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Review of Eckart Förster, *The 25 Years of Philosophy – A Systematic Reconstruction*, and Stephen Gaukroger, *The Failures of Philosophy – A Historical Essay*.

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Eckart Förster, *The 25 Years of Philosophy – A Systematic Reconstruction*, Harvard University Press, 2017.
Stephen Gaukroger, *The Failures Of Philosophy – A Historical Essay*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

Eckart Förster, honorary professor at Humboldt University in Berlin, expert in German Idealism, has lectured on German studies at Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, John Hopkins and Munich universities. His book, "The 25 Years of Philosophy", is an attempt to reconstruct in a systematic manner a dramatic episode in the history of philosophy between 1781 and 1806. The first bombshell was thrown by Kant who had no hesitation in claiming that prior the "The Critique of Pure Reason", published in 1781, "there had been no philosophy at all." (Preface p. ix) The second bombshell exploded 25 years later when Hegel predicted in 1806 during one of his lectures that his book "The Phenomenology of Spirit" had spelt the end of the history of philosophy. The implication was that during those 25 years, Kant and Hegel had worked out a complete philosophical system which had answered all metaphysical questions and had raised philosophy from a set of random questions to the status of science.

Prof Förster points out that, there was no consensus among Kantian philosophers about what 'science' means. Fichte's conception, "rests on the assumption shared by Kant and Reinhold that philosophy must be systematic and therefore must be derived from a first principle." According to Fichte, however, such a principle is accessible to cognition only in the intellectual intuition of one's own I" (p. 165). The second conception "is inspired by Spinoza's view that scientific knowledge consists in the ability to derive an object's essential properties from its proximate cause or definition. (*Ibid.*) Goethe was inspired by both Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva* and Kant's "Critique of the Power of Judgment' and used the method of intuitive understanding when he wrote "The Metamorphosis of Plants" and "The Theory of Colours'. As a result of Goethe's considerable influence, Hegel took over this method and incorporated it into his "Phenomenology of Spirit" in order to develop his theory based on an ascending scale of concepts starting from sensation, perception and leading to consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, spirit and the Absolute which he considered to have brought about the end of philosophy.

However, Eckart Förster makes the valid observation that the end of philosophy heralded by Hegel could be understood in two senses: completion and cessation. Hegel's dialectics enabled him to overcome the subject-object dichotomy which ended discursive thought and opened the possibility for a new cycle of philosophy. "Alternatively, the history of philosophy may be said to have *come to an end* in the sense that, in the end, only a closed system is possible, and once such a system is erected, philosophy would have exhausted its potential" (p. 372).

In response to Hegel's assumption that philosophy had come to an end, prof Förster considers that even if we accept such a claim, which he does not, another kind of philosophical science different from Hegel's system, something similar to *scientia intuitiva* developed by

Spinoza and Goethe, is open to the future (p. 372]. While Prof Förster does not wish to deny the legitimacy of discursive thought as a necessary stage prior to *scientia intuitiva*, he contends that discursive thought has lost its position of exclusive dominance in a similar way to Euclidean geometry. Unlike Kant, who had concluded that discursive thought could only lead to antinomies and could not reach the supersensible or nuomenon, Eckart Förster hopes that his study demonstrated that the 25 years of philosophy between 1781 and 1806 created the possibility that philosophy "would be able to come forward as a science" (p. 377).

How did philosophy arrive during those 25 years to the standpoint of science? After Fichte's and Schelling's failures to overcome Kant's conclusion that human mind is incapable of knowing the essence or nuomenon, "it was Goethe who elaborated a methodology of intuitive understanding based on Spinoza's *Ethics* and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Goethe's method consisted in bringing together related phenomena and grasping them in such a way as to form a whole". In a further step, "the transitions between the phenomena must be re-created in thought in order to tell whether the whole was already at work in them or whether the parts are only externally connected" (p. 375).

While Hegel was writing "The Phenomenology of Spirit" which he initially called "The Science of the Experience of Consciousness", Goethe gave a series of private lectures on natural philosophy for a select audience and was close to completing the first part of *FAUST.* Although Hegel did not attend Goethe's lectures, he met him in Jena on a number of occasions when he became familiar with Goethe's *Theory of Colours*. As a result of these encounters, Hegel adopted one of Goethe's ideas required by *scientia intuitiva,* "namely that the ascent from the particular to the universal be followed by a descent from the universal to the particular (p. 360). Prof Förster quotes a letter written by Hegel to Goethe, many years later, in which Hegel acknowledges his debt of gratitude: "When I survey the path of my spiritual development, I see you interwoven in it everywhere and I think of myself as *one of your sons; you have nourished in me a tenacious resistance to abstraction,* and your creations [*Gebilde]* have marked out my path like torches" (p. 362).

Kant was of the view that he had demonstrated convincingly that the road from the absolute idea to phenomena or from phenomena to the idea that corresponds to them (*scientia intuitiva)* was humanly impossible. Hegel and Goethe tried to overcome this position in different ways. Goethe believed that "What is highest is the intuition of the different as identical." And, "Man must be able to elevate himself to the highest reason if he is to touch the deity that is revealed in the *Urphänomenen,* physical and moral, behind which it lies and from which they arise" (p. 370).

Why does Eckart Förster believe that the 25 years of philosophy between 1781 and 1806 worked out a philosophical justification demonstrating that supersensible reality could be known by philosophy as a science and the path of *scientia intuitiva* is still open? And what is actually *scientia intuitiva?* "It is the form of cognition that Spinoza had demanded without being able to formulate it in methodologically adequate terms, and whose methodology Goethe was the first to work out, yet without being able to provide philosophical justification" (p. 372). Intuitive knowledge as defined by Spinoza in his *Ethics* is the comprehension of things by their essences or proximate cause. Spinoza calls *scientia intuitiva* the third kind of knowledge which is superior to perceptive and rational knowledge. Thus, Spinoza says, "The greatest striving of the Mind, and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge" (p. 93). However, Prof Förster points out that individual things cannot be grasped in the mode of *scientia intuitiva* without knowing their underlying idea or efficient cause which is probably the reason why Spinoza illustrated the third kind of knowledge with examples selected exclusively from mathematics. Despite such difficulties, the author does not share the scepticism of scholars who doubt the validity of Spinoza's third mode of cognition.

What enabled Goethe to overcome the limitations of Spinoza's method when he wrote the *Metamorphosis of Plants* was the idea found in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* where Kant described the process of intuitive understanding as a movement from the whole to the parts aiming to grasp their reciprocal causations (p. 166). However, Goethe's attempts to overcome the cognitive limitations posited by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* "were met with little approval among the Kantians." Goethe was unable, as he later wrote, "to bring myself into line with the Kantians: they heard what I had to say, but were unable to respond or to benefit me in any way" (p. 174). Goethe did not give up his belief that humans possess a type of cognition that proceeds from the whole to its parts and he believed that he had applied this method in his *Essay on the Metamorphosis of Plants.* "The philosophical attraction of Goethe's position consists not least in the fact (and in the way that) he mediates between Spinoza and Kant and seeks to make discursive and intuitive thinking compatible" (p. 254).

> Hegel applied this [Goethe's] method to philosophy itself in order to achieve philosophical knowledge of the supersensible. Since philosophical consciousness is a consciousness that makes a truth claim, he began by setting up a complete series of such shapes of consciousness in order to make the transitions between them reproducible in thought. (Whether or not the series is in fact complete can be determined by actually going through and trying to reproduce the transitions one by one.) When the philosophical consciousness of the present now looks back over its past shapes and reproduces the transitions between them in thought, it grasps what it thereby experiences as the knowledge of something that consciousness itself has not produced but merely aided in making visible. This is a self-moving, spiritual content which, although discoverable only in the thinking subject, exists independently of it and is objectively real. In this experience, consciousness apprehends the effects of a supersensible spiritual reality. In this way, it has attained the standpoint of *scientia intuitive.* (Chapters. 12-14) (p. 375)

However, in his book, "The Failures of Philosophy" which traces the rise and fall of various Western philosophical theories, Prof Stephen Gaukroger of the University of Sydney does not share Eckart Förster's optimism about the chances of transforming philosophy into a *scientia intuitiva* or a theory of everything. After Leibniz's "Monadology" where the distinction between the natural and the supernatural continued to operate, Kant, Hegel and the neo-Kantians tried to replace traditional metaphysics with a new theory of epistemology, morality, science and law by establishing the autonomy and supremacy of our cognitive powers dominated by reason divorced from the antinomies generated by empirical cognition. Schelling's, Fichte's and Hegel's move from Kant's transcendental idealism to absolute idealism was triggered by a general perception among his followers that his *Three Critiques* had failed to investigate properly "the principles and procedures underlying the acquisition of transcendental knowledge" (p.248). The Austrian philosopher, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, an avowed admirer of Kant, set out to introduce a more systematic and organic development of consciousness starting from the whole to the implicate order of the parts, by a process of deduction.

Kant's successors, Fichte and Schelling tried to bridge the Kantian gap between sensibility and understanding. "For Schelling, Fichte's subjective idealism fails to do justice to the fact of an external objective world and he developed a 'philosophy of identity' in which the subject and object emerged as products of a self-division in a primordial unity, the Absolute, and on this conception, it does not matter whether we derive the self from nature or nature from the self (p. 250). Hegel, in his "Phenomenology of Spirit" claims to have developed a

comprehensive "science of the experience of consciousness' encapsulating all the stages of empirical and rational cognition. However, Stephen Gaukroger considers that Hegel's 'Spirit', taken over from Schelling's 'Absolute' is obscure as it is not clear whether it was conceived as a kind of collective form if intelligence or some sort of Platonic world of ideas which was accessible to cognizant subjects. Gaukroger accepts that the absolute idealists tried to set up the most comprehensive system of understanding the world possible and the only similar equivalent was the Christian cosmology developed by St. Augustine. However, the search for a theory of everything continued after the collapse of Hegelian philosophy under its own weight. "With the demise of idealist philosophy, the view emerged that science could take over all the questions with which philosophy had concerned itself and could begin to explore them in an empirical way, with the aim of establishing materialism" (p. 252).

Gaukroger's conclusion is that ultimately science assimilates philosophy. However, science needs philosophy as a metatheory, without philosophy, science would run the risk of breaking down into a collection of unsystematic disciplines. Neo-Kantian philosophers like Ernst Cassirer have tried to place mythology and religion through aesthetic forms under a wide-ranging umbrella of symbolic forms with science at the pinnacle. Gottlob Frege's aspiration was to replace epistemology with logic and prove that logic underlies mathematics. Furthermore, Gaukroger points out that Frege attempted "to infer the logical structure of the world from the logical structure of thought" (p. 271). Consequently, Frege's new type of logic and his corresponding theory of meaning opened the way for Hussserl's phenomenology, on one hand, and Russell's, Wittgenstein's and Carnap's analytical philosophy, on the other.

However, the idea that language or consciousness has a logical structure which mirrors the logical structure of the world was criticised by Heidegger, John Searle and by Wittgenstein himself who abandoned his own picture of language offered in the *Tractatus* (p. 277). Dilthey and his student Heidegger questioned the supremacy of reason and the legitimacy of science. In their view, life should not be defined by all-encroaching technology and rampant consumerism but by specific cultures, worldliness, temporality, mortality, anxiety and historical contingency. They appear to be in favour of a return to Pre-Socratic philosophy or even pre-philosophical imagery (pp. 281-282). For Gaukroger, philosophy "seems to have lost its bearings"; for Eckart Förster, the future of philosophy as a science, "has only just begun". In a recent discussion we had, Förster has defined his position as being close to Gaukroger's: "Philosophy has given/is giving way to the sciences and at best functions as a meta-reflection on the procedures of the scientists. This is true, I think, if one identifies philosophy with discursive thinking, as most people do. Only if philosophy also engages in intuitive thought does it have a subject matter *sui generis* – and hence a future independent of natural sciences."

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