

**Alison Stone**

***Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism***

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Alison Stone has published an informative and provocative book covering a wide range of topics, all rooted in early nineteenth-century German attempts to think through the unity of nature and culture after Kant. On each topic she covers, Stone makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of the relevant positions; she writes lucidly about opaque texts and is careful to let the reader know why it is worth the effort to reconstruct this or that argument in detail. Her book is an excellent resource for anyone occupied with the development of post-Kantian German thought and its contemporary offshoots, or for anyone looking for historical funds to draw on in thinking about environmental ethics, gender and race.

Stone's book is not a monograph, but rather a collection of independent essays (indeed, all but one chapter consist of material previously published elsewhere, sometimes revised) advancing no single overarching argument or interpretation, although in her first chapter Stone does sketch some clusters of concerns and some through-lines that inform her approach. That introductory chapter is followed by three main parts. The first part, in five chapters, examines the concept of nature in early German Romanticism, as represented through Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Hölderlin. Stone considers how these three developed Romanticism out of post-Kantian (mainly Fichtean) Idealism, exploring their claims about the relation of nature to the 'Absolute' (the supposed unified foundation of all reality) and various persistent questions about humanity's relation to nature (Is nature knowable? Are we natural? Are we alienated from nature? and so on). The second part, in three chapters, moves on to later Idealist engagements with these same problems, as exemplified in Schelling and, most prominently, in Hegel. Stone provides an account of Hegelian *Naturphilosophie*, its relation to some contemporary philosophical debates (e.g., in environmental ethics), and its relation to some aspects of Hegel's political philosophy. The third part, again in five chapters, considers gender in Hegel's philosophy (in three chapters), Hegel's relation to colonialism (one chapter), and (in the last chapter) the Hegelian heritage of some prominent strains of contemporary philosophy of race and gender.

Although she tackles many difficult technical issues in the history of philosophy, Stone is at pains throughout to highlight links between these historical debates and contemporary philosophical, cultural and political concerns. She is aided in this effort both by her skill at laying out the debates in straightforward terms and by her ability to frame them without constant reference to the ever-growing and increasingly specialist secondary literature. The result is a book that is responsible on a scholarly level without restricting itself to an

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audience of fellow specialists. Such a book seems well-designed to carry out Stone's stated purpose of making Romantic and Idealist resources available to contemporary discourse.

To give a better sense of the flavour of Stone's strategies in pursuing this purpose, let me briefly summarise two of her arguments, both rooted in the core Romantic and Idealist question about how to understand the Absolute, and both seeking to connect this question to current debates of particular interest to readers of this journal.

The first is about how to understand the Absolute's unity. Stone draws a sharp distinction between two conceptions of the Absolute's unity, both of which take that unity to be 'organic': a vegetal conception and an animal conception. Each sort of unity regulates differently the functions of the organs or members it unifies; while animal unity assigns its members rigid, non-overlapping functions, vegetal unity allows for radical changes in those functions. To the extent that we understand political unity as itself organic, which model of organic unity we adopt matters politically: adopting the animal conception yields a relatively rigid political role for each (kind of) citizen, while adopting the vegetal one allows more political metamorphosis. Stone's interpretation here is innovative, arguing persuasively that Romanticism – in Novalis's and Schlegel's poetics – adopts the vegetal conception while Idealism – in Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* – adopts the animal one, before elaborating some political consequences of this difference. The conception of a vegetal politics sketched here deserves detailed development in future publications.

In implicit parallel with this argument for conceiving of politics naturally, Stone offers an argument for conceiving of nature politically. Her guiding question is about how best to accord nature an ethical status capable of protecting the environment from further human degradation. The core of her answer is that we accord ethical status to whatever we regard as acting freely, so that we must seek a way correctly to regard nature (or natural things) as acting freely. According to a familiar Romantic notion, nature is free because while it pursues goals intentionally, its intentions are known to be unknowable and thus known to be not causally determined (since if they were causally determined, they would be knowable). Stone argues that we should reject this view in favour of a Hegelian one according to which nature can be known to follow self-established rules, or to be autonomous. She then argues that, since Hegel himself was committed to a conception of human freedom as autonomy and to the claim that nature and natural things are in some sense autonomous, he ought to have developed an environmental ethics along these lines; because he didn't, that task now falls to us. Stone's argument here is, in broad outlines, compelling: a successful environmental ethics must find a way to demonstrate the ethical standing of nature and/or of individual natural things, and Hegel offers unique resources for conceiving of nature, including the nature revealed to us in the most advanced natural science, as in some sense autonomous.

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These are only two arguments of many Stone offers in the book, arguments whose appearances, in whole or part, in various chapters serve to unite the wide range of topics indicated by my sketch above. Like all her arguments, they are well-supported, well-thought-out, and significant interventions in contemporary debates. That said, they are not immune to criticism. Stone's interpretation of Romanticism, for instance, is perhaps still too philosophically oriented, overlooking the degree to which Romanticism's critical power comes from its being not-philosophy. She tends to marginalise the specifically literary character Romanticism exhibits even in its most philosophical moments, as do her main interlocutors; it is unfortunate that she never explicitly engages with the more literary, but still philosophically rigorous, interpretation of Romanticism originating in Walter Benjamin. She is perhaps also too quick to dismiss the links Novalis and Schlegel themselves saw between their poetics, on the one hand, and their reactionary nostalgia for medieval political forms, on the other. And when it comes to her Hegelian environmental ethics, she is perhaps too quick to assimilate *respect for* autonomy to the *constitution of* autonomy through mutual recognition. If Hegel is right in arguing that mutual recognition does not merely acknowledge a pre-existing autonomy but is constitutive of autonomy, then it is not obvious how non-human natural things can count as autonomous, insofar as it is hard to imagine how they could recognise us as autonomous, no matter how fervently we may wish to recognise autonomy in them. (What would a squirrel, or a copse of trees, have to do to count as participating in a practice of *mutual* recognition?)

But again, such criticisms cannot support a negative judgment on either the book as a whole or on its arguments in detail, and Stone no doubt has ready rejoinders to them all. She has produced an impressive volume.

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