call the

book *The Unity of Things*, but his publishers, for familiar marketing reasons, were adamant that Hegel's and Kant's names should appear in the title along with some more direct indication of its content. Bob eventually, and with some reluctance, settled on the alternative *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object*—at once more prosaic, less intriguing, and, in its own artless way, less accurate.

Sheffield

During the second year of Bob's junior research fellowship a permanent philosophy post was advertised at Sheffield. This was at a time when there were very few such openings. Having by now decided that he wanted to pursue an academic career, Bob applied. The post was to replace Frank McDermott, who had taught political philosophy at Sheffield. Bob scarcely counted as a political philosopher. He had had some exposure to political philosophy as an undergraduate, and his interest in Hegel had inevitably included an interest in Hegel's political thought; but this was not what he had been working on. Nevertheless, Bob was invited for interview. And when the question of how he would teach political philosophy came up in the interview he simply improvised. He emerged convinced that he had performed terribly. He returned to Cambridge depressed.

Overnight, however, he came to the somewhat reckless conclusion that he would have nothing to lose by telephoning one of his interviewers, David Bell, to apologise for his performance and to give a better answer to that question. Apparently Bell listened in polite silence, before hanging up. A few hours later, Bob received a return call with a job offer. He immediately accepted. He never knew whether his own earlier call had helped in this process or had potentially scuppered it, or whether it had perhaps had no bearing on it whatsoever. (The incident was never subsequently mentioned.)

He did, however, always retain a deep sense of gratitude. After taking up the Sheffield post, in 1989, he began a lifelong love affair with the Department. The love affair was mutual. Not only did Bob go on to play a colossal part in the life of the Department, shaping it in all sorts of ways, but—as I have already mentioned—he was held in great affection by everyone with whom he worked there, for his warmth, his kindness, and his good humour. He also developed a reputation for efficiency and conscientiousness, a conscientiousness that very often morphed into supererogation. And of course there was always his stature as a philosopher in whose reflected glory the Department could bask.

He became a professor in 2000. He served as Head of Department for four years during the mid 2000s. And he eventually retired, when ill health forced him to do so, in 2023.

Other services to the profession

Bob was always self-conscious about the rôle that philosophy might or might not be able to play in public life. In his interview with Sosis he lamented what he called ‘a growing sense of the marginal place of philosophy ... in UK culture’. He attributed this to the fact that neither science nor religion, both of which had previously benefited from close links with philosophy, was any longer felt, except by a relatively small number of philosophical zealots, to have any significant connection with philosophy at all. He was also pessimistic about how much philosophers could do to address the problem, though he did not want to rule out the possibility that scientists and those with an interest in religion might themselves come to realise what they had lost.

Combined with this sense of how little he could expect to contribute practically to society as a professional philosopher was a keenness on Bob’s part not to devote his professional life to the pursuit of matters of purely theoretical interest. And I suspect that it was in part because of this that he made unusually many, unusually prominent contributions to his profession beyond teaching and research. In the opening section of this memoir I listed the many offices that he held. He was the epitome of what academics would call ‘a good citizen’.

Not that his commitment to administration was ever a matter of pleasure. It was much more a matter of Kantian duty—Bob’s sense of which we have already witnessed. (He mistrusted those who do derive pleasure from such things, claiming in his interview with Sosis that ‘[they] quickly become power-crazed.’) Thus he could grumble with the rest of us about administrative burdens and bureaucratic hurdles—albeit typically in a way that was both jocular and, whether by design or by accident, an encouragement to others who had to contend with the same burdens and hurdles alongside him.

Moreover, when he saw the point of contending with these, he approached the exercise with energy and resolve. This was particularly true when the aim of the exercise was to support others in the profession, something that Bob did throughout his career. Often he did it by bringing together people whose paths would not otherwise have crossed. His presidency of the Hegel Society of Great Britain, for instance, gave him ample opportunity, which he seized, to assist in the organisation of conferences at which the work of younger academics and students was promoted and at which philosophers with unexpectedly related interests found themselves in fruitful dialogue with one another. His two editorships gave him scope to help others in similar ways.

Of these his editorship of *European Journal of Philosophy* is especially noteworthy. This journal was established in the early 1990s by Mark Sacks, with the express intention of breaking down barriers between analytic philosophy of the kind that had dominated British philosophy for decades—the kind to which Bob himself had been primarily

exposed as an undergraduate—and, to use that tired label again, ‘continental’ philosophy. It was remarkable how quickly this journal established itself as one of the leading philosophy journals in such a crowded field. Very soon philosophers were eager to publish in it. At first, however, its success was not quite what had been hoped for. It was based on the sheer excellence of the articles that the journal contained, where these were for the most part either excellent articles that would have been entirely at home in a more traditionally analytic context, or excellent articles that would have been entirely at home in a more traditionally continental context. It took a while for articles to appear that were forging the connections that Sacks had originally hoped they would. Sacks himself deserved huge credit for the way in which they gradually and increasingly did so, ensuring that the journal came to be distinctive as well as prestigious. But Bob deserved huge credit too. Bob was a very natural person to be invited to serve, early in the history of the journal, on its editorial committee, and then, when Sacks stood down as editor, to succeed him in the rôle. He had always been at some remove from mainstream analytic philosophy, but he had never been opposed to philosophy of that kind, only to those of its practitioners who were themselves opposed to philosophy of other kinds. The project was therefore dear to his heart. He was a superb editor.

Work on Hegel

As I have already indicated, Stern was especially known for helping to introduce British philosophers to underappreciated and sometimes neglected figures in the history of philosophy. First and most prominent among these was Hegel. Three of Bob’s five monographs and a collection of his essays were either devoted to Hegel or had Hegel as one of their primary foci.

There had been a time, from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, when Hegel had not only been acknowledged as a major figure within British philosophy; he had been an enormously influential one too. But by the time Bob encountered him, this was very far from the case. With the growth of analytic philosophy, whose practitioners revered nothing more than clarity and precision, Hegel had become—it is no exaggeration to say this—a figure of fun among British philosophers. Nor, to be fair, is it hard to see why. Here is a quotation from the forbidding Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to which I referred earlier:

[The] living substance is being which is in truth *subject*, or ... is ... actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This substance is, as subject, pure, *simple negativity*, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis ... Only this

self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself ... is the true. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.¹²

To an untrained eye this appears to be an unlovely mixture of obscurity, jargon, barbarism, and outright contradiction, making far too little sense for there to be any serious question about whether or not we should *endorse* it. (Endorse *what* exactly?) Small wonder that Bob was bemused. Much greater wonder that he was not put off.

Bob was nevertheless able to recover something from such texts: something that was not only intelligible, but plausible. Not that Bob was by any means alone in this. Many Hegel scholars in the past fifty years or so, within the analytic tradition, have done as much. Moreover, many philosophers in the past fifty years or so within the analytic tradition, who are not thought of primarily as Hegel specialists, have made significant capital out of Hegel's work. (Examples that Bob himself cited when asked about this were Robert Brandom, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDowell, and Richard Rorty. Nor should we forget his own PhD supervisor Craig.) I have already noted that Bob understated his own influence in the rehabilitation of Hegel; but we would be doing him a different disservice if we erred in the other direction of overstating it. What Bob did do, which I think none of these other philosophers quite did, or at least not to the same extent, was to domesticate Hegel, by which I mean that he presented Hegel's ideas in such a way that one might reasonably respond, 'Ah, yes!' This is not to suggest that he trivialised what Hegel had achieved. Apart from anything else, Bob's exegesis of Hegel involved situating him with respect to the extraordinary legacy of Kant in such a way that Hegel's appropriation of this legacy could not possibly count as trivial. If Bob's exegesis was correct, then Hegel emerged as having some claim both to have preserved Kant's most important insights and, what was not at all easy to do at the same time but what certainly needed to be done if there was to be any question at all of domestication, to have kept his distance from Kant's own excesses.

Bob's view, when he pitted Hegel against Kant, was that it was quite wrong to do what people so often do, namely to portray Kant as the more level-headed of the two and Hegel as the wild visionary. For Bob this was precisely back to front. Kant had drawn a radical distinction between appearance and reality whereby even space and time, and therewith the whole scientifically investigable world of nature, were merely apparent, whereas exercises of freedom on our part were real—and therefore ultimately, if unintelligibly, both unlocated and atemporal. Moreover, Kant had construed such exercises of freedom as involving a kind of reason-governed self-legislation and had equated the demands of morality with what was thereby legislated, which, among other things, meant

¹² *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶18, emphasis in original, capitalisation removed because unwarranted (all German nouns are capitalised).

that he had severed those demands from the concrete practicalities of our shared life together. Hegel recoiled from all of this. And Bob was surely right to see in Hegel's recoil a reversion to something altogether tamer and easier to accept.

One of Kant's main offences, in Bob's view, was to parade a number of radical distinctions—not just between appearance and reality, or between nature and freedom, but also between passively received data of experience and the active conceptualisation of those data, between what can be known only by appeal to experience and what can be known *a priori*, between those of our experiences that pertain to our inner worlds and those that pertain to the world beyond, between the impulses of desire and the requirements of reason, between our animal nature and our commerce with the divine, between the theoretical and the practical.¹³ Hegel repudiated all of these. More generally, in Bob's view, Kant acknowledged diversity, separation, and plurality, where Hegel acknowledged only unity. And the Hegelian alternative, Bob urged, had myriad attractive repercussions. For example, the achievements of reason, for Hegel, so far from having the timeless quality that Kant took them to have, could be seen as emerging inextricably with the historically conditioned deliverances of tradition. Or, to pick one other example, an individual person's identity, for Hegel, so far from being the isolable essence that Kant took it to be, could be seen as an inextricable aspect of the community to which that person belongs.

One of Bob's favourite ideas in Hegel, which is connected with both of these examples, was that of what Hegel dubbed 'the concrete universal'. In his interview with Sosis, Bob himself explained this idea as follows:

[T]hought leads us into a realm of unreal abstractions, away from the concrete reality of lived experience and an immediate grasp of beings in their unique individuality. Now ... Hegel's doctrine of the 'concrete universal' was designed precisely to try to address this worry ... For example, suppose I have the concept 'human being'. To grasp that concept, I cannot just abstract away from all the things that make individual human beings different and just focus on what makes them similar, as arguably I would have virtually nothing left and certainly not the richness that is characteristic of our concept ... It is a mistake to think of the concept of a concrete universal like 'human being' as 'hollow and empty' or somehow cut off from the individuals that exemplify it; on the contrary, they are included under the concept, as part of what thought grasps in grasping the concept itself.

This too could be seen as a rebuke of sorts to Kant.

Not that Kant was Hegel's only foil. Hegel likewise, and just as importantly in Bob's view, recoiled from sceptics and dogmatists: from sceptics, in remaining committed to

¹³ Cf. P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 47.

the project of making rational sense of reality; from dogmatists, in nevertheless abandoning the project of making unassailable sense of it. Hegel wanted to encourage us in our quest for rational sense-making, but only as an ongoing process requiring continual cognitive, ethical, and cultural effort on our part, abandoning false starts, amending past errors, recovering past insights. (That said, Hegel did think that this process of making rational sense of reality could lead to a terminus of some kind, and indeed that he himself had already reached this terminus. There was something about such conceits that was anathema to Bob—a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that he was, in certain critical respects, more Hegelian than Hegel.)

Bob's interest in Hegel was connected to a broader interest in metaphysics and to what was, when he first started writing about these issues, a somewhat unfashionable conviction in the importance and power of metaphysics. He understood metaphysics as the attempt, by means of *a priori* reflection, to gain substantive insights into the character of reality; and he did not see why this was a forlorn endeavour. Here too he was siding with Hegel against Kant. Kant had thought that what *a priori* reflection could be used to yield substantive insights into was, not the character of reality, but the character of those doing the reflecting and, thereby, the character of how things appear to them. (Hence his radical distinction between appearance and reality.) But Bob never tired of insisting that it was no more obvious that *a priori* reflection could yield substantive insights into the character of those doing the reflecting than that it could yield substantive insights into the character of anything else.

Other philosophical work

What we have just witnessed illustrates an important feature of Bob's interest in Hegel: a great deal of that interest concerned where Hegel stands in relation to other philosophers. Indeed, it was his interest in Hegel that in many cases helped to foster his interest in those other philosophers. Even in the case of Kant—Bob's interest in whom had predated his interest in Hegel—it was the comparison of the two that did much to motivate Bob's career-long fascination with arguments of the distinctive kind that Kant introduced and used throughout his metaphysics: what have come to be known as 'transcendental arguments'. A transcendental argument purports to identify some necessary condition of our experience's having some feature that it undeniably has. Bob's second monograph and a collection that he edited were devoted to this topic,¹⁴ one dominant issue being—in echo of the point of controversy between Kant and Hegel noted at the

¹⁴ Respectively: *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*; and Robert Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

end of the previous section—how far such an argument could succeed if the condition in question, that is to say the supposed necessary condition of our experience's having the feature in question, were completely independent of us.

Despite Bob's opposition to Kant, he was drawn to Kant's moral philosophy, and wrote extensively on it.¹⁵ (I have noted more than once Bob's Kantian sense of duty.) He agreed with Kant, contra Hume, that the demands of morality apply to us irrespective of what we happen to want, what values we happen to espouse, or what our sensibilities happen to be. But the way in which Kant elaborated this was to cast the demands of morality as akin to the demands of logic. That is, he saw the demands of morality as neither more nor less than constraints that we must respect on pain of failing to count as fully rational. Bob shared Hegel's concern that this made the demands of morality too formal; that it deprived them of any real content.

Not only did this involve pitting Kant against Hegel. It also, in one of Bob's most important books,¹⁶ involved pitting Kant against Kierkegaard—and Kierkegaard against Hegel. For in that book Bob portrayed Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard as occupying the apices of a dialectical triangle, each trying to circumvent problems encountered by the other two. Bob showed how, in line with the concern that Kant's view made the demands of morality too formal, Hegel introduced a social element into morality, whereby the demands of morality are grounded in the way in which we hold each other to account. But he also showed how, for Kierkegaard, this meant that Hegel downplayed just how demanding the demands of morality are: Kierkegaard accepted that we almost never live up to these demands, and he thought that this was due to their having their source in an infinite God, albeit an infinite God who can forgive us our shortcoming. But this brings us back to Kant, who, as Bob showed at the beginning of his book, strenuously denied that the demands of morality can have any such source. God's decrees are subordinate to the constraints of rationality, Kant insisted, not vice versa: God is at no greater liberty to decree something that would violate these constraints than we are.

There is an extraordinarily interesting quotation in another of Bob's online interviews, this time with Richard Marshall.¹⁷ Referring to this book on Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, Bob said, 'It may be that these three possibilities [*sc.* the three possibilities for ethics represented by these three thinkers] do not exhaust all the conceptual space, so maybe there is also some better alternative available—though I have to say that most of the alternatives I have considered tend to fall under one of these three headings. But this is something I may develop further in future work.' This proved to be prescient in a way of which not even Bob could have had any inkling at the time.

¹⁵ See esp. his collection Robert Stern, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

¹⁶ *Understanding Moral Obligation*.

¹⁷ 'Hegel's Modest Metaphysician'. <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/hegel-s-modest-metaphysician>

Bob later became a devotee of the Danish philosopher Løgstrup, about whose work, at the time, he knew nothing. And he found in Løgstrup precisely the fourth possibility to which he had alluded (more on this anon). Bob not only went on to explore this fourth possibility in great depth (having taught himself Danish so that he could read Løgstrup in the original); he devoted an entire book to Løgstrup's ethics.¹⁸ As a result he helped to establish Løgstrup as a significant international figure in philosophy. For although Løgstrup had been 'world-famous in Denmark', as Bob used to quip, he had been largely ignored in the Anglophone world.

Before I say more about this fourth possibility, the story of how Bob discovered Løgstrup itself merits a brief detour. It is a fascinating and revealing tribute to Bob's professionalism and conscientiousness. Three years into his editorship of *European Journal of Philosophy*, the journal established an annual public lecture, now known as the Mark Sacks lecture in tribute to and in memory of Sacks, who died in 2008. The Mark Sacks lecture is always followed, the day after, by a smaller-scale seminar for invited guests on associated work by the lecturer. In 2009 the lecturer was MacIntyre. Bob had sight of MacIntyre's text in advance, as he did MacIntyre's work for the seminar. In each case one of the main foci was Løgstrup's ethics. Bob, in common with almost all of those who would be attending the lecture, and in common even with almost all of those who had been invited to the seminar, had never so much as heard of Løgstrup. As editor of the journal, he felt beholden to engage in some background research, in order to remedy his ignorance. This was partly for his own benefit, so that he could appreciate the lecture and seminar better. But it was principally for MacIntyre's benefit, to ensure that there would be at least one person in attendance, in each case, who would be able to ask suitably knowledgeable questions. The fact that he immediately found Løgstrup's work engaging was an incidental bonus. The fact that he found it increasingly engaging, every time he returned to it, helped to define the latter part of his career.

Part of what appealed to him about it—and here we find the fourth possibility to which I have referred—was the way in which it bypassed the appeal to authority that had been a common feature of Kant's, Hegel's, and Kierkegaard's approaches to ethics: the authority of rationality in Kant's case, that of what binds people together in Hegel's, and that of God in Kierkegaard's. For Løgstrup, the sheer fact that we have power over other people makes them vulnerable to us and makes it appropriate for us to respond to them with love and care. One consequence of this is that our fulfilling the demands of morality is never, for Løgstrup, a matter of our deliberately doing so: genuine love and care for another person must have as their focus the other person, not any demand of morality. (Unsurprisingly, in view of Bob's devotion to his family, he found it natural to illustrate this point by contrasting the genuine love and care of a parent for a child with the

¹⁸ *The Radical Demand in Løgstrup's Ethics*.

simulacrum of such love and care exhibited by someone intent only on doing their duty.) The demands of morality thereby become, on Løgstrup's account, silent, radical, one-sided, and unfulfillable: silent, because they do not depend on what other people ask of us, only on what is in other people's interests; radical, because they characteristically require us to act against our own interests; one-sided, because we cannot demand anything in return; and unfulfillable, because, for the reasons considered above, when they present themselves *as* demands of morality, they positively thwart our fulfilling them. And indeed we do not fulfil them—which leads us to seek forgiveness. But the fact that we are all equally at fault means that none of us can properly forgive anyone else. So such forgiveness, if it is forthcoming at all, must be forthcoming, Løgstrup concludes, from God.

This section has by no means exhausted Bob's wider interests. Two more that deserve mention are: the relationship between idealism and pragmatism, which he pursued in a major research project with his Sheffield colleague Christopher Hookway; and Martin Luther's influence on Enlightenment thinkers. The second of these developed towards the end of his life. It would have been the basis of his next book, had his unsuccessful battle with cancer not intervened.

Concluding remarks

Bob's respect for the history of philosophy has been evident in the last two sections. It was embedded in a wider respect for history. He knew that philosophy could never properly flourish without due appreciation of the forces that have brought us to where we are, the trajectory that we are on, and the possibilities that this opens up for where we are to go next. But not all the forces that have brought us to where we are are philosophical forces. Philosophy, in Bob's view, had to be seen in its wider cultural and political context. And this in turn meant that the history of philosophy had to be informed to a significant extent by history of other kinds.

Not that Bob's engagement with the history of philosophy always related primarily to its value *as* the history of philosophy. Many of the figures from the past whose work he found riveting he did so for the simple reason that he took it to contain important insights that we still need to reckon with. This was true above all, of course, of the work of Hegel and Løgstrup.

One of the things to which Bob was particularly drawn in the case of Hegel, and about which I have so far made no explicit mention, was his methodology (albeit neither Hegel nor Bob would have recognised a sharp distinction between his methodology and his doctrines). Bob especially approved of the way in which Hegel, when confronted with a philosophical concept, rather than trying to decide how to wield it, would charac-

teristically consider how the wielding of it could morph into the wielding of its very opposite and would thereby usher in the supersession of both that concept and its opposite by another of greater subtlety and wider compass than either. It was in this vein that Hegel rejected the various radical distinctions that had been such a hallmark of Kant's philosophy.

One of these, as we have seen, was Kant's distinction between appearance and reality. Bob's own rejection of this distinction was what enabled him to argue that, although transcendental arguments of the kind that Kant propounded could only ever deliver conclusions about how things appear to us, such arguments could still be reckoned to have anti-sceptical force; for, once any such distinction has been rejected, having such force does not need to be understood as delivering conclusions about a reality that is quite independent of how things appear to us.

Much of the focus of this memoir has been on the history of philosophy. But Bob was often asked to speculate about the future of the discipline. He mentioned the pressing concerns that most philosophers these days would mention when asked this, notably climate change and artificial intelligence. But he also noted how thinking philosophically about such things would involve a reach backwards as well as a reach forwards: that is, it would involve history and tradition as well as innovation. For the questions that these concerns raise are in many respects the age-old questions of philosophy—about who we are and about our place in the world—but in a new guise. Moreover, the fact that philosophers have been grappling with such questions for millennia and have not arrived at settled answers to them was in Bob's view a sign of philosophy's strength, not its weakness. It showed, Bob thought, how deep the questions are, and how circumspect we should be about extending philosophers' treatment of such questions to such urgent practical matters and anticipating any clear uncontested verdicts.

When Bob was asked to reflect on his own work, he singled out as a source of special pride his work on Løgstrup, which he took (rightly) to have opened up a new field of historical and systematic interest in a very distinctive ethical vision. He was pleased that he had managed to keep Løgstrup on the syllabus at Sheffield, as indeed he was that he had managed to keep German idealism on it too. He also spoke with pride of his graduate students, many of whom had themselves pursued successful academic careers, and the rest of whom had been successful in other ways.

I close with a quotation from the interview with Sosis:

Most days, doing [philosophy] makes me feel happily absorbed and engaged, though of course it can also be challenging, frustrating, puzzling, and demanding. As well as expanding my cultural knowledge and experience and teaching me much about the past as well as about present ideas, my enjoyment of philosophy also comes from its creative aspects, in terms of thinking, and also writing, arguing, structuring, imagining, and so on. Sadly, I am unable to perform music, be a creative writer or artist, or

conceive of some new scientific theory—but at its best moments, I think doing philosophy can come close to the various satisfactions to be found in these inventive activities, even all of them at once on a good day.

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¹⁹ <https://sheffield.ac.uk/hpdh/research/philosophy/robert-stern-1962-2024>

²⁰ <https://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/robert-stern>

²¹ <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/hegel-s-modest-metaphysician>

²² https://philosophynow.org/issues/165/Robert_Stern

²³ <https://sheffield.ac.uk/hpdh/research/philosophy/robert-stern-1962-2024/bob-man-angie-hobbs>

²⁴ <https://sheffield.ac.uk/hpdh/research/philosophy/robert-stern-1962-2024/bob-stern-1962-2024-david-strohmaier>

²⁵ <https://sheffield.ac.uk/hpdh/research/philosophy/robert-stern-1962-2024/running-bob>

²⁶ <https://sheffield.ac.uk/hpdh/research/philosophy/robert-stern-1962-2024/bob-colleague-stevie-makin>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/sep/24/robert-stern-obituary>

²⁸ <https://www.hegelpd.it/in-memorial-hegel-society-of-great-britain-prof-robert-stern/>

²⁹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/kantian-review/robert-stern-memorial>