

Alison Stone

Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism

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Reviewed by Jane Dryden, 2020

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Quote:

"There has been a resurgence of interest in Schelling and in Hegel's philosophy of nature, and an appetite for connecting their work to contemporary discourse about the environment... Stone's lucid exposition and interpretations of Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel fit well into this context"

Alison Stone's new book collects previously written chapters and articles from the last fourteen years. These explore German Idealist and Romantic conceptions of nature and their implications for race and gender. Most of the book concerns Hegel, though there are substantive discussions of Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schelling. Stone's work is a model of good practice in the history of philosophy: careful attention to scholarly detail, clear exposition of texts, and attentiveness to the resources they open up for us. She does not suggest that these philosophers offer ready-made solutions to contemporary questions, but that they deserve to be taken seriously and that working through the ambiguities and tensions of their work can serve to help our thinking today. Given the influence that Hegel in particular has had on the development of feminist theory, it is valuable to have such a lucid exploration of the way nature and gender figure in his texts.

The introduction, "German Romantic and Idealist Accounts of Nature and Their Legacy," is the only chapter written especially for this book. It serves as a helpful guide to the various metaphysical claims made about nature, and how they may be linked with hierarchies that have implications for gender and race; these are discussed further elsewhere in the book. Hegel, Schelling, and the Romantics offer different accounts of how human freedom can be located within nature, and yet still be "a power of spontaneous self-determination" (3). Stone suggests that the arguments that these philosophers have about how we should conceptualize nature and our place within it are useful for clarifying and refining our own ideas in the face of our current environmental crisis.

Rather than discussing each chapter in turn, I will provide an overview of the three sections and particular highlights. The first section of the book, "Romantic Nature," has five chapters discussing Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin. The Romantics are often overlooked within philosophy, and these chapters serve as useful introductions to their thought. The response of Schlegel and Novalis to the systematic philosophies of Kant, Reinhold, and Fichte was to challenge the idea of a first principle or a definite beginning of philosophy. They understood the *absolute* as a "synthetic web of all interrelated things and ideas" (25), which is connected to their understanding of nature as something that cannot be wholly reduced to analytic categories, and that remains in part unknowable. Chapters focusing on Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin respectively present their accounts of nature, identify problems efficiently, and then suggest interpretations of their work that might be of use today. For

example, the Schlegel chapter closes by proposing that his account of the re-enchantment of nature, in which poetry and physics draw closer together, might provide "a way to preserve the central values of modernity while reconceiving nature as spontaneously creative, partially mysterious, and therefore worthy of respect and care" (60).

This section also includes a chapter exploring how the idea of alienation is relevant to our contemporary environmental crisis, touching on Hegel, Adorno, and Fichte, before exploring the resources offered within German Romanticism. The Romantics conceive of humans as part of nature yet alienated from it, in part by our use of discursive knowledge that cannot do justice to nature as a whole. An ideal reconciliation with nature would still include a form of alienation, such that "we apprehend that we depend on nature, recognizing it as the whole that encompasses us as one of its parts," while still appreciating "that the nature on which we depend is profoundly unlike us and remains out of the reach of any human attempt to comprehend its unity" (97). These considerations may seem abstract, but Stone argues that they can help us to "re-orient ourselves intellectually" (98) and to "address and unseat our deep-rooted understandings of the self and nature" (97–98).

The exploration of nature within Romantic thought is continued in the second part of the book, on philosophy of nature proper (*Naturwissenschaft*) and naturalism. Philosophy of nature refers to a holistic approach to nature that understands it as dynamic and self-organizing, in contrast to the empirical sciences that comprehend nature primarily as a "mechanical aggregate" (124); as Novalis writes, "under [scientists'] hands friendly nature died" (Novalis 2005, 27). The philosophy of nature is most often associated with Schelling, but as discussed in the opening chapter of this section, Hegel and a number of nineteenth-century scientists also pursued it. It declined toward the middle of the nineteenth century amid the rise of scientific and philosophical approaches that "combined empiricist method with mechanistic materialism" (137). It did not die out completely, however, and Stone notes its continuation through Bergson in the early twentieth century. Discussing her view that one of the problems of modernity is our sense of ourselves as separate from nature, which has had implications for our treatment of the environment, she closes by arguing for the usefulness of this tradition: "Philosophy of nature can thus give us an improved appreciation both of how nature is an interconnected whole and of the dependent place that we occupy within this whole—an appreciation that can help to motivate us to practice more environmentally sustainable ways of life" (139).

Since several chapters in this part and the next concern Hegel's philosophy of nature specifically, it is worth mentioning a development in Stone's own views, as discussed in an endnote to her introduction. In her 2004 book, *Petrified Intelligence*, she distinguished between "strong" and "weak" *a priori* approaches to the philosophy of nature. In the strong *a priori* approach, the abstract forms and structures of nature are determined according to a metaphysics of nature, and empirical features of nature are interpreted according to how they may fit that theory. In the weak *a priori* approach, one begins with a range of empirical features of nature and then reconstructs why they must be as they are (Stone 2005, 9–28). In her book, she had argued that Hegel was a strong apriorist, drawing on textual evidence and the claim that this would be the best foundation for using his theory to critique the assumptions of empirical science. Even though science has progressed since Hegel's day, his categories could still be useful, and we could determine what aspects of nature best fit them according to our current understanding.

Stone has since changed her mind, and argues that Hegel should be interpreted as a weak apriorist. No longer committed to defending the particulars of Hegel's philosophy of nature, she notes "little substantial detail of his account of nature can interest us" (18). This does not matter, however, "because what does retain interest is his overall *metaphysics* of nature, in terms of which he reconstructs scientific accounts of its components" (18). This development of Stone's views is worth noting because it is characteristic of her approach generally. Rather than defend or justify particular details that may be outdated or problematic, she focuses on their connection to the overall structure of a philosopher's metaphysics, and what they mean in that context.

For Hegel, nature is a self-organizing whole in which there is a kind of rationality, albeit one that is not yet self-aware. Although its component parts may seem entirely contingent and disorganized, an organic structure provides each of them a role. In "Hegel, Nature, and Ethics," she explores the moral implications of Hegel's account of nature as "self-organizing to some degree" (160). In his political philosophy, Hegel treats nature solely as something that can and ought to be appropriated and used by human beings at will, whereas the freedom of other human agents should be respected, "a respect that limits and complicates the initial setting of unbridled appropriation" (161). Stone argues that this disparity is not essential to Hegel's thought, and explores an alternative he could have pursued, in which we learn through our social institutions to afford nature some moral consideration, recognizing that it too has its own purposes (168). Although Hegel did not make this argument, reasons for doing so are found within his work, and might provide resources for contemporary environmental concerns.

The third part, "Hegel, Gender, and Race," has five chapters, which cover the embedding of sexual and gender difference in Schelling's and Hegel's systems, Hegel's views on colonialism, and the use of Hegel in twentieth-century French philosophy. These chapters acknowledge problematic stances that German Idealist and Romantic philosophers have taken with respect to gender and race, and rather than simply wave them away as relics of the past, Stone uses her deep knowledge of these figures to explore what resources there might be within the tradition to rethink and rework them.

In Hegel's organicism, every part has a role, ordered according to a hierarchy of rationality. His account of gender involves the Aristotelian association of women with matter and men with form or the concept. Matter is associated with indeterminacy, and thus a feeling of unity; this leads to women being relegated to the family and the home. As Stone writes, "Given Hegel's sexual symbolism, the process he narrates in his *Philosophy of Nature*—whereby the concept re-emerges from matter and progressively remodels matter in its own image—amounts to a progressive mastery of the female by the male" (192). These chapters are helpful for understanding the interconnections between the metaphysical and political aspects of Hegel's work, which is vital for those who want to draw on Hegel's philosophy in a "more gender-egalitarian form" (204).

To suggest one way this could be done, in the chapter "Gender, the Family and the Organic State in Hegel's Political Thought," Stone explores a different kind of organicism. Whereas Hegel's organicism is based on the interconnections of parts of animals, which have a definite head and ensuing hierarchy, that of Novalis is based on plants. Plants are less rigidly structured, and since "each part contains within itself the potential to perform any number of functions" (217), a vegetal state might enable more contingency in terms of the development of each member. Stone

acknowledges that in his essay "Faith and Love," Novalis does bar women from politics, but she argues that the way he does this is contrary to his vegetal state (whereas Hegel's exclusion was in keeping with his hierarchical organicism). This produces the possibility of creatively reworking the organic state to be more equitable.

Chapter 13, "Hegel and Colonialism," also takes up the question of how and whether Hegel's work can be salvaged. Stone reconstructs his views on colonialism, drawing from his *Philosophy of World History*. Arguing that these imply the justification of colonialism as a means of spreading freedom, she asks whether Hegel's philosophy of freedom may in fact be used to save him from himself, by providing Hegelian grounds for anticolonialism. Although she displays sympathy with this intention, she demonstrates that Hegel's account of freedom is grounded on the imperative to distance oneself from nature. This leads to a hierarchy of civilizations, based on how much they have overcome nature. Insofar as this hierarchy is developed according to European standards, the result is inescapably intertwined with colonialism and Eurocentrism (242). Similar to her chapters on gender, Stone provides an important caution to theorists who are influenced by Hegel's social and political theory lest they unwittingly replicate Hegel's hierarchies.

As mentioned before, the book is a collection of previously published material. The chapters have been edited somewhat to reduce redundancy. Those who work in German Idealism and Romanticism have likely seen at least some of these before, as Stone's work is consistently worth consulting. It is helpful to have all of these pieces in one place, and it will be useful not only to those interested in this period of the history of philosophy, but also to those interested in theoretical resources for considering how our metaphysical assumptions about nature can be connected to ethical and political problems today.

However, because it is made up of reworked material, it is limited in how far it can develop its suggestions. The origin of chapters as articles (or as chapters in other volumes) means that many of them end on the note that, although we may not be able to neatly import philosophers' ideas into our current context, nonetheless they bear re-examining for useful possibilities. As a reader interested in these areas of philosophy, I'm sympathetic to this project, but want to know more about how we could proceed in developing these possibilities.

Most of the chapters have obvious interconnections, but the structure of the collection also makes some of the chapters seem disconnected. For example, the chapter on Hegel and twentieth-century French philosophy focuses primarily on the reception of the "struggle for recognition" from Hegel's master/slave dialectic in Kojève, Sartre, Beauvoir, Fanon, and Irigaray, and does not engage the theme of nature present in the other chapters. This is particularly noticeable in Stone's discussion of Beauvoir in this chapter, on Beauvoir's adaptation of the master/slave dialectic in theorizing the oppression of women. On Beauvoir's account, women did not lose the struggle for recognition; they never even got to participate in it, and have thus been fixed in the position of other (256). This account associates women with nature (256), but Stone does not take the opportunity to connect it to the rich reimagining of nature developed earlier in the book. It might also have been worthwhile to link back and develop Stone's criticism of Beauvoir in an earlier chapter for attributing "part of the blame for women's oppression to women's own biology, rather than to what society has made of that biology" (204).

This leaves rich terrain for others to explore, however, and this book comes at an opportune time. There has been a resurgence of interest in Schelling and in Hegel's philosophy of nature, and an appetite for connecting their work to contemporary discourse about the environment and the idea of the Anthropocene. Similarly, feminist new materialism has been drawing renewed attention to our enmeshment in our environment, suggesting patterns of interaction that invite comparison with German Romanticism and Idealism. Stone's lucid exposition and interpretations of Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel fit well into this context.

Stone's approach to history of philosophy is valuable; as we reckon with sexist, colonial, and Eurocentric legacies of Western philosophy, it is useful to have work that engages these problems and tensions in a careful and thoughtful way. Her approach is nuanced and allows for the retrieval of resources within this tradition—it helps us to "unearth positive possibilities" (17). Further elaboration of these possibilities would have been welcome, but the work that is here is very much appreciated.

References

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