

Alison Stone. *Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism*. London: Roman and Littlefield International, Ltd, 2018. ISBN 978-1-78660917-5 (hbk) ISBN 978-1-78660918-2 (pbk). Pp.287

Alison Stone's *Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism* aims to show that this cluster of views have much to offer debates in contemporary philosophy, in particular environmental ethics; naturalism; gender; race; and colonialism. A central claim Stone defends is that '[i]n different ways [...] Romanticism and Idealism both open up ways of saying that nature imposes normative demands' (11). Thus re-engagement with these views can highlight the extent to which our ethics is informed by our (often implicit) view of nature; and can offer a new way to think about nature, and therefore about ethics.

Part of Stone's achievement here is a wonderfully clear account of a set of philosophical positions often taken as obscure, and relevant only as a matter of historical curiosity. Stone demonstrates the philosophical value of these views, and brings out their ethical implications, showing their significant contemporary relevance. This work makes an important contribution not only to the scholarship on Early German Romanticism and Idealism, but also provides a convincing argument for new engagement with these positions as providing valuable insight into the debates listed above.

A further advantage of this work is that the views covered are presented as part of a unified movement: although Stone outlines areas where these thinkers diverge, she emphasises the set of overlapping concerns which unite them. This enables these views to be presented as part of a shared endeavour to understand nature, and its relationship to human agents. This strategy also gives Stone an argumentative advantage, as she is able to use elements of different views in conjunction with one another: for example in chapter twelve Stone defends the organic conception of the state, by arguing that its problematic implications are mitigated by replacing Hegel's understanding of the organic on the model of the *animal* with the Early German Romantic understanding of the organic on the model of the *plant*.

As should be becoming clear, there is a lot going on in this book. Firstly, there is the exegesis of a number of different views: Stone covers Novalis, Schelegel, Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel in some detail. Secondly, she outlines her views with respect to particular debates in the literature. Thirdly, Stone makes explicit the ethical implications of these positions – which at times requires some reconstruction, as she argues that these are not always what they were taken to be by their author. Finally, Stone highlights the contemporary debates with which these views connect. Due to the ambitious scope of the text, the contemporary

implications are flagged, rather than developed. Stone's aim is to demonstrate that these views do have implications for contemporary debates; the task of working these out fully falls beyond the scope of the work.

Part one tackles Early German Romanticism, with a focus on Novalis and Schlegel. Stone emphasises that a central concern of the Romantic project is *re-enchanting nature*, and enabling us to overcome alienation by rediscovering our fundamental connectedness to nature as a whole. However, as the Early German Romantics recognize, this re-enchantment and reconnection cannot take the form of a return to pre-modern ways of living: we exist within and as a product of modernity; therefore re-enchanting and reconnecting with nature must start from rather than attempt to escape this perspective. Stone also argues that the conception of nature in play here is fruitful for environmental ethics: the Early German Romantics view nature as animated, spontaneous, self-determining, and as having a mysterious aspect that resists rational comprehension. Stone claims that nature, on this account, demands an attitude of respectful wonder; it entails a view of nature and natural objects as embodying their own ways of being and their own kind of value, and therefore as worthy of respect and care.

Part two documents the development of *Naturphilosophie*, specifically in Schelling and Hegel. Again Stone's accounts are beautifully clear – something which cannot always be said about literature on *Naturphilosophie*. She makes a good case for the contemporary relevance of *Naturphilosophie*: by challenging the traditional picture of humans as separate from nature; articulating our embeddedness in nature; and emphasising nature's interconnectedness; this way of thinking can motivate us to act more ethically with respect to our environment. A crucial claim that Stone defends in this section is that Hegel's idealism should be understood as naturalistic. Building on the view that naturalism is as a *cluster of commitments* rather than a singular viewpoint, Stone demonstrates Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* endorses a number of these commitments – therefore while it may not be as naturalistic as views such as mechanical materialism, *Naturphilosophie* still falls on the spectrum of naturalism.

However, Stone's arguments here, that Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* endorses the naturalist denial of the existence of any supernatural entities or processes, are unconvincing. Stone adopts the strategy of playing Hegel off against Schelling, arguing that the latter is closer to supernaturalism than the former. There are number of problems with her arguments: (i) the merit of this argumentative strategy is questionable, insofar as it is not clear that persuading the naturalist that Schelling does include supernatural processes in his ontology is at all helpful to persuade her that Hegel does not. (ii) Stone's argument that Schelling's philosophy is supernaturalist in a way that Hegel's is not has problems of its own. Her argument, in brief, is

that Schelling's reliance on the natural forces of productivity and limitation in his *Naturphilosophie* render his account supernaturalist, because these forces are to some degree mysterious; whereas Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* avoids this issue, because for him the fundamental force which structures nature is Reason, which by its very nature can be rationally comprehended. One problem with this argument is Stone's implicit claim that *being mysterious renders something supernatural*. Rational intelligibility is not equivalent to naturalness – it is plausible that there could be natural phenomena which humans are not able to rationally comprehend. However, this epistemic barrier does not entail that those natural phenomena are therefore unnatural. Moreover, Stone argues in part one that we *should* view some natural processes as mysterious – this is one of the aspects of Early German Romanticism which she argues is beneficial for environmental ethics – and in that section, she does *not* take this claim as implying supernaturalism.

Another issue is that it is far from clear that these forces in Schelling's ontology are mysterious – for Schelling, although we cannot study these forces directly (because they do not ever exist as separate from their manifestation in particular natural processes), we *are* able to understand them through our empirical and philosophical investigations of nature. One of the central commitments of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is that nothing outside of nature explains nature: there is nothing transcendent to nature on this view. However, this cannot be said of Hegel's *Naturphilosophie*; for Hegel, there *is* something which transcends nature even as it structures it: Reason. Therefore, both the claim that Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* is more naturalistic than Schelling's, and the claim that it does not involve any supernatural element, seem on shaky ground (at least given the arguments for these claims here).

Stone closes part two by outlining the implications of Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* for ethics. Although Hegel explicitly claims that only human agents are free, and therefore worthy of ethical consideration, Stone argues that we should take his *Naturphilosophie* as entailing that *all natural beings*, because they are *Geistig* to varying degrees, are worthy of ethical consideration. Although Stone is right to claim that this *could* be taken as an implication of Hegel's view, it is not clear why she focuses on Hegel's account here, given his clear commitment to the claim that rational agents are the only natural beings towards whom we have ethical obligations. Why Stone takes Hegel as her exemplar of *Naturphilosophie* is unclear, as there are other versions of this view which yield the conception of nature and the ethical implications that Stone wants, without requiring significant re-interpretation (for example, the Early German Romantic accounts in part one).

In part three the project of re-interpreting Hegel has a much clearer motivation. As Stone shows, although Hegel's philosophy has a number of problematic consequences for certain elements of ethics (in particular with respect to gender, race, and colonialism), it also contains the resources to approach these areas in ways that are productive and potentially emancipatory. Therefore, the project of engaging with Hegel here important as it enables the separation of Hegel's conclusions from the elements of his philosophy which could be used in a positive way, and allows an assessment of the extent to which the problematic consequences can be separated from the elements which we might productively use. For example: although Stone acknowledges that Hegel's accounts of the role of women, and of the organic state, entail some problematic consequences about the right or ability of women to participate in certain aspects of social and political life, she also demonstrates that these consequences need not follow given some small changes to the view. This is one area where Stone's approach to German Romanticism and Idealism as a *unified movement* gives her an advantage: she argues that if we replace Hegel's conception of the organic state based on the animal (which implies that each part's function is to occupy *a specific role* within the whole) with the Early German Romantic account of the state based on the plant (which entails that each part, though perhaps suited to a particular functional role, should be able to play *any role* within the whole), we are able to argue that any individual, regardless of their gender, should be able to take whatever role they choose within the social whole.

Stone does not shy away from confronting the problematic aspects of Hegel's philosophy, and although she discusses and identifies a number of ways in which Hegel's philosophy can be used in ethics in a positive way, she also issues a warning: it is crucial that any contemporary defender of Hegelianism as critically-oriented must face up to the charges that Eurocentrism and racism are structurally embedded throughout every level of Hegelian philosophical commitments. Therefore, those who want to use his views to challenge problematic structures must take care not to end up appropriating aspects of his thought which will end up reproducing these structures in different ways.

Overall Stone has produced a work which makes an important contribution to the literature in a number of ways: (i) it provides a clear and concise account of a number of elements of Early German Romanticism and Idealism which are often taken to be difficult or obscure. (ii) It makes a strong case for a contemporary re-engagement with these views due to the resources they provide for thinking about an important set of ethical issues surrounding the way that we think about nature, our responsibilities to the environment, gender; race, and colonialism. (iii) It provides a commendably honest look at the problematic elements of the

thought of this period, and in particular Hegel's. (iv) It critically examines the resources internal to this movement that are available to us in attempting to liberate these views from their less palatable aspects. This is a work which be useful to many; from students to established scholars to ethicists not currently engaging with this set of views, there is a lot to be gained from this text.