Stanley Jaki and the Errors of Hegelian Idealism

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Jaki on the history of science

The science-faith interaction represents Stanley L. Jaki's main area of investigation[1]. He achieved enormous results in this topic, the confirmation of Duhem's view on the Christian origin of science being one. Jaki and Duhem shared the idea, according to which the theory of impetus, developed in the first half of the Fourteenth Century by the Scholastic natural philosopher Jean Buridan, can be deemed as the first formulation of the principle of inertia, to be considered the fundamental law of modern physics, which was definitely defined during the age of the Scientific Revolution. In Jaki's mind only in the Christian context the

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[1] R. Pascual – A. Colombo (eds), *Commemorazione di padre Stanley L. Jaki nel primo anniversario della sua morte*, IF Press, Roma 2014.

basic laws of the motion of bodies were discovered. This achievement is due to an innovative way to see the natural reality. In the Christian perspective, indeed, nature is not a pantheist and finalistic structure, regulated by divine forces. In other words, the dogma of the creation out of nothing has been essential to adopt a quantitative and mechanistic approach to the investigation of phenomena. The universe, being a creation by the Supreme Logos, is not a divine entity, but it is provided with an inner rationality forming part of the rationality of revelation. The metaphor of the book, which is typical of Christian theology, just portrays the intelligibility of the world as a creation by the Word. The main protagonists of the Scientific Revolution defined the universe as a book, written in mathematical characters, and that is a meaningful instance of the influence exerted by Christian theology on the origin of exact science.

> Philosophy is written in this great book which is continually open before our eyes - I mean the universe -, but before we can understand it we need to learn the language and recognize the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a word of what it says. Without these, it is just wandering aimlessly in a baffling maze[2].

In all of his works, Jaki highlighted his own realistic worldview. The human mind presupposes the existence of a universe, that is a whole reality, whose working is reducible to common basic physical properties. The world is a creature, whose phenomena depend on their causal interaction and the existence of universal laws established by God in the moment of creation. Thus, the reality of the universe is the only possible area for a philosophy, which is founded upon an objective world and represents the only factor allowing the mathematical reductionism of science. Moreover, the scientific discourse consists of the quantitative description of natural laws, and just that peculiarity determines its

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[2] G. Galilei, *Selected Writings*, new translations by William R. Shea and Mark Davie, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, 115.

distinctive feature and the reason of its exactness. The consequence of this principle lies in the impossibility of conceiving a real opposition between science and faith, the last being rooted in the eschatological dimension of revelation. The occurrence of some historical clashes between those disciplines, the Galileo case being one, does not justify the statement of a sharp contrast:

> "Historical instances of clashes between the two have been invariably rooted in an oversight of the restriction of scientific truth to numbers and of the total irrelevance of numbers as parts of measurements to religious truth or dogma. The existence of God in one nature and three Persons may be numerical, but has nothing in common with measurements"[3].

The specificity of both science and faith rejects any possibility of concordism too. The quantitative account of phenomena is not within the goals of the Holy Texts. Therefore, on one side Jaki highlighted the error made by researchers using science to demonstrate the insubstantiality of faith. On the other side, however, another mistake consists in believing that the Bible includes some scientific meanings. In the long history of the science-faith relationship, the above mentioned Galileo affair is probably the clearest instance of an erroneous approach to both science and faith, as the sole reason of Galilei's condemnation.

> The reason was the failure of Galileo and his ecclesiastical judges to see and ponder in its enormous weight the difference between numbers and all other words. Had this been done by Galileo he would have given a different twist to his concern to save the Church from ignoring Copernicus. His ecclesiastical judges might also have perceived what was really wrong with Aristotle's science[4].

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[3] S.L. Jaki, *The mirage of conflict between science and religion*, Real View Books, New Hope 2009, pp. vii-viii.

[4] *Ibidem*, 57.

In the contemporary cultural context, Genesis 1 represents another example of an erroneous application of scientific models to theological constructs:

> Two millennia of interpretations of Genesis 1 have certainly proved that all those eternal truths can be compromised by concordism. For as man's knowledge of the physical world, that is, his science, grows by leaps and bounds, the discordance between the world-making of Genesis 1 (if it taught world-making at all) and scientific cosmogenesis will appear ever more enormous. All those who tried to reconcile the two as variations on the same theme contributed, in spite of their best intentions, to the discrediting of those eternal truths[5].

The Christian faith announces the creation of the universe out of nothing and that characteristic goes much beyond the dominion of science, as the 'nothing' is not a scientific concept. In his major works, Jaki laid stress on the failure of scientific theories aiming at demonstrating the emergence of matter. They always culminate in science-fiction accounts abandoning a correct scientific approach to phenomena.

Christian monotheism has played a key role for the origin of science in the Western context. Despite the fact that creation out of nothing is supported also by Jewish and Islamic religions, only in the Christian cultural milieu the basic laws of the motion of bodies were formulated. The reason of this historical evidence, indeed, consists in the Trinitarian dogma of the Christian faith announcing Christ as the Only Begotten, namely the only reality generated by the Father. Therefore, the divine consubstantiality between Father and Son rejected any possible view of the universe as the result of an emanative process. The lack of the dogma of creation out of nothing, and, of an Only Begotten in Judaism and Islam, brought about that historical phenomenon Jaki calls 'the stillbirths of science'[6]. The ancient Eastern or Egyptian civilizations, despite having preceded the Christian culture by many centuries and

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[5] S.L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the ages*, Real View Books, Royal Oak 1998, 259.

[6] S.L. Jaki, *The Savior of Science*, Wm B. Eersmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 2000, 9-48.

achieved a high technological level, failed to formulate the basic laws of motion. As regards to Islam, that inability occurred although Muslim thinkers had at their disposal the Greek scientific and philosophical texts a couple of centuries before their diffusion in the Christian Europe.

> All educated persons of classical antiquity could sense blasphemy in the special status which John accorded to Christ by calling him the 'only son', or *monogenes* (Jn 1: 18). The latter term, soon to be further hallowed by ecclesial usage, was one which in classical paganism emphatically denoted the universe (kosmos) as the only-begotten emanation from the divine principle […] Educated converts to Christianity had to demote in their thinking the universe from a divine rank to the rank of a mere creature[7].

The gap separating Jaki's theistic worldview, where phenomena and their mutual relations depend on God as a transcendent ontological entity, from Hegelian staking everything on the self-reflection of mind, is unbridgeable. Hegel's philosophy can be evaluated as the culmination of Kantian reflective thought, which reduced the divinity to an unknowable entity or a moral corollary. Kant's criticism of the three chief assumption of the Christian metaphysics, namely God, soul, and universe, just discredited the exactness of science. The philosopher of Königsberg led his followers into the belief that the universe is only a product of the metaphysical reason. Kantian philosophers begin "with ideas and, as all the history of modern philosophy shows, never get to reality"[8]. Kant, indeed, argued

> over the 600 pages of a laborious book that causality is a necessary imposition of a category of reason on the phenomena by which he meant sensory impressions[9].

In Hegel's perspective, the Absolute is not a transcendent cause, independent of its natural manifestation. His philosophy affirms the

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[7] S.L. Jaki, *Bible and Science*, Christendom Press, Front Royal 1996, 70-71.
[8] S.L. Jaki, *Chesterton: a seer of science*, Real View Books, Pinckney 2001, 19.
[9] S.L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1980, 95.

whole of reality as a totality, by thinking world and mind together, as the Spirit is the protagonist of a total process completing a dialectical path, as a struggle of opposites in pursuit of its self-consciousness and manifestation. The rational is the real, and the real is the rational; so, nature and spirit arise as integral and necessary parts within this dialectical process, exhibiting a total lack of stability, in which causality is reduced to a mere logical relation. This immanent worldview led Jaki to highlight its negativity in the cosmological and moral dominions, as two interrelated dimensions. In both science and ethics, Hegelianism prevents humanity from a correct approach to nature.

Jaki on Hegelian worldview

The Hegelian construction, being an all-encompassing view, has so much influenced entire generations of philosophers and scholars, that they

> will find novel the emphasis on the anti-scientific strain of Renaissance and Hegelism (right and left) both saturated with the idea of eternal returns[10].

In Jaki's opinion, the Hegelian conception of every finite being in relationship with everything else within the absolute evolving universal consciousness, can only bring about a disorderly worldview ignoring the physical details, namely the basic elements of scientific exactness.

> As to Hegel, his system, which aimed at unfolding the Absolute mind, only led to a most arbitrary handling of material processes[11].

In what can be considered the most 'philosophical' of his works, Jaki expressed the same meaning with the following words:

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[10] S.L. Jaki, *Science and Creation. From eternal cycles to an oscillating universe*, Real View Books, New Hope 2016, xiv.

[11] S.L. Jaki, *Questions on science and religion*, Real View Books 2004, 110.

> Others, such as Hegel, turned with fury on good science, which they were unable to disentangle from its pseudo-philosophical cocoon spun in part by leading scientists[12].

More in detail, Jaki refers to Hegel's Dissertatio Philosophica de Orbitis Planetarum as an instance of a prejudicial work, aiming at providing a criticism of Newton and showing a preference for Keplerian astronomy:

> Already in his first publication from 1801, an essay on the planetary system, he legislated that the number of planets could only be six because nature had to obey a Pythagorean rule. He declared insane the search for a planet between Mars and Jupiter, whose fragments were found when a year or two later the first asteroid was detected by Olbers. The essay deserved to be branded as a '*monumentum insaniae saeculi decimi noni*', the words which the Duke Ernst von Gotha attached to the copy he sent to the astronomer F X. von Zach[13].

It was an attempt to include the laws of the motion of planets in a broader philosophical system excluding mathematical technicalities:

> Only those with no knowledge of what had happened in physics could be overawed by Hegel's claim that the elliptical orbit of planets necessarily followed from his dialectic. This trick, aimed at circumventing Newton, was part of the encyclopaedic mess which Hegel's idea of the Absolute made of physics and other branches of experimental science[14].

The origin of modern science implied the shift from the Aristotelian qualitative vision to a purely quantitative view of the universe, and that is the reason of Jaki's crushing remarks about Hegel's conception:

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[12] S.L. Jaki, *Means to message. A treatise on truth*, Wm Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids 1999, cit., 3.

[13] S.L. Jaki, *The impassable divide between science and religion*, Real View Books, New Hope 2008, 77.

[14] S.L. Jaki, *Means to message*, 18.

> Just as Duhem defended thereby the autonomy of physics, he held high, by the same stroke, the full legitimacy of metaphysics. If anything was alien to his precise thinking, it was Hegel's illusion about a direct conceptual transition from quantities to qualities (ontological considerations and ethical values) and back again[15].

Despite the differences between Hegelian and Aristotelian natural philosophies, just his own pantheist approach led the German thinker to ignore the ontological dimension of Aristotle's universe.

> Others, such as Hegel and some Hegelians, took only the volitional aspects of Aristotle's physics, ignoring all his ontology[16].

In addition to his realistic metaphysics, another considerable merit of Aristotle consists in having highlighted the peculiarity of the category of quantity:

> Hegel's discomfiture was all the more farcical because he tried to reinstate in honor Aristotle, who, as will be seen, was the first to suggest the only solid reason about that impassability as he noted that only about numbers it is not possible to predicate the phrase, 'more or less'[17].

Even a prominent scientist, such as Descartes, is included in Jaki's constructive criticism.

> Protagonists of rationalism, such as Descartes, and of idealism, such as Kant and Hegel, offered vagaries whenever they turned their discourse to the material world and the science about it. Their dismal performance in that respect stemmed from the fact that they had taken some pleasing notions for their starting point. With Descartes it was extension, with Hegel polarity[18].

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[15] S.L. Jaki, *Bible and Science*, 127.
[16] S.L. Jaki, *Means to message*, 44.
[17] S.L. Jaki, *The impassable divide*, 7.
[18] S.L. Jaki, *Questions on science*, 110.

Modern science, as the history of scientific thought clearly testifies, has overcome any kind of pantheistic conception. Jaki, such as Duhem had done in the early Twentieth Century, attaches a lot of importance to the 1277 Parisian condemnation of 219 theses, most of which originated from Averroist philosophy[19]. That is why the idea of 'nothing' has been an essential element for the origin of the scientific enterprise.

> Strange as it may appear, the idea of nothing remains an indispensable part of a genuine religious outlook, whereas it causes endless discomfort to pantheists of all sorts, whether philosophers of old, such as Aristotle, or of recent vintage, such as Hegel[20].

The Hegelian Spirit, as an all-encompassing whole, able to actualize the finite existence of single beings, can be seen as another pantheist worldview; in other words, it is a conception of the world as a huge organism, whose main supporters used philosophy to hide their own lack of knowledge about scientific matters:

> As to pantheists, they were around before the twentieth century, but hardly any of them was a scientist of note. Most pantheists held very antiscientific views. Suffice it to think of Hegel, of Schelling, of Fichte, and Kant himself—all of whom provided ample evidence of what happens when one's pantheism is used, especially with no training in science, to pontificate on science. Two centuries earlier Fludd and especially Giordano Bruno provided shocking evidence of that venture[21].

Hegelian dialectic was turned by Marxist philosophers into a materialistic dialectic, whose sharp one-way vision not only excludes any role played by the Creator, but it is also the main limit preventing Marxists from approaching a correct understanding of natural phenomena. The eternity of matter is just among those Marxist tenets covering their eyes before the scientific truth. The example of entropy in

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[19] A. Hyman – J. Walsh (eds), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages. The Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1973, 582-592.

[20] S.L. Jaki, *The impassable divide*, 70.

[21] S.L. Jaki, *Questions on science*, 32.

the following passage, is only one of the historical evidences provided by Jaki.

> In Engels' *Dialectic of Nature* numerous are the references to 'good old Hegel', as well as denunciations of the first formulators, such as Kelvin and Clausius, of the law of entropy. The law was clearly incompatible with the claim of the Hegelian Left that matter was eternal[22].

Jaki on the ethical outcomes of Hegel's thought

Although Jaki has given priority to the question of the origin of science, he did not disregard the ethical dimension of scientific achievements and philosophical arrangements. That is the reason why, negative ethical consequences can be drawn from Hegelian thought.

> Hegel tried to escape this prospect by claiming that qualities control quantities. In reverse, this also meant […] that if one piles quantities upon quantities one ends up with qualities. In both cases the results for science were disastrous, to say nothing about other cultural disasters[23].

The adoption of a limitless science should recall the necessity of a reliable inner morality for humans. The idea of the necessary harmony between personal will and society, leads to the prevailing view that ethical norms are subjective and conditioned by social trends.

> Another reaction was to sublimate numbers in the mould of Hegelian dialectic, the radical form of subjectivism bequeathed on Western thought by Kant[24].

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[22] S.L. Jaki, *The impassable divide*, 79.
[23] S.L. Jaki, *Lectures in the Vatican gardens*, Real View Books, New Hope, 2009, 135.
[24] S.L. Jaki, *The impassable divide*, 4.

Thus, according to Jaki, similarly to the other aspects of human knowledge, also Idealistic ethical thought continued the way opened by Kant who believed in the practical reason as the only means to reach the universe, in addition to the soul and God. The road specified by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel,

> obeyed, as had to be the case with great thinkers, the inner logic of initial presuppositions. They brought out only more strongly the utter subjectivity of a mind isolated by Kant from external reality[25].

So, even in the ethical sphere we can recognize a negative influence exerted by the pantheistic view held by idealistic philosophers:

> common to their thinking was a theological orientation with distinctly pantheistic colouring, and this also meant a heavy emphasis on the priority of subjective consciousness over the external world[26].

The idea of an inevitable progress through the ages as a basic presupposition, is the source to legitimize any sort of human behaviour. Subjectivism shares with naturalism the will to accommodate natural desires and needs; in sum, that is the triumph of the spectre of relativism. Arbitrariness, as an outcome of this view, is typical not only of natural philosophy, as it involves the meaning of knowledge as a whole. Hegel, indeed,

> expressed his belief in the fundamental nature of circular patterns whether writing about logic, philosophy of law, history of philosophy, or theology. He defined the essential point to be observed by science as the circular return of the whole into itself where the first is the last and the last is the first. This he explicitly contrasted with the concept of an absolutely given beginning. The Hegelian version of exact science illustrates only too well the morass of arbitrariness which seems to be generated when the pattern

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[25] S.L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, 95.
[26] S.L. Jaki, *Science and creation*, 305.

> of perennial circularity is accepted as the supreme framework of thought and existence[27].

It would be very difficult to enlist all the destructive outcomes of this kind of moral philosophy. As a matter of fact, it is possible to see in the eternal circularity of the world a common ground for Hegelianism, and an extremist ideology such as Nazism. The idealistic subordination of the individuals to the purposes of society, lays the ground to the exaltation of a dictatorship as a necessary manifestation of a collective spirit. The conviction of the primacy of German culture and identity, indeed, was integral part of the Hegelian theory of the state.

> If one is to place *Naturphilosophie* within the trends generated by German Idealism it undoubtedly should be grouped with the ones forming the so-called Hegelian right. It was no coincidence that *Naturphilosophie* saw a strong revival a century or so later among the exponents of Nazi ideology. Nor was the swastika chosen without full recognition of the fact that throughout classical antiquity it served as the chief symbol of eternal recurrence. What occurred on the Hegelian right also evidenced itself in virtue of an inner logic on the Hegelian left. There, too, scientific sanity became a principal victim of willfully posited principles[28].

Moreover, one of the most criticized Hegelian views consists in the necessity of the historical process leading humanity towards the Germanic world, as the phase of the fulfilment of personal freedom in the wider dimension of the state. Even in this case, arbitrariness and lack of precision represent the basic elements resulting from an "*a priori* attitude toward history that runs through German idealism from Kant to Hegel and beyond"[29].

Notwithstanding the significant differences existing among various philosophical trends, Jaki has been able to find some common errors in them.

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[27] *Ibidem*, 309-310.
[28] *Ibidem*, 311.
[29] S.L. Jaki, *The Savior of Science*, 86.

> Of course, if one's inspiration is distinctly Marxist, that is crypto-Hegelian, as admitted by leading exponents of liberation theology, the blindness to the obvious in the Bible or elsewhere is a foregone conclusion. Hegel's is such a great light that it can only blind[30].

The purely human origin of Christian values forms part of those common errors, culminating in that materialist view, which has affected the European way of life in the last centuries:

> The hostility of institutionalized Marxism is, in Europe at least, a thing of the past. But in the same Europe fully alive is the main purpose of the leaders of the French Enlightenment and German idealism. Its protagonists felt that the best elements of the Christian past were purely human, that is natural, and that they were to be retained as much as possible. Such is the origin of the 'religion laique', which was introduced in French public education after the French Revolution and was still a part of that education until very recently. In Germany it produced Liberal Protestantism, the kind of religion embodied, for instance, in Bismarck, who carefully avoided taking part in Lutheran celebrations of the Lord's Supper. The essence of both the French and German varieties of this new religion is Christianity minus Christ. Or whenever Christ is included, he is included only as a man but never as a Savior[31].

All in all, only realism provides humans with a solid ground, upon which one can believe in universal ethical tenets.

> Severed from those grounds, ethics becomes purely subjective and relative. The radical relativism of all moral tenets then inescapably follows[32].

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[30] S.L. Jaki, *The ethical foundations of bioethics*, Real View Books, Port Huron 2007, 129.

[31] *Ibidem*, 104.

[32] S.L. Jaki, *Means to Message*, 161.

Conclusions

Jaki's view on science and philosophy is grounded upon realism, where philosophy starts with objects and goes on recognizing other irreducible aspects of the human condition in the world. The belief in the Hegelian *geist* as the ultimate immanent reality, gradually coming to full self-consciousness, is far from a correct scientific understanding of nature. The organic unity of the universe represents a nonsensical re-proposition of a pantheist world. The existence of finite beings as only objects-for-consciousness, and the denial of their objective reality, implies the abandonment of the true conditions for scientific investigation. So, from an epistemological point of view, Jaki's criticism of Hegelian thought proves to be very effective. The incompatibility between Hegel's natural philosophy and the achievements of modern science, based on matter as something unconscious and non-purposive, is a clear evidence.

As regards to ethics, though Hegel believed in the freedom of individuals in the unity of the state, and tried to counter an individualistic society, his view has prompted a relativistic and materialistic trend, where subjectivism has taken the leading role.

Summary: Stanley L. Jaki (1924-1929) can be considered a leading scholar in the area of the science-faith relationship. The Christian origin of science, an 'impassable divide' between the realms of science and religion, and a realistic worldview, form part of his very original thought. In this paper, Jaki's opposition towards Hegelian idealism is highlighted. In his main works, Jaki expressed a strong criticism of Hegel's panlogism. The absence of a Creator, the presence of an all-encompassing spirit, and a very superficial knowledge of scientific phenomena, make Hegel's natural philosophy inadequate. Moreover, Hegelian thought has brought about negative effects in the ethical dimension too.

Keywords: Stanley Jaki, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, science and faith, Christian origin of science, Christian realism, Christian ethics.

Sommario: Stanley L. Jaki (1924-1929) può essere considerato uno dei maggiori studiosi nell'ambito della relazione tra scienza e fede. L'origine cristiana della scienza, una "divisione

invalicabile" tra i regni della scienza e della religione, e una visione del mondo realistica, fanno parte del suo pensiero originale. In questo articolo viene evidenziata l'opposizione di Jaki all'idealismo hegeliano. Nelle sue opere principali, Jaki ha espresso una forte critica al panlogismo di Hegel. L'assenza di un Creatore, la presenza di uno spirito onnicomprensivo e una conoscenza molto superficiale dei fenomeni scientifici, rendono la filosofia naturale di Hegel inadeguata. Inoltre, il pensiero hegeliano ha prodotto effetti negativi anche nella dimensione etica.

Parole chiave: Stanley Jaki, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, scienza e fede, origini cristiane della scienza, realismo cristiano, etica cristiana.