

Animals We Eat and Animals We Care for: Hegel's Ambiguous Notion of the Animal as Soul



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Abstract: There is a fundamental contradiction in most people's behaviour towards animals. On certain occasions, we pet, nurture, name and even talk to them. On other occasions, we put up with or even endorse killing and eating them. While this contradiction takes on a particular shape in times of modern slaughterhouses, petting zoos and pet culture, the contradiction itself is not modern at all. The ancient Chinese Confucian classic *Mencius* already speaks of the noble person who cultivates compassion while staying out of the kitchen (where animals are butchered). Modern philosophy begins with Descartes' firm proposal of the animal machine, that is, of animal life as natural automaton or mechanism. By contrast, Hegel conceives of the animal as soul and the highest articulation of self-determination in nature. Yet Hegel's position is ambiguous: he provides everything one needs to acknowledge animal subjectivity but does not propose any dignity of the animal. Drawing mostly from the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature* along with his discussion of Descartes in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, I examine Hegel's account of animal subjectivity. I conclude by pondering why Hegel, nevertheless, does not attribute any dignity to the animal.

Keywords: Hegel; Descartes; animal; soul; subjectivity.

I. Introduction

There is a fundamental contradiction in most people's behaviour towards animals. I argue that Hegel's conception of animal life does not resolve this contradiction but, rather, reiterates it in conceiving of the animal as infinitely different from mere matter, on the one hand, and infinitely different from us, on the other. Thereby, he rejects both mechanical philosophy as proposed by Descartes, according to which nature is a mere resource for us, and deep ecology as proposed by Arne Naess, according to which everything in nature has moral worth. After considering our contradictory relationship towards animal life, I proceed by first examining Hegel's account of animal subjectivity, drawing mostly from the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature* along with his critique of Descartes' in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. I then ponder why Hegel does not attribute any dignity to the animal, even though he conceives of the animal as the realised concept and soul.

II. The Contradiction

Japan has recently become a country in which there are more pets than children. On the streets of Tokyo, one finds dogs and cats being pushed around in a stroller and dressed in socks or diapers. There are dog schools and cat cafés; there are hotels, barbershops and massage parlours serving one's animal companion. Notably, it is not rare to see people, after petting and marvelling in one of those animal cafés that are popular in East Asia, especially among the young, to have grilled meat later that day. This is just a particularly apparent example of the contradictory relationship that humans have with animals worldwide.

The contradiction does not just consist in the fact that we are more inclined to ascribe subjectivity to certain animal species than to others. Rather, the contradiction appears even with regards to the same animal species. We seem to have a very different understanding of the animal when approaching a calf in a petting zoo or on the edge of a field than when ordering a steak. Of course, in industrialised countries, the butchering of animals is for the most part outsourced into slaughterhouses on the outskirts of habitation and thus intentionally hidden from us. Yet, even though unaware of all the details, most of us certainly know of and put up with the meat industry feeding us and often our pets.

The contradiction between an encounter with an animal that deserves our attention, care and wonder and an encounter with an animal that is a mere resource may take on a particular shape in times of modern slaughterhouses, petting zoos and pet culture. Yet, the contradiction itself is not modern at all. The ancient Chinese Confucian classic *Mencius* already speaks of the noble person who cultivates compassion while staying out of the kitchen (where animals are butchered). Responding to a king who out of compassion decided to spare the trembling ox he has seen and instead to sacrifice a sheep he has not seen, Mencius says:

There is no harm in this. This was after all the working of humaneness – a matter of having seen the ox but not the sheep. This is the way of the noble person in regard to animals: if he sees them alive, then he cannot bear to see them die, and if he hears their cries, then he cannot bear to eat their flesh. And so the noble person stays far away from the kitchen (*Mencius* 2009, 1A7).

Mencius, instead of seeking to solve the contradiction, rather affirms it. This contrasts with the deep ecologist Arne Naess, for instance. For Naess, contradictions in our fundamental convictions or form of life cause instability and suffering in us (Naess 1989). The harmful contradiction would go away if we became die-hard Cartesians who think of everything in nature as mere matter and a possible resource for our use. Likewise, as Naess prefers, it would disappear if we became panpsychists or animists and attributed mental qualities and moral worth to everything that exists (Hampe 2013, 62–64)¹. This

¹ Later, panpsychism was influentially reintroduced to philosophy by David Chalmers' monograph *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Chalmers 1996). For panpsychism in post-Hegelian discourse in the 19th century, see Nelson (Nelson 2023).

line of thought would, however, entail that we must overcome the contradiction not because of the infinite value of the animal itself but to relieve ourselves of the instability and suffering the contradiction causes. Yet this, potentially, conflicts with the recognition of “[t]he value of non-human life forms [as] independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes” (Naess 1989, 29).

As Michael Hampe points out, the project of deep ecology would have us valorise socially our personal everyday experiences, in which we encounter animals as endowed with subjectivity; we would do this despite the anecdotal character of such experiences, in opposition to the objectifying tendency of modern scientific culture that equates justification with repeatability (Hampe 2013, 57). The contradiction is not between an encounter with animals as conceived in objectifying scientific experiment and an encounter with animals as those same beings with the additional feature of subjectivity. Rather, experiencing animals as endowed with subjectivity means to experience different beings, as it were, and, hence, to live a different life with such beings (Naess 1989, 60–61). In this sense, the question of animal subjectivity bears not on some further feature but on the very definition of the animal.

The problem with definitory determinations, however, is that they do not lend themselves to argument. Whereas ordinary empirical judgments like ‘it is raining’ maintain an identical meaning irrespective of their truth, definitory determinations like the acknowledgment of animal subjectivity entirely change the meaning of the entity in question. Someone who defends a strict anthropological gap and someone who denies it usually differ not just in their conclusions about what sort of being the animal is but already in their premises. They speak of different entities, and they, therefore, find it hard to speak to each other. This is not surprising, for the premises must already speak of the same beings as the conclusion in order to be premises on which that conclusion is based. Naess is fully aware of this problem:

I am not very much interested in ethics or morals. I’m interested in how we experience the world (...). If deep ecology is deep it must relate to our fundamental beliefs, not just to ethics. Ethics follow from how we experience the world. If you articulate your experience then it can be a philosophy or religion (Naess 1989, 20).

In contrast to “shallow” ecology, Naess’ deep ecology does not engage in ethical debate. He therefore refrains from resorting to ethical arguments, principles or virtues. What Naess is interested in are the ontologies beneath our ethical arguments. His project is philosophically much more ambitious than applied ethics. Deep ecology seeks to change our form of life by tackling the ontologies underlying our commitments, be they explicit or implicit.

Hampe argues that philosophical projects such as deep ecology on their own, ultimately, fail in instigating change. While he sympathizes with Naess’ position, he argues with Richard Rorty that it was, first and foremost, novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

or *Les Misérables* that instigated moral progress by expressing narratively an unheard-of perspective but not a philosophical theory, be it panpsychism or materialism (Hampe 2013, 72–75). For Rorty, “[s]uch books help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel” (Rorty 1989, 141).

Interestingly, the abstinence from ethical argument by Naess and Hampe is shared by Hegel who is notoriously critical of any mere ‘ought’ that is detached from the actual. Yet, in contrast to Naess, Hegel does not resort to ontologies grounded in our everyday experience; in contrast to Hampe and Rorty, he does not resort to narration. Instead, for Hegel, the issue of animal subjectivity is conceptual: “Underlying the various orders and structures of the animals lies the general type of the animal determined by the concept (...). The concept of the animal has the concept itself as its essence, because it is the actuality of the idea of life” (Hegel 1990, § 292). Likewise, to Hegel, the anthropological gap, the way in which self-conscious human beings differ from the animal, is conceptual.

Hegel would agree with Naess that animal subjectivity is not just another feature of an already determined entity. In this sense, both Hegel and Naess deny that the question can be decided by gathering additional empirical data about a ready-made objective world.

We start to perceive, we collect facts about the manifold formations and laws of Nature; this procedure, on its own account, runs on into endless detail in all directions, and just because no end can be perceived in it, this method does not satisfy us. And in all this wealth of knowledge the question can again arise, or perhaps come to us for the first time: What is Nature? It remains a problem. When we see Nature’s processes and transformations we want to grasp its simple essence, to compel this Proteus to cease its transformations and show itself to us and declare itself to us; so that it may not present us with a variety of ever new forms, but in simpler fashion bring to our consciousness in language what it is (Hegel 1970, 3–4).

In other words, we are not satisfied with simply expanding our ever-more-complex collection of facts about nature. Rather, we cannot help but ask what nature as such means. Likewise, we are not satisfied with simply adding up observations of animal behaviour. Rather, we have a concept of (animal) life as such. Neither Hegel nor Naess thinks that the question of animal subjectivity can be meaningfully addressed by scientific experiment (for example, a mirror test in which animal beings either recognize themselves or do not)². For Hegel, however, animal subjectivity is a matter of logical form, insofar “[a]s the Philosophy of Nature is a *comprehending (begreifend)* treatment, (...) in accordance with the self-determination of the [concept]” (Hegel 1970, § 246).

In contrast to Naess’ deep ecology, Hegel rejects prioritizing certain experiences, ontologies or “one-sided thought determinations fixed by the understanding that one

² Interestingly, Hegel allows, however, for the idea of graded subjectivity. Yet these gradations are never a deviation from the logical form of animal life. He mentions, for instance, the “free-sounding of the animal voice, which (...) is already a higher expression of ensouled subjectivity”. Or he speaks of the self-maintenance “in stronger organisms, by more definitely separated intervals of needing and consuming, of satisfaction and satiety [i.e., by mealtimes]” (Hegel 1975, 123).

holds on to and that form the basis of our theoretical as well as practical activities.” Here, Hegel articulates the position that our metaphysics is indeed “the basis of our (...) practical activities.” Thus, the “only thing that matters, therefore, is whether the metaphysics one applies is of the right kind.” Yet, this cannot be done by arbitrarily importing certain of our intuitions about or experiences with animals. Which experience should ground our understanding of animal subjectivity? The one when we care for, or we see other animals caring for, an animal? Or when observing cannibalism in the animal kingdom? For Hegel, this is not the way to develop an account of animal subjectivity. Instead, the gold standard of philosophy is the “the concrete logical idea” (Hegel 2010a, § 98 Z)³.

In narrating a story, as Hampe argues philosophy should proceed, one may start with certain intuitions or experiences. Yet philosophy as the science of being (in contrast to both narration and sciences of specific beings) cannot; such a beginning remains arbitrary and does not rule out dogmatism. We cannot uncritically start with or insert certain intuitions and then stop doing so wherever we see fit. If our premises are arbitrary, our conclusions will be as well. These unsystematic ways of philosophizing might seem modest but are ultimately unstable.

If it is not the *truth* which is at issue but only *narration*, as it is the case in pictorial and phenomenal thinking, then we might as well stay with the story that we begin with feelings and intuitions, (...) [b]ut philosophy ought not to be a narrative of what happens, but a cognition of what is *true* in what happens, in order further to comprehend on the basis of this truth what in the narrative appears as a mere happening (Hegel 2010b, 519).

III. Hegel on Animal Subjectivity

In the *Lectures of the History of Philosophy*, Hegel concludes his presentation of Descartes as follows:

Descartes regarded animals and other organisms as machines moved by another, and not possessing the principle of the spontaneity of thought within them – a mechanical physiology, a cut and dry thought pertaining to the understanding, which is of no further importance. In the sharp opposition between thought and extension, the former is not considered as sensation, so that the latter can isolate itself. The organic must as body reduce itself to extension; any further development of this last thus only proves its dependence on the first determinations. (...) How does Descartes understand the unity of soul and body? The former belongs to thought, the latter to extension; and thus because both are substance, neither requires the [concept] of the other, and hence soul and

³ For Hegel, philosophy is not conditioned by empirical evidence or intuition. Yet this does not rule out the idea of enabling conditions of thought: “Philosophy assumes indeed that the stages of feeling, intuition, sense consciousness, and so forth, are prior to [and] the conditions of the genesis of [thought] but they are conditions only in the sense that the concept results *from their dialectic* and *their nothingness* and not because it is conditioned by their *reality*. Abstractive thought, therefore, is not to be regarded as the mere discarding of a sensuous material which does not suffer in the process any impairment of reality; it is rather the sublation and reduction of that material as mere *appearance* to the *essential*, which is manifested only *in the concept*” (Hegel 2010b, 518–519).

body are independent of one another and can exercise no direct influence upon one another. (...) [S]ince each is a totality, neither can bear a real relation to the other. Descartes consistently denied the physical influence of one on the other; that would have signified a mechanical relation between the two. Descartes thus established the intellectual sphere in contradistinction to matter, and on it based the independent subsistence of mind; for in his *cogito* 'I' is at first only certain of itself, since I can abstract from all (Hegel 1896, 250–251).

Descartes proposes that everything, that is, both animate and inanimate nature, except for the thinking subject, the rational soul, can be explained by physical mechanics. The animal does not exhibit a logical form distinct from mere inanimate matter subject to mechanical, that is, efficient, causality. Hence, in Descartes' view, there is just no space for a self-standing life science or a notion of natural life as distinct from mechanism. There is an unbridgeable gap between human mind and nature, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, for "the rational soul (...) cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter, but must be specially created" (Descartes 1985, 141). Matter as such is lifeless, and desire, feeling, thought are internal and not perceivable through the senses, for they do not exist in physical space⁴.

Hegel goes on:

Now we find the necessity of a mediator to bring about a union of the abstract and the external and individual. Descartes settles this by placing between the two what constitutes the metaphysical ground of their mutual changes, God. (...) God is hereby the perfect identity of the two opposites, since He is, as Idea, the unity of [concept] and reality. (...) Descartes' conclusion is quite correct; in finite things this identity is imperfect. Only the form employed by Descartes is inadequate; for it implies that in the beginning there are two things, thought or soul and body, and that then God appears as a third thing, outside both — that He is not the [concept] of unity, nor are the two elements themselves [concept] (Hegel 1896, 251–252).

Unlike Descartes, Hegel conceives of the animal precisely as the realised concept. In a nutshell, what Descartes ascribes to God (the unification of soul and body; subjectivity and objectivity) Hegel ascribes to the animal. Descartes feels the need to introduce a super-subject in order to unify *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. For Hegel, the animal is that subject. The animal is the first manifestation of what Hegel calls 'idea', that is, the unity of concept and object, the subject that is objective, the soul that is body. The animal is not an entity already intelligible regardless of whether we ascribe subjectivity to it or not. Rather, comprehending the entity that the animal is means comprehending an activity of living that irreducibly already entails subjectivity. For Descartes, soul and body are two separate totalities, whereas for Hegel they form one and the same totality. For Hegel, living beings exhibit the concept as existing, that is, as permeating objectivity; Descartes, however,

⁴ As John Zammito (Zammito 2018) has recently argued, the point is not that philosophers like Descartes or Kant disliked animals but that they, in the wake of the scientific revolution, out of religious motives, did not dare to drop their dualisms and ascribe faculties to the natural world that traditionally have constituted the special status of the human among all beings. This motivation led to the (at first glance) paradoxical situation that some of the most avant-garde scientists held on to very pronounced theologies.

denies organisms “the principle of the spontaneity of thought.” They belong solely to the realm of inert matter or mere extension. Notably, for Hegel, the crux in Descartes’ account is that he does not conceive of thought or spontaneity in terms of sensation, which is why he is able to separate subjectivity entirely from the outer world.

Why, and in what sense, does Hegel conceive of the animal as soul? The living being is unified through a concept that permeates all its parts and activities. In the living being, “[w]hatever is distinguished as part, or by some otherwise external reflection, has the whole concept within it” (Hegel 2010b, 678). It is purposive activity through and through. No perception, no action of the animal can be explained without already conjoining it with this immanent purposiveness. This means that the living being carries with it the determination of what its life is. This concept is not a determination given externally to a matter which is indifferent to such determination. Instead, “the concept (...) is the soul of life itself” (Hegel 2010b, 677). Insofar as the living being acts as a unity, not as parts, to sustain itself, “[t]here thus exists in the animal the veritable subjective unity, a unitary soul” (Hegel 1970, § 350 Z). Hence, it acts purposively. In other words, it acts for the sake of an ‘ideal’ unity. This ‘ideal’ is not a norm imposed from outside or a transcendental determination of a human observer but an ideal the living being itself is and an ideal which it acts out in any given moment.

Now this ideality is not at all only *our* reflection on life; it is *objectively* present in the living subject himself, whose existence, therefore, we may style an ‘objective idealism’. The soul, as this ideality, makes *itself* appear, since it steadily degrades into an appearance the *purely* external reality of the body and therefore appears itself objectively in body (Hegel 1975, 123).

The animal is soul in the sense of being a totality that is unified by a concept whose purposiveness pervades that self-sustaining totality. The soul or concept, as that which accounts for the self-sustaining activities that can be satisfactory or impeded, is not some anthropological projection of us onto the animal. The animal soul, as the concept that self-particularises and, therein, stays identical with itself, carries, in virtue of being conceptual, a form of normativity with it. As such, the self-sustaining unity brings with it a notion of natural goodness internal to the concept that the animal is. Hegel writes that “[t]he immediate shape of the living being is the idea in its simple concept, the objectivity conforming to the concept; as such the shape is *good* by nature” (Hegel 2010b, 684).

In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel remarks that the animal “is nothing merely there.” This is because it is “its own product [or] self-end”; in other words, it is “End and Means at the same time” or its own self-realisation. It realises the concept that it always already is. As such, the “End has the same content as that which is already present in the agent; the living creature, therefore, with all its activities does not add anything to it” (Hegel 1970, § 352 Z). In this sense, life is self-determining. It is the ironic circle, so to speak, of any organism that it seeks to maintain its activities but, for this self-sustenance to be possible, the organism must already engage in those activities. It may take in nutrients to

nourish itself but, in order to be able to nourish itself, it must already be the being it seeks to sustain.

Life is logically circular yet not a mere tautology insofar as it is threatened, that is, insofar as there is negativity internal to it. Hegel speaks of “the concept [that] *splits into two*, becoming an absolute inequality with itself” (Hegel 2010b, 684). That is to say, the animal has to sustain itself or is “*impulse*” (Hegel 2010b, 685). In its activity, it will encounter that which contributes to its flourishing and that which obstructs it. Such obstruction, negativity or “rupture” is internal to its concept:

[S]ince even in this rupture the concept remains absolute identity, the living being is for itself this rupture, has the feeling of this contradiction which is *pain*. *Pain* is therefore the prerogative of living natures; since they are the concretely existing concept, they are an actuality of infinite power, so that they are in themselves the *negativity* of themselves, that this *their negativity* exists *for them*, that in their otherness they preserve themselves. (...) This internal rupture of the living being, when taken up into the simple universality of the concept, in sensibility, is *feeling* (Hegel 2010b, 684–685).

The animal moves and nourishes itself. Such nourishing is not a tautological self-identity with itself but a process in which the animal also senses impediments to its nourishing. It is not that there is first the self-movement of a living being, and, then, in a second step, sensation is added on top of it because by sensing its environment that movement may become smoother and more sophisticated and nourishment, thus, more convenient. The appropriate description is rather that the self-movement of a living being just is such sensation and without such sensation the self-movement of animal life is inconceivable⁵. This is precisely denied in Descartes’ account of the animal machine. For Hegel, such sensation is the animal’s spontaneity or soul in the sense that the animal senses as a unity, moves as a unity and is acted upon as a unity. It will grab food, attack its enemy or climb up a tree and so forth.

This inherently free independence of subjective life shows itself principally in *spontaneous* movement. The inanimate bodies of inorganic nature have their fixed position in space; they are one with their place, bound to it, or moved from it only by an external force. (...) And, even if the movement of the planets, etc., does not appear as an external propulsion and as foreign to the bodies themselves, nevertheless it is tied to a fixed law and its abstract necessity. But the living animal in its free spontaneous movement negates by its own means this attachment to a determinate place and is the progressive liberation from physical unity with such determinacy. (...) Looked at more closely, however, the animal has in its organism by its very nature a physical position in space, and its life is spontaneous movement within this reality itself, as the circulation of the blood, movement of the limbs, etc. (Hegel 1975, 122–123).

The self-movement of the animal is not a spontaneity *above and beyond* the physical world but takes place precisely *within* such a world. This is because the animal organism

⁵ In other words, in animal life, sensation is not a property in addition to movement whose character remains untouched but, instead, entirely transforms what movement means (for a transformative account of life in Hegel, see Haase 2013).

is body. The body is the visible “separatedness of all the particular members” (Hegel 1975, 120) of the living being. Life is both soul and body. They are “the same totality” (Hegel 1975, 119). The ideal unity the living being strives for is, at the same time, its real bodily organs, and its real bodily organs are that purpose. The animal is “a soul which is simple self-reference and remains one in the manifoldness that accrues to the objective being (...); thus the soul flows omnipresently in this manifold but remains at the same time the simple oneness of the concrete concept with itself” (Hegel 2010b, 678). The soul is body, and the body is soul.

For Hegel, animal life is the highest form of self-determination to be found in nature. While mechanism and chemism, for the most part, exhibit external determination insofar as they make reference to the universality of a law or form of conditioning that is distinct from or external to the particular objects or contents in which that law or conditioning is efficacious, the living individual articulates a universality that does not have its particulars outside of itself. In this sense, Hegel states that “[l]ife (...) is in and for itself absolute *universality*; the objectivity which it possesses is throughout permeated by the concept” (Hegel 2010b, 678). In mechanism and chemism, the universality of the form of conditioning and the particularity of its contents remain separate. In contrast, animal life is the self-particularisation of the universal; it is a form of conditioning that is itself content.

Whereas the plant lacks self-sensation, lacks a centre, and, therefore, does not relate itself through sensory consciousness as a unity to particular objects⁶, the animal relates itself as a unity to external objectivity, assimilates it and, therein, stays identical with itself, that is, remains the unity it already was. What is more, in the animal, all lower forms of nature are sublated: “The animal organism is the microcosm, the centre of Nature which has achieved an existence for itself in which the whole of inorganic Nature is recapitulated and idealized” (Hegel 1970, § 352 Z). In other words, mechanism or chemism, for instance, have not disappeared but are now subject to the purposive activity of the animal.

To recapitulate, the animal is an ensouled or unified living individual, that is, self-sensation or “*sensibility*.” Secondly, the animal is the self-sustaining life-process; it is the assimilation of external objectivity, that is, body or “*irritability*” (Hegel 2010b, 682). Thus, the animal is “a self-referring being-for-itself” which is “at the same time a real *outward reference*, the reflection of *particularity* or irritability *as against an other*, as against the *objective world*” (Hegel 2010b, 683). Moreover, “[e]ach singular moment is essentially the totality of all.” That is to say, the animal only senses itself as a unity since it posits itself

6 While the circular structure of the organism applies to the plant as well, Hegel attributes self-sensation or subjectivity only to the animal: “Since the animal organism is the process of subjectivity, of self-relation in an outer world, the rest of Nature is therefore here present for the first time as outward, since the animal preserves itself in this relation with the outer world. Now the plant is drawn towards the outer world but without truly preserving itself in connection with what is other, and consequently the rest of Nature is still not present for it as outer” (Hegel 1970, § 352 Z).

against “the presupposed objectivity as such.” In positing “itself as *subjective* totality, the *moment of its determinateness, its reference* to externality, also becomes a *totality*” (Hegel 2010b, 682–683). What this implies is that animals are not in the world like a stone is. Using Wittgenstein’s expression, they rather are their world (Wittgenstein 1961, 5.63). The question of whether we should understand the animal through its environment or the environment through the animal cannot arise. Everything that happens in external objectivity is already pervaded by the activity of the unity that the ensouled living being is⁷.

Given that the animal “as this highest point of Nature is thus the absolute idealism of possessing within itself the determinateness of its bodily nature in a perfectly fluid form – the incorporation of the immediate into the subject and its possession as incorporated” (Hegel 1970, § 350 Z), it might seem that the animal is an end in itself and has nothing external to it which could be its purpose. Yet Hegel argues that the two moments of sensibility and irritability do not suffice in order to understand animal life. It takes a third moment, that is, the genus, Aristotle’s secondary substance. The self-determination of the individual animal is lacking in that it cannot engender itself. Instead, it is engendered by the genus-process. In virtue of the genus-process, the individual animal remains a means. The genus is realised by the animal through reproduction with the help of other living individuals. Since animal life is characterized by sexual desire and sexual difference, the individual animal cannot be the completion of the genus-process. Sexual reproduction entails the idea that animal life has its ‘concrete’ universality in the genus. The genus is beyond any particular instantiation of it. It cannot be statistically generated from the bottom up but determines its particular instantiations top-down⁸. The genus is not a taxonomy, that is, not a projection that may help us in categorizing certain empirical data about the properties of natural living beings. The genus is concrete universality in that it logically entails its self-particularisation. It is explanatory of its identity and difference, of why its universality consists necessarily in a multitude of individual living beings.

With the genus, we arrive at the ambiguity of animal subjectivity. On the one hand, the animal is self-determining, that is, a self-enclosed totality in which the universality of the concept pervades objectivity, pervades all its particular contents. Yet, at the same time, the individual animal has its universality as “a presupposition yet unproven through

7 This is brought out nicely in Schelling’s statement that the organism is “not mere appearance, not that which is known *merely* by its effects [and] its activity is not at all directed to anything external, but is directed upon itself – it is its *own object* (...): it is, what it is, without any external effect” (Schelling 2004, 51).

8 Similarly, drawing on the notion of an archetypal form, the type [*Typus*], Goethe argues: “[I]t was found necessary to compare all animals with every animal with all animals – and we can see the impossibility of reconciling things in this manner. Hence, an anatomical [*Typus*] will be suggested here, a general picture containing the forms of all potential animals, one which will guide us to an orderly description of each animal (...) The mere idea of [a *Typus*] in general implies that no particular animal can be used as our point of departure; the particular can never serve as a measure for the whole (...). The idea must govern the whole” (Goethe 1988, 118). As pointed out by a reviewer, the English translation is wrong at this point, when speaking of “*Urphänomen*,” instead of “*Typus*”. Goethe usually uses the latter term to refer to animals.

itself" (Hegel 2010b, 686). In "their own *immediate nature*," animals are still determined by "externality and contingency" for "the fate of a living thing is in general the *genus*, for the genus manifests itself through the fleetingness of the living individuals that do not possess it as genus in their *actual singularity*" (Hegel 2010b, 639). The lifeform or genus remains something above and beyond the individual actualisation of it. It remains an end that lies partly outside of individual animal life. In this sense, animal life exhibits both true infinity (being a self-enclosed totality that is explained through itself) and bad infinity (the universality of the genus exhibited in an infinite chain of birth and death), both self-determination (the identity of subjectivity and objectivity, concept and reality) and external determination (the individual being determined by the genus). The animal is the highest point of self-determination in nature, yet it remains natural precisely in not entirely overcoming external determination: "In the sphere of Nature contingency and determination from [outside] has its right (...). This is the impotence of Nature, that it preserves the determinations of the [concept] only abstractly, and leaves their detailed specification to external determination" (Hegel 1970, § 250).

Hegel explains how the animal is an end to itself and soul, that is, the unity of sensory consciousness. He therewith introduces the idea of the animal's sensitivity, feeling and pain, not on an empirical basis but logically. At the same time, the individual animal remains a means, for the full realisation of animal life lies outside of it. Its sustenance remains a means with respect to the sustenance of its genus. Therefore, the good of the individual animal and the good of its genus diverge⁹. In animal life, natural goodness is split into the good of the individual *qua* being subject and the good of its genus. The genus particularises itself into its individual actualisations but no single actualisation realises its genus entirely which is why any individual animal is subordinate to the universality of its genus. Hence, there is, for instance, sexual or filial cannibalism in the animal kingdom. An animal may sacrifice its mate or one of its young for the sake of itself or for the sake of other offspring, without thereby diverging from its lifeform. Moreover, it may consume other animals as mere means. Hegel states that "[t]he natural fate of the individuals in this hostile relationship, in which others are reduced to an inorganic nature, is a *violent death*" (Hegel 1970, § 370).

IV. The Question of Dignity

Animals as self-maintaining organisms encounter their environment as that which hinders and that which allows their survival. There are things that prevent their flourishing and things that contribute to their flourishing. These are evaluative categories. In this sense, there are things that are good and things that are bad for the animal. Animal

⁹ In the literature, these two colliding senses of natural goodness can be found in Michael Thompson's notion of natural-historical judgment (Thompson 2008) that concerns the normativity of the genus, and the notion of self-organisation that concerns the normativity of the individual living being (Corti 2022).

instinct is able to distinguish between these. Of course, instinctive behaviour might fail. But such occurrences will be described in precisely this way, as a failure of instinct but not as a sheer indifference to the animal's survival.

[Animals] do not have the rest of nature set over against them as something indifferent but inhabit environments that afford them opportunities to live and act in. These environments are not the sorts of collections that physics has in view; an animal does not care about mass or gravitation but about food and whether a branch can be walked on (Lindquist 2018, 392).

However, is this form of normativity implied by the activity of living enough to invoke something like the moral dignity of the individual animal? This bears on the question of if or to what extent animals are self-conscious, that is, if or to what extent they have their own independent perspective on themselves and, thereby, on their environment. Being subjectivity, the animal distinguishes itself from particular objects that it may act upon. Yet Hegel also states repeatedly that the animal “has the *certainty* of the intrinsic *nullity* of the *otherness* confronting it. Its impulse is the need to sublate this otherness and to give itself the truth of this certainty” (Hegel 2010b)¹⁰. To use Robert Pippin's wording, in contrast to self-consciousness, there is nothing to an animal that “*negates back*” (Pippin 2010, 37)¹¹.

According to Christine Korsgaard, having self-consciousness allows for “the distinction between yourself and the rest of the world. It identifies you, and makes you identify yourself, with a specific spot from which the rest of the world appears to you” (Korsgaard 2018, 30). Kant denies animals self-consciousness in precisely this sense:

The fact that man can have the idea ‘I’ raises him infinitely above all the other beings living on earth. By this he is a *person*; and by virtue of the unity of his consciousness, through all the changes he may undergo, he is one and the same person – that is, a being altogether different in rank and dignity from *things*, such as irrational animals, which we can dispose of as we please. This holds even if he cannot yet say ‘I’; for he still has it in mind. So any language must *think* “I” when it speaks in the first person, even if it has no special word to express it (Kant 1974, 127).

Using Korsgaard's phrasing again, it seems that what is needed is a “unity of what we may call your ‘active self’ – a unity that we also call ‘integrity’ – [which] enables you to pursue your ends effectively and maintain your projects, commitments, relationships, and values over time”. What is more, “integrity enables you to maintain your projects, commitments, relationships, and values, but also to change them when you find you have

10 See also Hegel's remark that “the animal has gone beyond (...) realist philosophy, for it consumes things [*Dinge*] and thereby proves that they are not absolutely self-sufficient” (Hegel 1991, § 44 Z).

11 However, notably, Hegel also suggests that the twofold structure of a practical and theoretical, that is, a consuming and contemplative, stance towards nature is not just a feature of spiritual life but, to an extent, already of the animal: “[T]he living individual separates himself off from the rest of reality, and yet, on the other hand, he equally makes the external world something *for himself*: partly contemplatively, through seeing, etc., partly practically by subjecting external things to himself, using them, assimilating them (...). All these are activities in which the essential nature of life comes into appearance in ensouled individuals” (Hegel 1975, 123).

good reasons to do" (Korsgaard 2018, 29). In this regard, Korsgaard makes mention of 'a young science', namely "[t]he serious study of animal minds," and she argues that "self-consciousness is something that comes in degrees and takes many different forms" and that "Kant's view is too extreme." Like Korsgaard, empirical science seems to suggest "that having a self is a matter of degree" (Korsgaard 2018, 30–32).

To my mind, Hegel agrees with Kant that it is self-consciousness or the 'I' that establishes the anthropological gap, that is, the gap between the 'rank and dignity' that pertains to the human being and 'irrational animals'. He disagrees, however, about the way it does so. For Hegel, unlike for Kant, this is not merely an issue of the transcendental apperceptive unity. That is to say, it is not just a matter of a unified coherent perspective on the world throughout a succession of moments. For Hegel, the problem is not so much that the animal does not have commitments over time or that it cannot change its commitments. Rather, the problem is that its commitments are not fully its own but imposed from outside, namely, by its genus. A certain animal parent may be said to have the stable commitment to raise its offspring. Yet there are cases in which the animal parent abandons one of its offspring because the offspring got sick or had been in close contact with a human being and so forth. The animal parent may sacrifice its sick young to the benefit of its other offspring with better life expectancy. From its point of view, it has a good reason to change its commitment and focus on raising its other offspring. Thus, in a sense, we here see a certain form of 'integrity' in the animal and its capacity to alter its commitments.

While Kant's point seems to be that the animal lives only in the moment and lacks any unified perspective on its life as a whole, Hegel goes in the opposite direction and stresses that it is the unifying genus-process that imposes the normativity of the lifeform on its singular actualisation. In a way, both Kant and Hegel stress the fleetingness of the animal. From a Kantian perspective, the animal does not have an awareness of having been wrong and of taking in new information that makes the animal feel an urgency to correct its previous commitments. For Kant, the animal lacks unification in its momentariness, while, for Hegel, the individual animal breaks down, as it were, under too much unification imposed by its lifeform that, ultimately, remains external to it. For Kant, disrupting the living activity of the animal is infinitely different from disrupting the activity of a self-conscious being that has commitments, plans, hopes and dreams. For Hegel, disrupting animal life is infinitely different from disrupting self-consciousness, for in virtue of the genus-process animal life disrupts itself. Animals sacrifice themselves, their mate or their offspring for the survival of its lifeform, its genus. The animal soul articulates only "*subjective* universality" (Hegel 1970, § 350). It is "not yet for-itself as pure, universal subjectivity; it is not aware of itself in thought, but only in feeling and intuition." That is to say, the individual animal is determined by but does not grasp the genus-process and, hence, does not "grasp [itself] in thought as universal" (Hegel 1970, § 350 Z).

[T]he animal soul is still not free (...). The animal only senses the genus, it is not

aware of it; in the animal, the soul is not yet for the soul, the universal as such is not for the universal. By the sublation of the particularity of the sexes which occurs in the genus-process, the animal does not attain to the production of the genus; what is produced by this process is again only an individual. Thus nature, even at the highest point of its elevation above finitude, always falls back into it again and in this way exhibits a perpetual cycle (Hegel 2007, § 381 Z).

This is the bad infinity exhibited by animal life. The individual animal is incapable of engendering the universality of its genus, its lifeform, for all it can create through reproduction is another individual animal. In contrast, spirit articulates a universality that does not impose any external force on its singular actualisation, on each self-consciousness. The universality of spirit belongs to every single self-consciousness. This is because self-consciousness is recognition of other self-consciousnesses. Spirit is precisely “[t]he *I* that is *we* and the *we* that is *I*” (Hegel 2018, § 177) and, hence, does not introduce another content different from the content self-consciousness already provides. In self-conscious beings, the normativity of the lifeform is at stake in each individual; hence, its dignity. Unlike the genus or lifeform that imposes itself on the individual animal, spirit is not a genus that imposes itself on individual self-consciousnesses or the ‘*I*’ (Kern 2023).

Self-conscious beings may sacrifice themselves for a good which transcends the mere survival of the genus. They may sacrifice themselves because of a promise they made; or in order to prevent evil from happening. In other words, self-consciousness does not have spirit as its genus outside of it but is its own genus. It is not a particular instantiation of a greater universality that determines it externally. The animal may care about its offspring. Yet it does not care about its independence as independence¹². In contrast to self-consciousness that is beyond any particular determinations and, therefore, maintains an independence within all dependencies, the animal does not have this independence that would allow it to negate back¹³. An animal might risk its life for the sake of its offspring or its master. Yet, to Hegel, it is not the sort of being that could be recognized, for it does not have the freedom to recognize us or to deny us recognition. The animal is soul and, therein, is infinitely different from anything else in nature. Yet, at the same time, it is infinitely different from self-consciousness.

Pippin argues that while the animal “is a mere sentiment of self” and acts “in order to satisfy a desire, the actions of a being that does not just embody its self-sentiment (...) can be said to act *on* (...) a self-conception.” Thus, there is a distinction of “a cycle of desires and satisfactions that continually arise and subside in animals from beings *for whom* their desires can be objects of attention, issues at stake, ultimately *reasons* to be acted on or not” (Pippin 2010, 36). In contrast, defending Hegel’s “disenchanted Aristotelian naturalism” (Pinkard 2012, 19), Terry Pinkard argues that “there is normativity already at work in nature in the sense that for organic life, there can be goods and evils for plants

12 According to Pippin, Hegelian self-consciousness has “deep similarities with the way Heidegger insists that *Dasein*’s unique mode of being-in-the-world is *Sorge*, or care” (Pippin 2010, 36).

13 In the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel states that “[t]he human being alone is able to abandon all things, even his own life: he can commit suicide” (Hegel 1991, § 5 Z).

and animals – and thus reasons for plants and animals to respond in one way or another” (Pinkard 2012, 26). However, these reasons may entail reasons to kill their offspring or mates. Hence, even if we want to speak of reasons in this way, these reasons will take on a very different shape and content than for us, that is, spiritual life.

On the one hand, Hegel’s account of animal subjectivity, of animal self-movement and sensation, can be read as overcoming Kant’s gap between nature and freedom (Khurana 2017; Gambarotto & Illetterati 2020; Ng 2020). Along these lines, the transition “from necessity to freedom” (Hegel 2007, § 381 Z), from nature to spirit, is already happening in animal life. Such conception strengthens the “continuity between animal experience and human experience” (Pinkard 2012, 27) which may also have ethical implications (Jonas 1984; Battistoni 2023). On the other hand, animal life remains infinitely different from spiritual, that is, self-conscious, life (Siep 2022; Kern 2023)¹⁴. Along these lines, Hegel states that “what is called the *life of spirit* as spirit, is spirit’s own peculiar nature that stands opposed to mere life; just as we speak of the *nature* of spirit, even though spirit is nothing natural but stands rather in opposition to nature” (Hegel 2010b, 677). In this sense, spirit is the truth of nature, and self-consciousness is a higher form of self-determination, of the self-realisation of the concept, than is life. For Hegel, these notions differ in logical form and, hence, “cannot be taken as *indifferent* concepts, as if each were by itself a correct concept and had as much validity as the other, the only question being *where* the one or the other may apply” (Hegel 2010b, 651).

In other words, we may refrain from harming animal life due to its sensory nature. But this would still be different from proposing its dignity. For Hegel, this dignity is only had in self-conscious life in which the lifeform is at stake in any individual, that is, in which the individual counts *qua* individuality. This is the way in which self-conscious life overcomes the restrictions of nature. We may decide to care for animal life. Yet, thereby, the contradiction between the genus and the individual animal is not cancelled. This contradiction does not hang on our comportment, our commitments. Instead, it expresses the finitude of nature.

V. Conclusion

That there are profound disagreements in Hegel scholarship on the relationship of nature and spirit and, hence, the status of the animal (which seems to abide on the edge between those) may itself be philosophically revelatory. This dividedness even among experts is not rooted in individual fancies but in ambiguities the matter at hand itself provides¹⁵. In contemporary academic discourse, it is often believed that what pertains to

¹⁴ Hegel argues that, even though on the “purely bodily side, man is not greatly different from the ape”, by being spirit, humans are different “to that animal to such a degree that a smaller difference obtains between the appearance of an ape and that of a bird than between the body of a man and that of an ape” (Hegel 2007, § 411 Z).

¹⁵ Luca Illetterati has recently argued for “Hegel’s Non-Naturalistic Naturalism” (Illetterati 2021).

thought or self-consciousness is more in need of explanation, more capable of perplexing us, than what is natural. For Hegel, it is the other way round: “Nature confronts us as a riddle and a problem, whose solution both attracts and repels us: attracts us, because Spirit is presaged in Nature; repels us, because Nature seems an alien existence, in which Spirit does not find itself” (Hegel 1970, 3). Perhaps, “we struggle to break the tension between nature and spirit (...) because we are their contradiction (which is why we will never get over it)” (Abbott 2021, 187). The question about nature is irreducibly spiritual. It is spirit that may problematize its relationship to nature and not the other way round. In a way, spirit, just like the anthropological gap, is generated self-performatively through asking oneself what nature or what the animal is¹⁶.

As I have shown here, Hegel rejects Descartes’ proposal of the animal machine by problematizing how Descartes denies that sensation is a form of spontaneity or subjectivity. Searching for life within *res extensa*, “[p]eople have been at pains to find the soul”, but “[t]he asunderness of spatial existence has no truth for the soul”. What is more, “[t]here are millions of points in which the soul is everywhere present; and yet it is not at any one point” (Hegel 1970, § 350 Z). Hegel certainly gives a sophisticated account of what animal subjectivity is.

Yet, the universality of the individual animal as subject and the universality of its genus diverge. They introduce two senses of goodness. Thus, on the one hand, there is the “need” (Hegel 2010b, 685), the “*sensing and feeling*” (Hegel 2010a, § 216 Z) of the animal that we may take into account and attend to. The animal “feels *pain*” (Hegel 2010b, 106). On the other hand, there is the genus-process that prevails over the good of the individual animal. Phenomena like sexual and filial cannibalism in the animal kingdom are signs of the genus prevailing, and it would be a misplaced anthropological projection to conceive of these as unnatural or evil. The goodness of the individual animal and the goodness of its genus clash. Therefore, talk of the animal as soul or subject is ambiguous.

Instead of resolving our contradictory relationship towards animals, Hegel’s account of animal life is an expression of it. The contradiction does not disappear by simply not consuming animals ourselves. The contradiction remains in our and the animals’ own awareness of some animals as means for another. Even though defending the moral worth of the animal, Korsgaard acknowledges this contradiction when she comments on her personal life with her cats: “With them I have lived a morally compromised life, feeding them the meat that I will not eat myself” (Korsgaard 2018, 235).

Even though I am uncertain how helpful this expression ultimately is, it certainly points to the ambiguity of the issue in question.

16 In this regard, see Hegel’s remark that “only the animals are pure, unadulterated physicists, since they do not think, whereas a human being as a thinking being is a born metaphysician” (Hegel 2010a, § 98 Z).

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