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Metaphysics as Christology. An Odyssey of the Self from Kant and Hegel to Steiner

By Jonael Schickler

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[1] This is a small book by a great mind with a tragic fate. It is the dissertation of Jonael Schickler, a former student of Queen's College, Cambridge, who died in the Potters Bar rail accident in 2002 at the age of 25. The original and bold main thesis of his dissertation can be presented in three interlinked perspectives. First, in an intellectual-historical vein, the author claims that Kant leaves us with some problems which Hegel tries to overcome, but only Rudolph Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, is able to solve. According to Schickler, Kant's transcendentalism is fraught with the problem of the 'thing-in-itself' (*Ding an sich*), which leads to ontological scepticism. Hegel's dialectic, with its mediation between being and thought, is *the* way to overcome it. But Hegel's dialectic is under-determined because he does not give due weight to one crucial problem: how can we know the ground of our sensory impressions? It is Steiner's four-fold conception of the human organization and of reality, culminating in his Christology, which fills this gap. Only by sublating Hegel into an even more absolute mediation, a general ontology is reached which prepares the ground for an anti-sceptical epistemology. Or, and this is the third perspective: in a contemporary philosophical and theological scene hostile to metaphysics, Schickler aims at a general ontology which sublates transcendentalism and dialectics in order to escape scepticism. This general ontology, according to his philosophical thesis, implies a theological telos, resurrection. In effect, Schickler presents an onto-theo-logy, or, as his title has it: Metaphysics as Christology. 'This book defends the thesis, *on purely philosophical grounds*, that the possibility of the resurrection of a physical body is a necessary condition of ordinary thought and experience.' (xix)

[2] First, I would like to present the content of the book in somewhat greater detail—high appraisal and some criticism will follow later. The book begins with a foreword by Fraser Watts and a very helpful preface by George Pattison, Schickler's former supervisor. The main part of the book consists of seven chapters, a conclusion and a summary. The first chapter sketches Schickler's core question with reference to important strands of Kant's theoretical philosophy. Chapters

two to six analyse Hegel's attempts at overcoming the problems inherent in Kant, while the final chapter sketches Steiner's solution to the question at hand. In the first chapter, Schickler presents 'Kant's Faculties and the "I think"' (13). A reconstruction of the faculties of cognition as described in the *Critique of Pure Reason* leads into a critique of Kant's idea of the 'I think'. Kant holds that the 'I think' (as self-consciousness) is necessarily bound to the manifold of sense-impressions. The way it functions cannot be fully explicated. Following early Fichte, Schickler shows, against both assumptions, that it must be understood as standing in itself as an understandable entity. As such, it is absolute and can function as the unity and ground of both understanding and sensibility. Therefore, it can overcome the dualism between understanding (reason) and sensibility (being) which characterises Kant's system as a whole and which leads to his ontological scepticism or the problem of the 'thing-in-itself'. In order to fulfil this function, the absolute 'I think' must meet two requirements. First, it must be construed dialectically, in order to be able to differentiate itself into understanding (or subject) and sensibility (or object). Second, it must be totally understandable and transparent, otherwise the ontological scepticism stays in place.

[3] Schickler's reading of Hegel is that he does not meet the first requirement sufficiently and therefore fails to meet the second, too. This is shown by an occasionally very detailed reconstruction of important passages of Hegel's system. Chapter two analyses Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is the presupposition of Hegel's logic and anthropology, because in it, Hegel sublates understanding (as the Kantian view on rationality) into absolute reason (as the mediation between being and thought). Chapters three to five analyse crucial passages of the third part of Hegel's *Science of Logic* as the logical background to his anthropology. In chapter three, Schickler provides an introduction into the basic ideas of Hegel's dialectical method by analysing the latter's presentation of concept, judgement and syllogism. In chapter four, Schickler shows how this leads to the mediation between logic and ontology. To this end, he reconstructs Hegel's presentation of mechanism, chemism and teleology. In chapter five, Hegel's idea of life and the Absolute Idea are presented as the final chapters of his *Science of Logic*. Against the backdrop of these logical structures, chapter six moves to Hegel's anthropology (presented in his *Encyclopedia*) in order to see whether Hegel's concept of man is able to overcome the shortcomings of Kant's dualism.

[4] According to Schickler, Hegel does not truly sublimate Kant in spite of his dialectics. This is because Hegel refrains from a full clarification of the ontological side of the mediation between being and thought. In the *Science of Logic*, this shortcoming becomes visible in Hegel's failure to account for the logical significance of the object's sensory component. This is taken care of in chapter four, where Schickler analyses the categories of mechanism, chemism and teleology. 'Hegel thus only achieves the synthesis of mechanism and chemism in the category of teleology by making a massive and unjustified ontological leap from chemical substances to human thought, a leap which [. . .] presupposes both life and sentience.' (66) A similar problem comes to the fore in chapter five, where Schickler reconstructs Hegel's logical notion of life and cognition. 'Hegel achieves the tran-

sition from life to cognition and eventually to the thesis that thinking and being are one by unjustifiably renouncing the concept of the concrete individual as the absolute unity of subject and object. This unity should have been conceived as a full ontological sublation to the sensory world as a whole, which is an end for which the concept of resurrection will be shown to be fitting (see chapter 7)'. (94) Thus, the inability to deal adequately with the sensory world is the basic flaw of Hegel's logic—a flaw that is mirrored in his anthropology. Hegel's concepts of the natural and the feeling soul as the parts of the soul where man's sensibility is seated and which precedes self-consciousness are ontologically underdetermined. In a word: Hegel gets trapped in a one-sided idealism which, finally, renounces sensibility. Therefore, he does not truly overcome the problems posed by Kant's transcendentalism.

^[5] It is Rudolph Steiner who truly unites transcendentalism and dialectics by developing a transcendental ontology. As Schickler elaborates throughout his book, such a transcendental ontology needs to clarify the spheres of life, sentience and thought as those spheres which Kant holds to be unknowable and Hegel more or less ignores. The proper answer lies in the conceptions of an etheric, astral and spiritual world and body developed in Steiner's esoteric writings as worlds to be taken into consideration on top of the physical world. The etheric world holds the living organisms together and is thus the transcendental condition of the physical world. Our organs of cognition are located in the astral body, which therefore enables our sensory qualities, while in the spiritual world, our thoughts find their place. This four-fold idea of the organization of the human and the world as a whole allows a total mediation between understanding (thought) and sensibility (being) and therefore an anti-sceptical transcendental ontology. The imagination representing this absolute mediation is resurrection. Thus, the possibility of the resurrection of a physical body is a necessary condition of ordinary thought and experience.

^[6] Schickler's book is excellent in many respects. Two of its advantages deserve special praise. First, Schickler is an outstanding exegete of both Kant and especially Hegel. His one hundred pages of Hegel exegesis meet the highest of standards. He displays a clear overview over the system as a whole and is able to deal with the very difficult texts of the *Science of Logic* with impressive clarity. He embeds detailed exegesis into the larger questions he is interested in. And his criticism of Hegel always aims to be internal criticism, exposing the internal contradictions of Hegel himself. Thus, anybody who is interested in the contemporary debate on the relationship between Kant and Hegel or the question of a general ontology discussed in terms of German Idealism will benefit from reading this book. And anybody who enjoys new perspectives on the history of ideas will be given food for thought, too. For Schickler follows familiar lines in his critique of Kant, and although his detailed critique of Hegel flaunts new aspects, the general line of his argument is familiar, too. Setting out from late Schelling (followed by Kierkegaard, Marx etc.), several thinkers criticised Hegel for ignoring the sensibility-side of anthropology, therefore ending up with a one-sided idealism. But Schickler is original in two decisive moves. He does not want

to give up the Hegelian aim of an absolute mediation between being and thought. And he presents Steiner as the answer to this question, thereby reintegrating this often ignored author into the mainstream of the history of ideas.

^[7] Nevertheless, some criticism is in order for two reasons. First, some details of Schickler's Hegel exegesis need further discussion. I would like to name just three issues which concern Schickler's view of Hegel's system as a whole. First: In which way is the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the 'presupposition' (37) of the *Science of Logic*—special attention is necessary here because otherwise the *Phenomenology* ruins the foundational project of Hegel. Second: Hegel's idea of the beginning of his system cannot be formulated by the alternative that either being or the Absolute Idea/God stand at its starting point (84–85): this underestimates the dialectical nature of Hegel's system. Third: Hegel's claim that the *Science of Logic* represents the mind of God prior to creation (91) surely is just a metaphor—Hegel does not presuppose an absolute subject independently of human consciousness (a position possibly held by Steiner). These are minor issues, though. The key issue is this: Schickler himself states that today's mankind is unable to perceive the etheric body, and that the clairvoyance of Steiner and other mystics is necessary to do so. Could this not be a hint that a problem has been reached here which, at this side of the eschaton, cannot be solved? Schickler is right in stating the problem he states—but perhaps under the conditions of fallen human beings, we simply cannot solve it and must learn to live with the rest of ontological scepticism inherent to a Kantian position.

^[8] Although my own ultimate interpretative decisions would differ from Schickler's, I can wholeheartedly recommend his elegant and original book. His untimely death is a great loss for the scientific community which is always in need for surprising ideas, so that his book deserves a wide readership.