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Vittorio Klostermann

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DER PHILOSOPHIE
UND IHR VERHÄLTNIS ZU DEN
ANDEREN WISSENSCHAFTEN

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Inhalt

DINA EMUNDTS / KAREN KOCH / DIRK QUADFLIEG	
Einleitung	11
Introduction	17

ABENDVORTRÄGE

DINA EMUNDTS	
Das Verhältnis von Philosophie, Religion und Wissenschaft erläutert anhand des Themas Verzeihen	25
ECKART FÖRSTER	
Philosophiegeschichte ohne Philosophiebegriff? Eine Apologie für Hegel	47
BIRGIT SANDKAULEN	
Prosa, Kunst und Wissenschaft. Ästhetische Theorie bei Hegel	77

SEKTION A: PHILOSOPHIE UND WISSENSCHAFT IN DER GESCHICHTE DER PHILOSOPHIE

KOLLOQUIUM

Geschichte der Philosophie I

ALLEGRA DE LAURENTIIS	
Introduction	101
EDWARD C. HALPER	
Self-Understanding as Self-Relation: Hegel and Aristotle	105
ANDY GERMAN	
Spirit's Self-Determination and Nature's Purposiveness. Thoughts on their Relation	131
STEFANIA ACHELLA	
»die Physik muß so der Philosophie in die Hände arbeiten«. Hegel und die Biologie	149

KOLLOQUIUM

Geschichte der Philosophie II

SALLY SEDGWICK

Introduction	169
--------------------	-----

ULRICH SCHLÖSSER

Was ist Naturphilosophie?	171
---------------------------------	-----

ALFREDO FERRARIN

The Transformation of the Systematic Role of the <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit	189
--	-----

SEKTION B

PHILOSOPHIE UND DIE EINZELWISSENSCHAFTEN

KOLLOQUIUM

Mathematik und Logik

CHRISTIAN MARTIN

Einleitung	209
------------------	-----

ELENA FICARA

The Logic of <i>Vereinigung</i> . The Fragment 42 in the Historico-Critical Edition of Hegel's <i>Frühe Schriften</i> and its Relevance for Paraconsistency	223
---	-----

PIRMIN STEKELER-WEITHOFER

Concepts of Objects. On the Logical Significance of Hegel's Criticism of Infinitesimals	247
---	-----

STEPHEN HOULGATE

Logic and Science in Hegel's Logic of Measure	271
---	-----

KOLLOQUIUM

Naturwissenschaft

KAREN NG

Hegel and the Natural Sciences	289
--------------------------------------	-----

SUSANNE LETTOW

Das Geschlecht, die »Rassenverschiedenheiten« und die Naturwissenschaften. Überlegungen zu Hegels Enzyklopädie II und III	293
---	-----

SEBASTIAN RAND

»Absolut freie Bewegung«. Laws of Motion in the Development of Hegel's Speculative Mechanics	303
---	-----

KOLLOQUIUM

Geisteswissenschaft

GUNNAR HINDRICH

Zum geisteswissenschaftlichen Komplex. Statt einer Einleitung	323
---	-----

AUDREY RIEBER

The Methodological Hegelianism of Art History	337
---	-----

SEKTION C

KRITIK AN VORSTELLUNGEN VON WISSEN UND WISSENSCHAFT

KOLLOQUIUM

Kritik an Wissenschaften bzw. Wissenschaftsverständnis

GILLES MARMASSE

Einleitung	353
------------------	-----

CINZIA FERRINI

Kant's and Hegel's Criticisms of how Empirical Scientists Understand »Observation« (<i>Beobachtung</i>)	355
--	-----

KENNETH R. WESTPHAL

Hegels kognitive Semantik, <i>pro</i> Newtons universale Gravitationstheorie sowie <i>contra</i> van Fraassens »konstruktiven Empirismus« – ein Resumée	373
--	-----

GILLES MARMASSE

Spekulation als konkrete Verallgemeinerung endlichen Wissens. Der Fall der Naturwissenschaften	387
---	-----

KOLLOQUIUM

Kritik an sozialer Theorie und Praxis

DIRK QUADFLIEG

Einleitung	401
------------------	-----

THOMAS KHURANA

Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude. The Coloniality of Freedom
and its ›True Critique‹ 407

KOLLOQUIUM

Wissen und Wahrheit

MARINA F. BYKOVA

Introduction 429

ANGELICA NUZZO

Wissen and *Wahrheit*: Hegelian Absolutes? Systematic Implications
from the End of Hegel's Logic 447

PAUL REDDING

Hegel's Treatment of *Verhältnis* in *The Science of Logic*,
and its Bearing on his Understanding of Calculus 461

SEKTION D

DAS SELBSTVERSTÄNDNIS DER PHILOSOPHIE

KOLLOQUIUM

Kunst und Religion

LUCA ILLETTERATI

Über die Absolutheit des absoluten Geistes 489

ZDRAVKO KOBE

Religion nach dem Ende der Religion 503

PAUL A. KOTTMAN

»The Withholding of Love« 519

ANDREJA NOVAKOVIC

Hegel on Transformative Experiences 537

KOLLOQUIUM

Aufgaben der Philosophie

CHRISTOPH HALBIG

Einleitung 559

TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON

Clarification by Theory Construction 563

HANS-JOHANN GLOCK

»Cold steel in the hand of passion«. Philosophy as Critical Thinking
Writ Large 577

KOLLOQUIUM

Methode und Methodenvielfalt

BÉATRICE LONGUENESSE / DINA EMUNDTS

Introduction 601

MATTHEW BOYLE

Reflection as a Philosophical Method 603

TOBIAS ROSEFELDT

The Role of Faculties for Philosophical Methodology 621

HANNAH GINSBORG

The Importance of History to Philosophical Methodology 641

VORTRÄGE IN FREIEN FOREN

GIULIA BATTISTONI

Handlungstheoretische und logische Grundlagen des Zurechnungs-
begriffs. Hegel und die Strafrechtswissenschaft seiner Zeit 657

GIULIA BERNARD

Weltbegriff der Philosophie? Zur Frage der Wissenschaftlichkeit
der Philosophie in Hegels Berliner System 669

DANIEL BURNFIN

Der Pöbel aus makroökonomischer Sicht 679

THOMAS HANKE

»Weltbegriff« und »Geschichte« der Philosophie. Die nicht-szientistische
Verwissenschaftlichung von Philosophie und Philosophiegeschichte bei
Kant und Hegel 697

NADINE MOOREN

Möglichkeiten und Grenzen wissenschaftlicher Arbeitsteilung
am Beispiel des Verhältnisses von Religionsphilosophie und Theologie
bei Hegel 711

THOMAS OEHL

Hegels Logik der Bewährung 721

GEORG OSWALD

Methode und System. Zu den Grenzen der spekulativen Philosophie
bei Hegel 733

ANNA-LISA SANDER / ANA SILVIA MUNTE

Die Psychoanalyse als hegelsche Wissenschaft des Geistes 745

SIMON SCHÜZ

Der Begriff des Menschen als hermeneutisches Apriori. Hegels
Anthropologie der »Menschenrassen« im Spannungsfeld von Physiologie,
Ethnologie und Philosophie des Geistes 755

ELENA TRIPALDI

The Unity of Correlation and Non-Correlation. Contingency,
Objectivity, and the Possibility of Ecological Thought in Hegel 775

XINGKUI WANG

Make the Will Visible. A Critique of Hegel's Principle of Subjectivity
in the Romantic Arts through an Analysis of Portraiture 787

MARKUS WIRTZ

Tierischer Organismus und animalische Subjektivität in Hegels
Systemphilosophie – unter Berücksichtigung von Perspektiven der
Human-Animal-Studies und des kritischen Posthumanismus 801

HEGEL UND FEMINISMUS

BOJANA JOVIĆEVIĆ / KAREN KOCH

Hegel und Feminismus. Zur philosophischen Relevanz 817

KOLLOQUIUM

Zum Andenken an Dieter Henrich

ROLF-PETER HORSTMANN

Einleitung 829

ANGELIKA KRESS

Metaphysik als Selbstreflexion bewussten Lebens.
Dieter Henrich als Philosoph, Forscher und Lehrer 833

TOBIAS ROSEFELDT

Henrich als Leser Kants 843

ULRICH SCHLÖSSER

Dieter Henrich und der nachkantische Idealismus 851

KAREN NG

Hegel and the Natural Sciences

Hegel reflected extensively on the relation between philosophy and the natural sciences, and did so during a unique period in the history of philosophy and science. First, Hegel lived in the wake of the long period in which the idea of »natural philosophy« and the study of nature were not separate from philosophical inquiry, but a central branch of philosophical knowledge. In the 1700s, natural philosophy moved away from its scholastic, Aristotelian inheritance into a mechanical and mathematized framework, which was crucial for the gradual separation of philosophy and science as we understand it today.¹ Second, Hegel also lived in the period that saw the emergence of new sciences such as chemistry (in the 1700s) and biology (in the 1800s), along with, finally, the demarcation of »science« as a distinct discipline and area of study separate from philosophy and other pursuits of knowledge. Shortly after Hegel's death in 1833, the term »scientist« was coined in English by William Whewell, replacing the older term, »natural philosopher.« This unique historical context makes it especially interesting to consider Hegel's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences: on the one hand, Hegel is invested in securing what he takes to be the unique contribution of philosophical thinking to knowledge in contrast to the contributions of the empirical sciences; on the other hand, Hegel is highly knowledgeable of the scientific developments of his own time and open to exploring new discoveries and theories within his philosophical thinking. Both of the essays in this section show how fruitful these two commitments can be to constructing philosophical accounts of a wide range of topics, from nature and mechanics to differentiations of race and gender.

There are two aspects of Hegel's approach to philosophy and the natural sciences that are worth highlighting in particular. First, Hegel argues that *experience* (Erfahrung) plays an important role for both kinds of knowing. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel writes that the content of philosophy is the world of »living spirit ... the outer and inner world of consciousness ... [phi-

¹ See Blair 2008 and Gascoigne 2008.

losophy's] content is *actuality* [*Wirklichkeit*]*»* (EL § 6). But the immediate consciousness of this content is *»experience.«* Experience is an important concept in Hegel's philosophy, most famously explored in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and we can distinguish two ways of understanding what Hegel means by experience here. In the broadest sense, Hegel is referring to sensuous experience and sensible knowledge of nature as given through perceptual capacities. Although it is important that this kind of sense experience is involved in both philosophical and empirical scientific knowledge, there is a more specific and demanding sense of experience that is required to understand both endeavors. Experience in this more demanding sense already draws a distinction between *appearances* and *actuality*, and requires the active involvement and contribution of an experiencing subject who finds *self-certainty* in relation to the content of experience. In this more demanding sense of experience, the attainment of self-certainty in relation to a content is transformative of both the content and of the self. Hegel writes:

The principle of *experience* contains the infinitely important determination that human beings must themselves be *involved* when taking up a given content and holding it to be true, more precisely that they must find such content to be united and in unison with *the certainty of themselves*. They must be involved in it, whether through their external senses only or with their deeper spirit and the essential consciousness of their respective self. ... We designate those sciences that have been called *philosophies* as *empirical* sciences due to their taking their point of departure from experience. But what in essence they aim at and produce are *laws*, *general propositions*, a *theory*, i.e. the *thoughts* of what there is. (EL § 7 A)

Experience – as sense experience but also in the more demanding sense of involving self-certainty – is the starting point for both philosophical and empirical scientific knowledge, and Hegel notes that both animals and human beings have the power of engaging with the world in this way. Making reference to the empirical sciences in particular, Hegel also suggests that what begins with experience leads us to something more general and universal, whether these are laws, principles and propositions, or theories. As examples of such empirical sciences, Hegel cites Newtonian physics, Grotius' philosophy of international law, and the emergent science of political economy. Experience allows us to attain self-certainty in relation to some content, but it also leads away from itself to something more general and universal.

This brings us to the second aspect of Hegel's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences: although both begin with the experience of a content and move toward something more universal,

only philosophy attains to the universal form characteristic of the »concept« (*der Begriff*). Through experience and thought, we transform things into universals: »the more thought enters into our representation of things, the less do they retain their naturalness, their singularity and immediacy ... die and fade away ...« (PN § 246Z). However, there is a crucial difference between the universality attained by the empirical sciences and the universality attained by philosophical thinking. Hegel suggests that »[t]he universal of physics,« and by implication, of the other empirical sciences, »is abstract or only formal ... it is split into fragments, into parts which are isolated and detached from each other, devoid of any necessary connection« (PN § 246Z). He also contends that from the standpoint of empirical science, there is necessary uncertainty as to whether the attained universality is merely subjective or something objective, and this uncertainty cannot be resolved within the theoretical confines of empirical science itself. What Hegel calls »philosophical universality,« or the universality of the concept, not only brings parts and fragments into a larger, essentially united whole, but further, unites certainty and truth to overcome the uncertainty between the subjective and the objective. Although there may be disagreement as to the degree of success attained by Hegel himself in this regard, the distinction between a formal or empirical notion of universality and a more holistic, immanent, philosophical sense of universality is helpful for thinking about the relation between philosophy and the natural sciences. For one thing, Hegel is clear that this more encompassing philosophical universality and philosophical thinking must be in agreement with our empirical knowledge of nature, and in fact, presupposes this knowledge (PN § 246Z). We must demonstrate that our philosophical concepts correspond to empirical appearances, even if the more holistic and general truth of such appearances can be determined only by philosophical thinking rather than empirical science. Second, Hegel suggests that it is in bringing a philosophical perspective to bear on empirical knowledge that we can understand the unity of our theoretical and practical approaches to nature. That our theoretical approaches to nature – our empirical scientific theories, laws, and principles – are essentially connected to a practical and agential relation to the natural world, shaped by our interests and purposes, is a central contribution of philosophical thinking to grasping the full and holistic import of empirical scientific knowledge.

This section on Hegel and the natural sciences contains two papers. The first is by Susanne Lettow (Freie Universität Berlin), titled: »Das Geschlecht, die »Rassenverschiedenheiten« und die Naturwissenschaften. *Überlegungen zu*

Hegels Enzyklopädie II und III.« Lettow takes up Hegel's remarks on sexual difference and racial differentiation, which draw on two emerging sciences in the period around 1800: biology on the one hand, and geography and the earth sciences on the other. What is of particular interest for Lettow is how Hegel brings philosophical form to scientific knowledge, along with his ethical and political articulation of the concepts of sexual and racial difference.

The second paper is by Sebastian Rand (Georgia State University), titled: »*Absolut freie Bewegung*«: Laws of Motion in the Development of Hegel's Speculative Mechanics.« Rand explores in depth a passage from Hegel's treatment of mechanics, in which he describes the orbital motion of the planets of the solar system around the sun as »*absolut freie Bewegung*.« Rand investigates changes between Hegel's 1817 and 1830 versions of *Naturphilosophie*, considering how these differences shed light on how Hegel understands the relation between not only logic and *Naturphilosophie*, but also *Naturphilosophie* and empirical physics.

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