Wendell Kisner. *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel's Logic. The Middle Voice of Autopoietic Life*. Basingstoke et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 340 pp.

Kisner's book, *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel's Logic*, attempts to provide an interpretation of Hegel's *Science of Logic* that places it in productive dialogue with problems in contemporary environmental ethics, linguistics, and philosophy of biology. This aim is a laudable one, but as with many attempts to bring historical texts to bear on contemporary issues (and in this case, a highly obscure and contested historical text), it comes with certain risks that can be difficult to navigate, ones that extend beyond the most obvious one of anachronism. A further possible risk is the lack of a satisfiable audience: those invested in Hegel will find the important interpretive issues inadequately addressed and those invested in contemporary problems will find themselves hard-pressed to take on a historical text that may, at best, only obliquely touch upon the issues that matter for their research. Although there is indeed much that is of interest in Kisner's book, ultimately these risks are not adequately navigated, taking their toll on the argument and overall structure of the book.

Chapters one and two are introductory, presenting a summary of Kisner's argument as well as his preferred methodological orientation. The book contends that Hegel's *Logic* presents us with an ontological determination of life – what Kisner, following Francisco Varela, calls a "biologic" – that provides the "grounds for the recognition of ethical obligations to living species along with their various ecosystems" (7). This is the ecological ethics signaled in the title of the book, and Kisner argues that specific duties such as the preservation of species, habitats, and biodiversity, can be derived from what he takes to be a Hegelian ontology of life. In addition to this ethical dimension, Kisner further attempts to defend what he calls "a philosophy of nature for today" (216) by bringing together Hegel and enactivist thinkers such as Humberto Maturana, Varela, and Evan Thompson, arguing that the theory of living systems as autopoiesis – autonomous processes of self-organization, self-maintenance, and self-production – can be amended and supplemented by insights from Hegel's *Logic*. Throughout, Kisner emphasizes Hegel's critique of mechanism as particularly instructive insofar as it demonstrates the conceptual contradiction at the heart of the very concept, something that marks off Hegel's critique of mechanism from other attempts that are deemed less successful.

Chapter two introduces a methodological orientation that seems somewhat extraneous to the many and already quite complex issues at hand, namely, the grammatical category of the middle voice. Kisner suggests that Hegel's *Logic* and the ontology of life in particular should be "thought in terms of a 'medial' or 'middle voice' process" (32). Acknowledging that this grammatical voice is not explicitly present in most modern Western languages (including German and English), Kisner nonetheless argues that finding a path between active and passive grammatical voices is instructive because it avoids the reification of a "substantive being that initiates action" (34). With respect to the *Logic*, this is important for two reasons. First, Kisner argues that the middle voice allows us to grasp the processual character of dialectical development generally, without an overreliance on the category of becoming that appears early in the Doctrine of Being (29–30). Secondly, with respect to the determination of life in particular, the middle

voice allows us to grasp the kind of reflexive, self-developing processes of organisms without presuming a substantive agential subject. As a medial process, the internal teleology of organisms need not presume a soul or self as the driver of development, for there is "neither an active agent nor a passive recipient but rather […] a process from which both agents and patients first emerge" (18).

Although Kisner takes up some interesting debates concerning the middle voice as a linguistic and philosophical category, there is something forced in the application of this idea to a reading of Hegel's *Logic*. In setting out with this methodological orientation, Kisner not only prejudges many complicated interpretative issues in Hegel (for example, whether Hegel's *Logic* should be read epistemologically or ontologically; the status of subjectivity and objectivity within the text; the nature of dialectical development; the nature of activity and conceptual activity in particular; to just name a few), but further, in bringing a completely external idea to bear on Hegel's text, it assumes that Hegel was both unaware of the issues that arise within his own arguments and unable to address these issues on his own terms. As Kisner continually revisits the idea of the middle voice in later chapters, this methodological orientation comes to appear more and more artificial, a device that serves to sidestep the difficult issues (in Hegel, environmental ethics, *and* philosophy of biology) rather than illuminate them.

Kisner provides his reading of the *Logic* in chapters three, four, and six. Chapter three opens with an overview of the *Logic* as a whole before providing a more detailed reading of the section on objectivity, covering the chapters on mechanism, chemism, and teleology; chapter four continues with an account of life and cognition; chapter six discusses the absolute idea and the relation between logic and the philosophy of nature. Throughout these three chapters, discussions of Hegel are interspersed with debates in contemporary philosophy of biology (for example, questions of emergence, autopoiesis, physical reductionism, and the status of viruses) and further development of the grammar of middle voice processes. In chapters five and seven, Kisner employs the reading of Hegel to engage with environmental ethics and enactivist accounts of living systems respectively, arguing that Hegel provides important philosophical resources for resolving some of the internal problems within both sets of discourse.

One common problem in taking up the *Science of Logic* is that there is not a lot of agreement among scholars concerning the status and aims of the text. This, coupled with the dense and varied contents of the book itself, makes it very difficult to engage the *Logic* without embarking on a wholesale interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. Kisner tries to avoid this problem by taking on two major interpretive assumptions that are defended by scholars such as Stephen Houlgate and Richard Dien Winfield. First, Kisner assumes that the *Logic* cannot be read as a purely epistemological undertaking but must also be read as staking out ontological claims (14, 61). With this assumption in place, Kisner then boldly asserts that "the conception of life presented in the *Logic* articulates the ontological structure of life itself" (15). To avoid the appearance of dogmatism, Kisner takes on a second assumption, namely, that we must read the *Logic* as a presuppositionless, immanent derivation of ontological determinacies. With this second assumption in place, Kisner can then accuse his opponents of "smuggling in" pregiven or "underived determinacies," (61) whenever they have not themselves followed in the

path of his preferred understanding of Hegelian dialectics. Employing a form of reasoning that Hegel likens to the witches' circle from Macbeth,[1] in which one presupposes what is to be explained and then claims to find in the object exactly what was already presupposed, Kisner then revisits the middle voice as follows:

> Hence the middle voice is not an independently given grammatical category that we are 'applying' to the dialectical development. Rather, mediality characterizes the dialectical development itself and belongs to the latter's process. […] Whereas those who have philosophically appropriated the middle voice have done so by taking it as a pregiven grammatical category and then framing things in its terms, the dialectical logic shows mediality to be first a pre-lingual ontological process. It is on this basis that it can then become a grammatical category. (75–76)

Given the broader aims of Kisner's book, it is understandable that he does not take on the full burden of addressing all the complications involved in taking on the assumptions noted above when reading Hegel's *Logic*. But without securing the soundness of these assumptions, or at least addressing some of the difficulties involved in accepting them (for example, what does it mean for a post-Kantian like Hegel to do 'ontology'? how does this square with Hegel's idealism? how can Hegel's *Logic* be truly presuppositionless? why would someone not invested in the study of Hegel find his project so defined compelling enough to engage with seriously?), it is hard for the reader to accept the claims put forth by Kisner concerning the details of Hegel's text on the basis of these assumptions. On another highly contested issue in Hegel scholarship concerning the relation between logic and philosophy of nature, Kisner again passes off the burden of interpretation by turning to another extraneous and complicated philosophical concept, this time, what Levinas calls "the diastasis of identity" (199–204). From his analysis of Levinas, Kisner concludes that we can determine nature as the "doppelganger" (205) of the ontological determinations of the *Logic*, again without acknowledging or assessing the many difficulties involved with accepting such an idea.

With respect to Kisner's treatment of ecological ethics and the theory of autopoiesis, one can raise two further questions. In chapter five, Kisner very quickly dismisses various contemporary options for thinking about an ethical relation to other species and the environment, including the discourse of animal rights, deep ecology, and ecofeminism, among others, largely based on his reading of Hegel's *Logic*. Kisner's own solution is to derive the duties of an ecological ethic on the basis of a Hegelian ontology of life. Even if one grants the soundness of such an ontology, this kind of approach is vulnerable to charges of the naturalistic fallacy in attempting to directly (and somewhat naively) derive *oughts* from *is*. Although it is indeed the case that Hegel has interesting reflections concerning the relation between 'is' and 'ought' and may have resources for getting around this problem, Kisner's general claim of deriving ethics from ontology only works if these complications are sufficiently addressed.

[1] See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* translated and edited by George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 401 (Orig. pub.: GW 11: 306).

A further question concerns Kisner's treatment of autopoietic theory in relation to Hegel's account of life. While autopoiesis is supposed to provide a sufficient description of living systems as such (with its model being the cell), it is clear that the treatment of life in the *Logic*, unlike the more general account of organics in the philosophy of nature, is a description of rather sophisticated forms of animal life in which nervous systems and sexual reproduction are in play. In attempting to align Hegel with autopoietic theories, Kisner either downplays or rejects Hegel's more restrictive consideration of life (107, 111, 121). But in trying to stretch Hegel's account to include *all* life, from the cell to the human being, Kisner misses a crucial difference between Hegel and autopoietic theory, namely, that Hegel expressly does *not* identify the autopoietic and the cognitive. Of course, 'cognition' does not mean the same thing in Hegel as it does in autopoietic theory (224); nonetheless, in expanding the category of life in the *Logic* to constitute the "minimal features of living things," (107) Kisner overlooks Hegel's anthropocentric commitment with respect to cognition, in that for Hegel, *only* human beings are capable of cognition. The treatment of life in the *Logic* is intentionally *not* an account of life as such, but only those features of animal life without which we could not grasp the distinctive character of self-conscious human life. Although Kisner is to be lauded for attempting to bring an underappreciated historical text to bear on important contemporary questions, this book also highlights the many difficulties involved with embarking on such an endeavor.

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