





MEMOIR

# Robert Stern (1962–2024)

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Bob Stern, who was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield for many years, sadly passed away on 21 August 2024. He made an extraordinary contribution to the field of philosophy, both intellectually through his work in the history of philosophy, and more broadly, through his leadership, teaching, mentorship, and infectious enthusiasm. In this short piece, we pay tribute especially to his contribution to the study of Kant’s philosophy.

Bob studied philosophy at St. John’s College, Cambridge, continuing on there to a PhD and a Junior Research Fellowship (via a year’s teaching post at Churchill College).<sup>1</sup> In 1989, he was appointed to a lectureship at the University of Sheffield, where he remained for the rest of his career. He became a professor in 2000 and retired in 2023 due to ill health.

Bob’s philosophical interests and expertise might be described as spanning broadly across the Kantian and post-Kantian landscape, across a range of philosophers. Within this intellectual history and tradition, he worked on metaphysics and epistemology, moral and political philosophy, and also pursued a serious interest in philosophical methodology – notably, the methodology of transcendental philosophy introduced by Kant, and developments and reactions within the post-Kantian tradition. He is particularly well-known for his work on Hegel, Kierkegaard, Løgstrup and, of course, Kant. Several of his 16 books engage with different aspects of Kant’s philosophy, most often in dialogue with other philosophers. These include a new translation of Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (with Christopher Bennett and Joe Saunders, OUP 2019), *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency and Obligation* (OUP 2015), *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (CUP 2011), *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: answering the question of justification* (OUP 2000), and *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* (Routledge 1990).

Bob’s first book focused on Kant’s and Hegel’s metaphysics of the object. In essence, he pits Kant’s ‘pluralism’ – an object is a synthesis of more basic entities – against Hegel’s ‘holism’ – the parts that make up a whole object are ‘unintelligible outside the whole’ (1990: 1). This book can be seen as the first step in a larger and sustained project to explore and revive Hegelian metaphysics as, ultimately, a more appealing approach than Kant’s.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, and characteristically, in the 1990 book, Bob provides a broader methodological framing, concerning the centrality of the opposition between pluralism and holism, as well as the question of whether we

structure reality, or whether reality has a structure independent of us, throughout the history of philosophy and onwards through contemporary debates.

Though my treatment of this contrast between the Kantian and Hegelian accounts of the nature of individual objects will mainly confine itself to an interpretation of these two thinkers, I believe that the issue that lies between them is of more than merely historical interest. The debate between the pluralistic and holistic standpoints remains one of the great ‘central disputes’ of philosophy; that is why philosophers still contend over the proper account to be given of the structure of the object, as well as of the structure of consciousness and the self, thought and language, state and communities, and physical reality in general. (1990: 5–6).

As noted, Bob was also particularly interested in Kant’s epistemology and methodology. Anyone who discussed Kant’s philosophy with Bob for long will know the crux of his concern, namely, that Kant’s attempt to secure *a priori* synthetic knowledge for us involves the reorientation of placing the source of that knowledge in the subject, but for Bob, that merely shifts our problem to a problem of self-knowledge. As Kant puts it, ‘We can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them’ (Bxviii). But, contends Bob, why think that philosophy should begin with self-knowledge? Why should knowledge of the pure structure of the self, or of the shape of our capacities for cognition, be any easier than our everyday knowledge of ordinary things in the world? This is a concern that reappeared throughout his career, and indeed in one of Bob’s last published papers: ‘Explaining Synthetic *A Priori* Knowledge: The Achilles Heel of Transcendental Idealism?’ (2022).<sup>3</sup>

This concern and interest with the promise of and problems with transcendental methodology led to a significant body of work on transcendental arguments.<sup>4</sup> Bob’s concern was two-fold here. Firstly, the worry that the transcendental turn, despite all its promise, didn’t really solve anything, or make any of the thorny issues in philosophy easier. Secondly, the more optimistic thought that metaphysics doesn’t appear to be as hopeless as Kant thought it was, so why not try to gain insight into how things really are more directly?

Bob was drawn to Kant’s practical philosophy. He agreed with Kant, contra Hume, about the categorical nature of morality. But he worried that Kant failed to do justice to this insight. Part of the worry here concerns Hegel’s empty-formalism objection, which Bob refined and sharpened. He wrote extensively on Kant’s ethics, focussing on the role of the holy will, what autonomy is, and whether ought implies can, and developed a post-Kantian perfectionism; see in particular his *Kantian Ethics* (2015).

He also thought a lot about the *obligatory* form that morality takes for us and explored Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard’s attempts to explain this. In the end, though, he didn’t find any of these approaches entirely satisfactory. He found an alternative in the Danish theologian Løgstrup, who provides a unique account of the radical nature of our moral demands, grounding them in the power that we have over each other as vulnerable interdependent beings. He thought that Løgstrup, like Hegel, helped us to move beyond Kant, while still retaining the idea that morality is categorical, and applies to us regardless of what we desire.

Bob's thought was, in a substantial sense, post-Kantian. Like Kant, he found Humean empiricism unsatisfying. However, he was not convinced by Kant's alternative. He found Hegel's criticisms of Kant compelling. He did not stop there, however, and taught, worked on, and supervised numerous students on Hegel's critics as well.

As can be seen, Bob was a prolific and prodigious writer. But his characteristic energy and enthusiasm extended beyond his own work. He had a passion and affinity for bringing people together, and for working with and supporting others in their philosophical endeavours. This is evident in the long list of professional appointments, including Presidencies of the British Philosophical Association (2012–2019), the Hegel Society of Great Britain (2004–2011), and the Aristotelian Society (2021–2022), and editorships of the *European Journal of Philosophy* (2001–2012) and the *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* (1991–1997). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2019 and was the Chair of the Philosophy panel for the Research Excellence Framework in 2021. But aside from these lofty achievements, he was always organising and joining in events, from reading groups and translation groups to philosophical hikes across the Peaks.

An example of his influence on the philosophical community, especially in the UK, can be taken from the UK Kant Society. The authors of this tribute are the outgoing and incoming Chairs of the Society. Bob was a PhD examiner and early career mentor of one, PhD supervisor to the other, and collaborator with both. The connections to us, and to many philosophers and Kant scholars around the UK and the world, are myriad. Many of us owe Bob a great debt, and we will be forever grateful.

A common theme throughout Bob's career was, as mentioned, a great energy and infectious enthusiasm: for philosophy, but also for the practice of doing philosophy with others and for building productive yet friendly and collegial communities. For example, he was tenacious in philosophical discussion, but in such a good-natured and delightful way that one couldn't mind, but rather felt warmly invited to enjoy the slings and arrows of lively philosophical debate. Bob provided us with a shining example of how to be a philosopher, both intellectually and personally.

Bob touched many lives and we will miss him greatly. He is survived by his wife Crosby and their two children, Adam and Lucy.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/robert-stern>.
- 2 See, for example, Stern (2009): a collection of essays on Hegelian metaphysics.
- 3 For a compelling statement of this challenge, see pp. 45–50 of Stern (2013).
- 4 See Stern (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2017), Stern and Watts (2019), and Brune, Stern, and Werner (2017).

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