

Book Review

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, *Hegels Realphilosophie. Ein dialogischer Kommentar zur Idee der Natur und des Geistes in der 'Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften'*. Hamburg: Meiner, 2023. ISBN 978-3-7873-4240-2 (e-book). 978-3-7873-4239-6 (hbk). Pp. 1070. 98.00€.

With his latest book *Hegels Realphilosophie*, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer concludes his series of dialogical commentaries on Hegel's major works, and in doing so once again dares to walk a tightrope, delicately balancing two ambitions. On the one hand, he aspires to comment on the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* in the spirit of Hegel himself, aiming to truly capture the essence and intricacies of his philosophy. On the other hand, Stekeler seeks to maintain a critical distance from Hegel, actively engaging with Hegelian philosophy through thoughtful critiques and meaningful extensions where he deems them necessary. This review will critically examine Stekeler's ambitious hermeneutical undertaking, probing the question: does the dialogical form of his commentary successfully navigate this tightrope, following Hegel's philosophical program while injecting his own critical perspectives?

In his interpretation, Stekeler challenges the conventional view of the simplistic reduction of concepts to mere predicates of possible judgements. Instead, he is advocating for a view where *speculative* concepts are seen as titles for domains that enable our predicative judgements in the first place (15; 38–44). This perspective can be found in his discussion of Hegel's departure from traditional metaphysics, which often hinges on the notion of an all-encompassing unity simply named 'being'. Stekeler interprets Hegel's philosophy not as a metaphysical doctrine in the traditional sense, but rather as a critical examination of the categorical forms integral to our rational speech. This stance distinguishes him from mainstream Hegel scholarship and certain trends in contemporary analytic metaphysics, fields in which scholars typically presuppose that successful knowledge claims directly represent pre-existing concepts, facts, laws or things (16). In contrast, Stekeler asserts that our processes of knowledge acquisition, embedded in our symbolic and semantic frameworks, obstruct a naïve access to things and their underlying principles. However, Stekeler makes clear that this obstruction does not stem from any 'gap' between our knowledge claims and a hidden back-world (*'Hinterwelt'* 34, 334) where the true nature of things lies concealed. Rather, speaking of concepts, facts, laws and things only becomes meaningful when viewed

against the backdrop of our epistemic efforts, which enables the constitution of well-defined objects in the first place.

While Stekeler's commentary insightfully addresses Hegel's philosophy of the real, it notably omits Hegel's approach to the immanent development of concepts—a critical aspect that highlights the internal unity of speculative concepts. Yet, Stekeler transforms this apparent oversight into a strength, weaving in fact-based digressions often absent in traditional reconstructions. His commentary includes a detailed examination of specific phrases in Hegel's text, seamlessly integrating philosophical themes with scientific thought spanning two millennia. This approach enables him to illuminate enduring questions in the philosophy of nature, drawing upon insights from mathematics and the natural sciences. Key discussions include the continuity of space and time (125, 281), as well as the boundaries of mechanical physics (39, 173, 279, 375).

A paradigmatic example of Stekeler's excellent hermeneutic work can be found in his commentaries on Hegel's notion of contingency. Here, Stekeler adeptly avoids two mistakes that are commonly made when determining the concept of contingency. Stekeler, like Hegel, understands contingency neither as a mere metaphysical phenomenon of withdrawal, nor as a mere expression of our (epistemic) finitude. On the contrary, he elucidates that contingency is as an indispensable remnant of every theory, not signifying a flaw attributable to *our limitations*, but making a feature of any relation between knowledge-claims and nature explicit. Stekeler asserts that contingency underscores our inability to formulate a comprehensive set of natural laws which fully explains every natural phenomenon. However, Stekeler argues that our 'conceptual understanding of nature is limited precisely because nature itself, in its empirical details, is by no means such that it always and without exceptions follows the natural laws we have established in its events' (109, all translations into English are mine). In essence, both 'objective contingency' and 'ontic lawfulness' are reflective terms, intrinsically linked to our theoretical frameworks that inherently cover only *a finite number of natural domains*. Therefore, it is not *our* finitude that necessitates the introduction of the concept of contingency as a makeshift solution; rather, nature itself is so constituted that it cannot be entirely subsumed under laws in a meaningful way unless a certain element is invariably left to contingency.

Stekeler's dialogical interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, while innovative, exhibits a propensity to unduly diminish the metaphysical aspects of Hegel's philosophy. This issue is exemplified in Stekeler's reading of Hegel's assertion that spirit is the 'truth of nature'. Stekeler interprets this phrase firstly to merely signify that the world comprises spirit as well as nature and secondly that any knowledge of nature exists only due to those practices that originate in spirit alone (483). In fact, it is true that only spirit possesses knowledge of nature. And it would even be correct to say that the *concept* of nature itself cannot exist independently

of the self-determination of spirit, since concepts in general originate only in processes of knowledge acquisition. Nonetheless, Hegel's assertion that spirit is the 'truth of nature' transcends mere reference to *our conceptualization* of nature. Read literally, the passage quoted is not about spirit's knowledge of nature, but about a *deficiency* in nature that can only be resolved by spirit as the truth *of nature*. An alternative, metaphysically more ambitious interpretation could look like the following: nature, in its essence, is not something absolute, but dependent upon conditions only met through spirit's genuine form of self-transparent self-determination. Because for nature to be *inherently* intelligible, there have to be *real* conditions of nature's intelligibility. However, we know from the logic of essence that the possible can only exist as a variant of the actual (*Wirklichkeit*). Consequently, nature's intelligibility thereby hangs a tale, because it is grounded in the existence of an epistemic entity that *actually cognizes* something natural.

Regarding the philosophy of subjective spirit, it is Hegel's tightrope walk between traditional pneumatology and empirical psychology that Stekeler comments on particularly enlightening. Here, Stekeler's objective is to refute the notion that rational animals possess an indestructible soul as their substance, without thereby falling back into a reductive physicalism, as advocated in large parts of the contemporary philosophy of mind. Thus, Stekeler writes that 'the soul is only a formal object of reflexive-logical speech [*reflexionslogische Rede*]. The soul is therefore not a truly existing and—according to Hegel's canonical analysis of meaning—not a spiritual "object" that brings about concrete phenomena. The soul is, as Aristotle already recognizes, only a form, *eidōs*' (562). This *eidōs* becomes apparent, for example, in our sensual capacities, as a form of the feeling soul ideally manifesting itself through me as the 'instantiated enactment form [*Vollzugsform*]' of my subjective sensing and feeling' (561). Thus, following Aristotelian interpretations such as the reading of Allegra de Laurentiis, Stekeler offers an original approach to the body-soul debate, which has traditionally been polarized between interactionist dualism and reductive physicalism. He demonstrates how, by applying principles derived from Hegelian philosophy, this longstanding dilemma can be effectively circumvented right from the beginning. For in truth, body and soul are not two independent substances that raise the question of how they are connected, but rather the separation between body and soul is itself 'only a consequence of our logic of abstraction' (534). In this respect, the *hard problem of consciousness*, which focuses on the relation between physical and mental states as if they were *two distinct objects*, emerges as a pseudo-problem, since it overlooks the overall background present in object-related speech.

Finally, Stekeler interprets Hegel's philosophy of the absolute spirit from a deflationary perspective. He argues that Hegel's use of the term 'eternal' in describing the absolute spirit should not be understood in the traditional metaphysical sense. Instead, Stekeler suggests that 'eternal' in this context means something

akin to ‘always’, which means nothing more than ‘the absolute reflection of myself and us in the knowledge of the unity of content and recognition’ (964). By conceptualising the absolute spirit *merely* as a ‘communal spirit of free communities’ (ibid.), Stekeler misses the emancipatory potential inherent in Hegel’s material concept of truth. This aspect, particularly in its philosophical manifestation, cannot be fully grasped devoid of the metaphysical connotations that surpass the historical and societal facets of spirit. Despite this limitation, Stekeler’s analysis of the final sections of the *Encyclopaedia* offers several insightful and thought-provoking perspectives, especially regarding the interplay between the logical and the real. Contrary to theological misinterpretations in the tradition of F. W. J. Schelling and Charles Taylor, Stekeler argues that the culmination of the *Encyclopaedia* in the doctrine of the absolute spirit does not imply a realization or manifestation of any divine self-consciousness. On the contrary, it entails an enlightenment ‘into the marvel of understanding the world and oneself’, a realization that amounts to ‘a speculative theory as knowledge of knowledge’ (1030), which takes its origin in the world of spirit and its history alone.

Fundamentally, Stekeler’s dialogical commentary emerges as a valuable repository of intertextual references, philological elucidations and philosophical meditations. While the dialogical form of the commentary, which occasionally reinterprets Hegel’s text rather than taking it at face value, might disappoint some particularly orthodox Hegel scholars, it generally serves to enrich any hermeneutical approach to the *Encyclopaedia*, broadening the readers’ perspective on crucial aspects and advancing intellectual engagement with Hegel and philosophical theory-building in general.

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