**Stephen Howard, *Kant's Late Philosophy of Nature. The Opus postumum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. 78, € 19.84, ISBN 9781009031028**

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In his *Kant's Late Philosophy of Nature. The Opus postumum*, Stephen Howard engages with a specific section of Kant's unfinished last work, namely *Konvolute* X/XI, written between August 1799 and April 1800. It is well known that the general project of the *Opus postumum* was to fill the gap between the metaphysical foundations of natural science and empirical physics, in order to build a "Transition" (*Übergang*) between the two. However, as Howard lucidly showcases, even though the *form* of this task remains the same, its *content* widely shifts throughout the manuscripts. "That is," the author explains, "Kant incessantly rethinks the two poles of the Transition problem, the metaphysical foundations of natural science and physics, as well as the means through which he attempts to make the transition" (p. 24). Howard's main intention is to investigate the meaning of the term "physics" that occurs in fascicles X/XI, and why it represents a major change from the earlier drafts.

The book starts with an overview of the history of the manuscripts' reception (pp. 5-10), which Howard distinguishes in two phases. The first comprises authors like Adickes, Vaihinger, de Vleeschauwer, Lehmann and Mathieu, who all had a systematic ambition in reconstructing the last phase of Kant's thought. The second, which begins around 1970, is inaugurated by Tuschling's stance that "a systematic oriented interpretation is 'impossible'" (p. 8), and comprises scholars like Friedman, Förster, Emundts, Edwards, Hall and Thorndike. Howard's intention is to take a stand somewhere *in between* these two perspectives. He accepts Tuschling's methodological claim, i.e., that the *Opus postumum* has a *dynamic*, rather than a *static* unity (see Tuschling 1971, p. 11), but at the same time he contends that this does not prevent some sort of

systematic reconstruction of Kant's last work, which is allowed by the persistency of the *form* of the transition problem (p. 25).

After this brief historical reconstruction, Howard focuses his attention on one of the most discussed issues in the contemporary literature, the so called "gap" problem, which has taken on a specific and autonomous relevance thanks to Förster's work (see Förster 2000). This problem originates from some of Kant's private letters written in 1798, in which the philosopher notes the presence of a gap (*Lücke*) within his own system that needs to be bridged. Förster's thesis is that this problem must be completely distinguished from the "transition" question, because Kant had been discussing the latter since at least 1790, thus long before the appearance of the gap. According to Förster, the latter is to be understood as a *lack* in his critical system; precisely as an inadequacy in the Transcendental deduction in the first *Critique*. Following his reconstruction, other scholars accepted the distinction between the "transition" and the "gap" problem but had identified the latter differently: for example, as an inadequacy in Kant's General Remark to Dyamic in the *Metaphisical Principles* (Emundts 2004), or as a lack in his theory of substance in the First Analogy of Experience (Hall 2015). On the contrary, Howard contends that there is no "passage in the drafts that equates the gap that the transition seeks to bridge with a failing that Kant is proposing to rectify in his earlier philosophy" (p. 21). Even if one would accept Förster's distinction, it is far from obvious that the *Lücke* Kant wants to fill must be understood as an inconsistency in his previous doctrines. Therefore, Howard suggests conceiving the question of the gap not as an *evaluative* problem, but in a *neutral* sense. That is, not as a "something that should be present but is missing", but rather as "a space between two things, a space that is not a failing or a troublesome lack but simply a separation" (p. 20). This space lies between metaphysics and physics, which the transition must bridge. Howard's proposal is thus to set aside the relevance of the gap conceived as an inconsistency in Kant's critical doctrines to focus on the meaning of the *Übergang* problem.

As we have briefly mentioned, the author distinguishes between the *form* of the transition, which remains stable throughout the *Opus postumum*, and its *content*, which instead undergoes meaningful shifts (see p. 24). That is to say, Kant

profoundly rethinks the two poles of the transition, i.e., the metaphysical principles and physics, while he is working on his last project. Howard's aim is to examine the meaning of the *arrival* point of the transition – physics – in the context of fascicles X/XI, where the question *Was ist Physik?* is continually posed by Kant in an almost obsessive manner.

The author then mentions some previous studies on this issue (Adickes 1920, Hoppe 1969, Tuschling 1971), which nonetheless fail to provide a trustworthy and coherent account of the problem of *Physik*. They state "that physics is nothing more than an empirical science that proceeds through observation and experiment" (p. 30), thus showing some skepticism about the possibility that it can be treated as a systematic science, as Kant would like. Therefore, they think that the attempt to bridge the gap between metaphysics and physics is an impossible and useless task. On the contrary, Howard contends that in fascicles X/XI physics has little to do with a discipline that proceeds only through observations and experiments.

The question is thus how to comprehend what Kant means when he speaks of physics as a *system*. Howard notes that Kant distinguishes between two kinds of systems: the elementary system (*Elementarsystem*) and the doctrinal system (*Doctrinalsystem* or *Lehrsystem*). The first is developed mainly in the drafts written between October 1798 and May 1799, which are not surprisingly entitled *Elem. Syst.* Here Kant sets the very ambitious goal to classify a priori, according to the categories, the specific and empirical proprieties of matter – a goal, however, that will soon prove too difficult to achieve. Kant recognizes "that the notion of an empirical system is a contradiction in terms" (p. 36), and that therefore the a priori enumeration of the properties of matter is not at all possible.

In fascicles X/XI there begins thus to emerge a difference between the *Elementarsystem* and the *Lehrsystem*, which corresponds to a difference between the *objective* and *subjective* part of physics. Taking up the skepticism of the earlier drafts, Kant states that the former, which is compared to Linnean natural classification, "can never be wholly completed" (p. 37), while the latter "can (and should) be presented completely" (*ibidem*). Now, what must be noted is that physics as a *Lehrsystem* is conceived by Kant "as the doctrine of outer *and inner* sense objects" (p. 39), thus blurring the distinction between rational

physics and rational psychology established in the first *Critique* and in the *Metaphysical Foundations*. Physics is now in its very essence *physiology*, namely "a science that treats the sum total […] of not only moving forces but also *perceptions*, that is, representations accompanied with consciousness" (p. 40). What has to be classified a priori into a system are no more the specific and objective properties of matter, but rather the *perceptions* of the *subject* itself. "The doctrinal system," Howard states, "should be able to be completed because it does not treat the objective *empirical whole of appearances* […], but rather the subjective *whole of empirical appearances*" (p. 50). For this to be possible, however, one must assume not only that objects exert some sort of moving forces on the subject, but also that the subject exerts his moving forces on the objects. The classification of the actions and reactions of the subject and object in terms of moving forces should therefore correspond, in Kant's intentions, to a classification of perceptions themselves, and so to the *Lehrsystem*. This is how, according to fascicles X/XI, Kant seeks to accomplish his ambitious task: to determine in advance not just the form, but also the *content* of experience, and so to bridge the gap between metaphysics and physics. As Howard writes, this method "gives Kant a way to conceive of empirical representations as at once made a priori by the subject and yet given" (p. 45).

After a comparison of his proposal with those mutually opposed of Hoppe and Mathieu regarding the anticipation of experience (pp. 45-48), Howard briefly analyzes the relation between fascicles X/XI and the latest drafts, fascicle I. The author's thesis is that a strong similarity can be traced between the concept of the *Lehrsystem* and that of *Weltsystem*, developed in the last fascicles. Both are indeed concepts of the absolute whole of appearances, but with a fundamental difference: whereas the cognitive faculty appointed to the production of the *Lehrsystem* is the understanding, the faculty assigned to the *Weltsystem* is reason. "Fascicles X/XI and fascicle I," thus concludes Howard, "are therefore two perspectives, those of understanding and of reason, on the problem of the systematic unification of the moving forces of matter and the subject's perceptions" (p. 52).

In his Conclusion (pp. 52-55) Howard, despite recognizing the incompleteness of Kant's transition project, acknowledges some similarities between the latter and some problems typical

of late-neo-Kantian and early logical empiricist philosophers. In particular, he traces a relation between Kant's attempt to give empirical physics some elements that can be determined a priori and Reichenbach's claim "that this sense of the a priori refer[s] not to eternal and unchanging conditions but to a framework that constitutes the object of scientific knowledge" (p. 53).

The book presents finally an Appendix (pp. 56-63) in which the author gives some useful suggestions for reading a fragmentary text such as the *Opus postumum*, as well as providing a valuable updated table on the dating of the fascicles.

The main merit of Howard's text surely consists in drawing attention to the change undergone by the concept of "physics" over the course of the manuscripts, as well as in highlighting the radical difference between *Elementarsystem* and *Lehrsystem*, which no commentator had ever adequately noted. In doing so, I think the author correctly emphasized the dynamic nature of the *Opus postumum*, which certainly cannot be considered as an accomplished and coherent work in all of its parts. However, I would like to point out two issues that could perhaps have received more clarifications. The first concerns the question of the relation between the "gap" and the "transition" problems. I totally agree with Howard's claim that the former is unlikely to refer to a failure in Kant's previous doctrine, and that therefore it should not play a prominent role in the debate about Kant's last project. As I understand it, Howard seems to suggest that an identification between the two questions is possible, and indeed desirable, to focus solely on the transition problem and thus on the question of the systematicity of physics. He therefore writes that "the gap can still be […] the new task of the transition from the metaphysical foundations to physics" (p. 22). However, at the same time he finds it "conceivable that, for Kant, the transition project and the problem of the gap in his earlier philosophy are separate issues that struck him at different times" (*ibidem*), referring to what the philosopher wrote in private letters and thus supporting Förster's separation of the issues. I believe, nonetheless, that it is complicated to maintain both alternatives: either one accepts Förster's division, and so assigns an independent and separate value to the gap problem – a problem that should thus also be worthy of interest – or one identifies the two issues as one,

conceiving the gap as the distance between metaphysics and physics that the transition is supposed to bridge.

My second concern is much broader than the previous, but it does not indicate a fault in Howard's text. Rather, it could be seen as a suggestion to supplement his reading of fascicles X/XI. These drafts do in fact occupy a central place in the context of the Kantian project, between the demonstration of the existence of the ether of *Übergang 1-14* and the *Selbstsetzunglehre* of the VII fascicle, which represent perhaps the two main issues in the manuscripts, but which are both rarely mentioned in Howard's text. The author focuses on this topic in an earlier contribution (Howard 2019), where, however, no specific analysis of the evolution of the problem of physics was yet made. I believe it might be helpful to investigate how, on the one hand, the demonstration of the ether may have led to the new formulation of physics, and on the other, how this formulation is intertwined with the doctrine of self-positing of the subject.

Notwithstanding, Howard's study remains an essential contribution for scholars wishing to approach, or explore further, the intricate and involved Kantian manuscripts.

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