HENRI LAUENER’S OPEN TRANSCENDENTALISM

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1. Henri Lauener’s manner of philosophizing

Over the last twenty-five years, Henri Lauener has published several books and quite a few papers. In this rich philosophical production, we shall concentrate on the papers in which he puts forward his own philosophical views. Even if he is not a philosopher about philosophers in the way G.E. Moore was, it is true that the starting point of Lauener’s thought is often to be found in philosophical theses widely debated today, such as Quine’s naturalism and holism, Carnap’s reduction of ontological questions to matters of practical decision or Kripke’s semantics of modal operators. Lauener addresses the most central questions discussed in contemporary philosophy. He typically starts from the most radical version of a solution, shows its weaknesses and spells out his own answer. If we tie up the threads of his numerous discussions of Kant’s, Gonseth’s, Quine’s and Carnap’s views, a coherent picture emerges which presents a very homogeneous and well-articulated philosophical approach that he calls “Open transcendentalism”. This is a challenging philosophical framework in which the author takes a stance on major issues of contemporary philosophy. Lauener is constantly entertaining an intense intellectual dialogue with the authors mentioned above and with some others. He puts forward forceful objections and raises intriguing questions. The solutions he offers very often consist in a kind of “Aufhebung”. Lauener is by no means an eclectic philosopher construing his own views by compromising on those of others. Yet he takes advantage of recent advances and tries to make a step forward very much the way scientists do. We shall focus here on a few important philosophical problems which Lauener has dealt with successfully. By saying this we do not mean that he has provided
“the final solution”, but that he has achieved some result which will become the starting point for the next philosophical move.

2. Common sense, Science, Philosophy

Quite a few of the major philosophers of today in the Anglo-Saxon world subscribe to a brand of naturalism which has its roots in Hobbes’ philosophy and has been revived in contemporary philosophy by Dewey, Smart and others. Quine is one of the proponents of this philosophy. He holds that science is educated common sense and sees philosophy as an integral part of science. He describes the inquiry into what there is as a common concern of philosophers and other writers of non-fictional prose. According to Quine, the difference between philosophy and science lies in the generality of the categories used by philosophers: while scientists ask questions as, e.g., “Is there an infinite number of prime numbers?”, philosophers ask more general questions like “Are there numbers?”. The claim that philosophy is a chapter of science also extends, in Quine’s opinion, to epistemology and especially to the inquiry into how we acquire knowledge, a research area for which Quine coined the expression “naturalized epistemology”.

Naturalized epistemology was unquestionably a healthy reaction to the rather restrictive view of epistemology that prevailed for a while in the Vienna Circle, namely the idea that philosophical investigation into knowledge should confine itself to the study of the language of science. But Lauener’s open transcendentalism is at cross purposes with naturalized epistemology. He urges the epistemologist to conceive of his discipline as “eine metawissenschaftliche oder methodologische Tätigkeit..., die es nicht so sehr mit Sachfragen als vielmehr mit transzendentalen, d.h. in einem genauer zu bestimmenden Sinne normativen Fragen zu tun hat” (Lauener 1987, 24).

3. Open Transcendentalism

Lauener shares the received opinion that it is hopeless to search for an ultimate foundation of science. Just as much as Quine, he would