

Reviews

Etudes critiques – Buchbesprechung

Henri Lauener, *Offene Transzendentalphilosophie*, Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2001, 216 p.

While our present intellectual habits favour piecemeal philosophical work, Henri Lauener sets out to construct something rare indeed: nothing less than “a coherent system of philosophy” (p.83), a project perhaps preposterous if undertaken by any but a few outstanding minds. The present collected papers show Lauener’s remarkable achievement in such a broad project. He does not shy away from philosophical “-isms”: Kantianism, empiricism, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism, contextualism, liberalism, etc. Let us follow the lead these terms may give and try to connect them usefully, while underlining that here they do not remain bare words, but are cashed out in detailed work in the case studies in the book. As the title of the collection makes clear, the author connects himself to a broadly conceived Kantian tradition. He inherits its anti-metaphysical stance, according to which humans are liable to think too highly of their own cognitive abilities, and need to limit their pretences to knowledge. That is the *pars destruens* in that tradition. Logical positivism, which provides Lauener with major interlocutors, especially R. Carnap, even hardened that stance. The other side of Kantianism, its *pars construens*, then claims that under precise conditions, knowledge is possible. If scepticism applies beyond the limits, no sceptical worries are left inside. Now, filling up the limited territory of knowledge, and tracing the limits themselves are two very different undertakings: we need to extend positive science, on the one hand, answer its “internal” or “factual questions”; on the other hand, we must establish the very framework for positive science through a set of “external questions” or rather “decisions”. Lauener firmly locates the latter, the methodical-constructive apparatus, in the domain of norms, and never tires of criticizing philosophical naturalism. As a transcendental philosopher, he readily resorts to a constructivist language: while the factual questions in positive science are about objects, the second-order questions, which determine how scientific (first-order) questions may be settled, stipulate the way in which objects are constructed by human intellectual practice – not given nor discovered. Lauener definitely sides with the Copernican revolution. If there is room for realism, it is strictly an internal one. So far for Kantianism. But now the drastic breaks with Kant occur. While the author of the Critiques worked with a complex psychological framework, intuitions, concepts, faculties and all, Lauener is a child of the linguistic turn in its precise form

(A. Tarski), and very much committed to a strict model-theoretic apparatus. For each language in which positive science is to be expressed, semantic values must be assigned to all non-logical elements (formulae and their constituents): the ranges of the variables that occur in the sentences of the language must be specified in the universe of discourse; a denotation must be given to the names; for the predicates, it must be specified by which objects or n -uples of objects they are satisfied, etc. Then, against Kant, who thought it his task to provide us with a stable a priori framework integrating all conceptual and methodical aspects of science, Lauener rejects what he calls fundamentalism or absolutism. He has no room for synthetic a priori judgements: scientific methods are either analytic or empirical. So he presents himself as an empiricist, albeit of a non-classical kind since he admits that observations must be theory-laden. They cannot remain independent from various sets of decisions, embedded in collective and institutional practices (e.g. p.168). Lauener inserts science and philosophy into a larger context which is human action: as humans we have aims which we critically examine, and we resort to certain means in order to realise them. Positive science thus belongs to the structured body of human activities, a basic fact to which Lauener wants to do justice. Putting these elements together, we obtain a connected triptych: we may arbitrarily assign the left panel to positive science (broadly speaking), then turn to the central philosophical (“transcendental”) panel where the principles, rules, norms of positive science are sorted out, and finally to the right panel where all various pragmatic considerations feature, reflected or not, shared or not. We can draw on this panel when we engage in the normative undertaking of philosophy. All three panels, while structurally stable, are subject to change in their contents. Therefore, philosophy has to be open, a preoccupation the author may have inherited from the philosopher of science F. Gonsseth. The book is mostly devoted, of course, to the middle panel of the triptych, but it gives a vivid understanding of the interconnections between the panels in human practice through history. Let us add that Lauener then campaigns for pluralism. Given certain interests of ours, we may as philosophers develop the conceptual apparatus appropriate for very different domains, so positive science is a split and ramified business – each time, however, in its model-theoretic setting. Lauener criticises the identification of positive science with physics, which we find e.g. in W.V. Quine. Various practical contexts invite us to produce bodies of knowledge which make sense relative to these practices. Lauener brings his pluralist insight to bear also on the philosophy of science, especially on the vexed question of theory-change in science. On this topic, he shows himself a discontinuist: scientific terms are strictly relative to their original theoretical setting, each of one positing the entities it needs in its “internal” reality. – After this broad outline of Henri Lauener’s philosophy, let us briefly consider the papers collected here, mostly published before on scattered occasions. The papers are all published in the German original, but here we give their full titles in English. The first paper, “Philosophy as Normative Activity”, is the most programmatic. It insists on the plurality of human interests and on the integration of positive science in the global structure of human action, though in a way that bears little resemblance to Davidson’s holism. In the second paper, “The Theory of Knowledge as Seen from a Relativistic Point of View”, Lauener subjects the current views on the topic of truth to searching criticism. The next paper, “Transcendental Arguments Pragmatically Relativised (Fundamental Options in Philosophy)”, explains in some detail how Kant’s central argumentative device gets transformed when transcendentalism is opened and relativised to differing practical aims. The next paper is the occasion for an examination of the Carnap-Quine controversy: “What’s the Use of the

Distinction between Analytic and Synthetic Statements ?” Lauener’s conclusions are on the side of Carnap. Of course his defence of the distinction goes hand in hand with its relativisation to contexts. He criticizes W.V. Quine’s account for containing a hidden essentialism, the assumption that analytic sentences – if we are to consider that they exist – must be analytic independently of explicit stipulations (p.15). The next two papers are devoted to topics in the philosophy of language. “To Speak about Speech” gives a criticism and redefinition of two received distinctions: tokens as opposed to types, and use as distinguished from mention. Lauener insists that these distinctions must be freed from physicalistic misunderstandings and proposes new rules for handling them. “Nomen est omen? (On the Use of Proper Names)” is close in spirit to S. Kripke’s views on proper names as rigid designators, although possible worlds, of course, are not welcome. “The Language of Fiction” introduces an account of fiction based on an ontology of fictive entities. “Remarks on the Interpretation of Gödel’s Undecidability Theorem” expresses doubts about the philosophical impact of K. Gödel’s 1931 theorem. In the following paper, “Methodological Remarks on the Philosophy of Mind”, Lauener criticizes the current mind-body identity theories and suggests sticking to a distinction of two contextually independent theoretical systems, one for the mental, the other for the neurophysiological domain. The next paper, “The Ethics of Methodological Humanism – Critical Remarks on the Relativity of Norms and on the Plurality of Systems of Morals”, gives Lauener occasion to state his ethical views, which are quite Kantian in spirit, and based on the supreme value of respect for human beings. In this piece the author makes several excellent comments on why deontic logic must be non-monotonic. The last piece, “What One Says and What One Does”, considers a value which is important in Lauener’s moral philosophy, frankness and veracity, in the context of an erudite and polemical discussion of the French writer L.-F. Céline. – The book we have been presenting has many qualities, both philosophical and literary. Each chapter makes for pleasant reading and can be understood by itself. The problems that are taken up require sophistication, and Lauener shows no lack of it, but the solutions he proposes are simple and deftly expressed in limpid German prose. Needless to say, the author is engaged in a subtle and enlightening dialogue with major contemporary philosophers. The examples are always well chosen, original and witty. The lonely footnote allows him to crack a joke that might otherwise have been lost. For all his liberalism, Lauener, of course, is a committed Aufklärer, a reader of Hume and Voltaire. This may account for one slip in this tightly thought out volume. At the beginning of the essay on fiction, Lauener gives as one example: “A Greek farmer, who has faith in the gods and declares to a traveller, that Zeus lives up there on Mount Olympus, states something false, because the name “Zeus” has no object of reference in the real world.” (p.133) This must be corrected if what precedes has to be taken seriously, because the notion of falsity which is relied upon here depends on an external conception of reference and reality. The line chosen in the book does not allow the author to take that stance. But in Lauener’s attitude – and this may be a hard problem for him –, there’s no trade-off allowed between hard-line Aufklärung and ontological liberalism. And it must be said that both of them bear witness to his exact, demanding and generous mind.

*Daniel Schulthess
Université de Neuchâtel*