

The Dialectic of Life in Hegel's Thought. An Introduction



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Abstract: This issue of *Ethics in Progress* titled *Unfolding Life – The Dialectic of the Living in Hegel's Thought. Philosophical Foundations and Contemporary Resonances* builds upon the discussions initiated in issue no. 15(2) (2024) of the journal, which explored the enduring relevance of Hegel's early philosophy through the theme Nature and Spirit. While continuing along that trajectory into Hegel's mature philosophy, the present issue narrows its focus to a central dimension of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: the concept of life in its diverse manifestations. The contributions investigate various forms of living being – plant, animal, and human – examining their underlying impulses, structural dynamics, and vulnerabilities. Together, the essays highlight how Hegelian philosophy offers critical resources for engaging with contemporary questions about the nature and conditions of life.

Keywords: Hegel; Philosophy of Nature; Life; Organism; Vitality.

This issue of *Ethics in Progress* follows issue no. 2 of 2024, which was dedicated to the theme *Nature and Spirit: Enduring Legacies of Hegel's Philosophy from the Jena Period* (Battistoni 2024; Palombelli 2024; Wilford, Anderson & Loebs 2024; Achella 2024; Aranda Arredondo 2024; Erle 2024; Tereshchenko 2024, Juchniewicz 2024)¹. In a certain sense, it represents a continuation of that issue, as several of the essays included here demonstrate how Hegelian thought still offers valuable tools for understanding the present. However, this issue also carves out a more focused path within the broader landscape of Hegel's thought. It concentrates on a theme that figures prominently – though not exclusively

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– in his *Philosophy of Nature*: the notion of life in its manifold expressions². The essays collected here examine life as it manifests across different strata – from vegetal existence and animal sensibility to the complexity of human life – attending particularly to its inner dynamics, essential drives, and inherent fragilities.

In doing so, the authors not only explore the systematic position of life in Hegel's philosophical architecture but also engage critically with its relevance for understanding the disruptions, boundaries, and transformations that characterise life. What follows is an overview of the central themes explored in this issue, highlighting the diverse yet interconnected ways in which Hegel's philosophy continues to inspire and challenge contemporary thought.

The first two essays operate on a speculative-systematic level, exploring the role of the concepts of *vitality* and *tending* within the Hegelian system, in their connection to the phenomenon of life. Ivo Minkov's essay *Deduction of the Concept of 'Vitality' in Hegel's Philosophy* offers an entry point into the broader question of how Hegel conceives of vitality and life. As is well known, the dialectic of life unfolds through the self-developing movement of the Concept. Minkov undertakes a hermeneutic and historical-critical investigation into the foundations of Hegel's speculative method, aiming to uncover the genesis of the notion of vitality and its intrinsic connection to spirit. From this angle, living matter appears as a principle in tension with the processes of dissolution that characterise the material universe. This leads to a speculative reading of negative entropy (*negentropy*) as the energy of the Concept resisting decay. Here, vitality is seen as the mediating dynamic by which a subject shapes and sustains forms of consciousness through the expenditure of inner energy – an activity whose limitless unfolding culminates in a process of complete spiritualisation. This analysis is grounded in a broader historical-critical reconstruction of the development of Hegel's system, tracing influences from Romantic thinkers, Kant, Fichte, and – above all – Schelling. From Schelling, Hegel takes the idea that nature is not devoid of reason but imbued with it. It is during his Jena period that Hegel formulates both the paradigm of objective reason and the dialectical method that form the basis of his mature system. In this context, life is not merely a biological phenomenon but an objective condition of method. The essay further explores the link between self-consciousness and vital processes, suggesting that the concept of life can be philosophically deduced as intrinsically tied to the development of consciousness. At the same time, it distinguishes between the logical and the natural concept of life in Hegel's thought. Vitality thus emerges as a mediating structure that reflects the dialectical

² Although the earliest studies on the living organism and the organic in Hegel's thought date back over forty years (see at least Breidbach 1982), it is only in more recent years that the concept of life – in its logical, biological, and systematic meanings – has drawn renewed critical attention. Today, it is increasingly regarded not only as a key to understanding the living organism, but as a lens through which to interpret nature as a whole and even Hegel's system itself (see Pinkard 2012 and more recently: Corti 2024; Okochi 2024; Ng 2020; Achella 2019; Illetterati 2016). This issue thus situates itself within this recent wave of scholarship, while also drawing on Hegel's thought to raise, interrogate, and hopefully illuminate some of the pressing questions of our time.

unfolding of the Concept itself – a form of spiritual activity grounded in nature yet pointing beyond it.

Federico Ferraguto's essay *Tending and Logic between Bardili and Hegel: The Operativity of Reason beyond the Philosophy of the Subject* explores crucial stages in the speculative reconfiguration of the *Trieb* within post-Kantian philosophy, aiming to reconstruct the intellectual background that renders Hegel's treatment of this concept in the *Science of Logic* intelligible. The essay begins by tracing the philosophical developments that paved the way for the integration of *Trieb* into speculative logic, then focuses on the key role played by Christoph Gottfried Bardili, whose *Grundriss der ersten Logik* offers valuable insights into the conceptual shift at stake. Bardili's theory of tending sheds light on how Hegel mobilises this notion within the doctrine of the Concept, particularly in his account of teleology in the *Science of Logic*. Ferraguto shows that the significance of *Trieb* does not lie in an anthropological interpretation aimed at critiquing subjectivity, but rather in its integration into a speculative structure that exceeds both anthropological and biological frames of reference. Tending is thus emancipated from its association with naturalistic impulses and redefined as an expression of rational dynamism – indeed, as *the very act of thinking* itself. This transformation, initiated through Bardili's logic, has implications not only for the theory of subjectivity but also for the understanding of nature within the system. After examining Bardili's contribution, the essay turns to Hegel's own treatment of *Trieb* as a fundamental moment in the development of the Concept. In this light, tending becomes a key to understanding the process of reason's self-realisation and its teleological orientation – a dimension of life already articulated in the *Science of Logic*, prior to its elaboration in the *Philosophy of Nature*. For both Bardili and Hegel, the *Trieb* represents a pre-reflective, not-yet-fully-conscious phase in the unfolding of rational activity.

The subsequent four essays explore various forms of living organisms – beginning with plants, moving to animals, and concluding with a philosophical inquiry into the metaphysical foundations of physical illness as it manifests in animal life. The last of the four essays shows how these Hegelian conceptions influenced British Idealism and, through it, resonated in Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and Hans Jonas's philosophical biology.

The contribution by Grégory de Souza and Jelson Roberto de Oliveira *Between Life and Spirit: The Place of Plants in Hegel's Dialectic of Nature* focuses on the place of plant life in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy, emphasizing its significance for understanding the relationship between life and spirit within the dialectical development of the Idea. The authors analyse how Hegel situates plant organisms within the *Philosophy of Nature*, characterizing them by their 'incomplete subjectivity' and absence of unified individuality – features reflected in the structural separation of their organs and their non-centralised organisation. Despite lacking consciousness or cohesive interiority, plants are presented as expressing a primordial form of vitality. Their metabolic activity marks the earliest

dialectical mediation between internal life and the external environment. In this regard, vegetal life emerges as a transitional stage between inorganic nature and animal organisation – a moment in which life begins to appear as incipient freedom. This insight leads Hegel to situate plant life within a broader progression that begins with the Earth as a geological organism, continues through the vegetal realm, and culminates in the animal organism. Along this path, plants are shown to embody a universal, self-organizing life form – open to its environment, capable of transforming external elements into its own substance, growing in a continuous and ordered manner, and ultimately reproducing. Though still lacking full subjective unity, plant life nonetheless plays a vital role in the dialectical movement from nature's objectivity to spirit's subjectivity, serving as a necessary mediation. This reading also engages Goethe's botanical studies and Hegel's interpretation of them, while drawing connections to Hans Jonas's later reflections on the concept of inwardness in living organisms.

Timo Ennen's essay *Animals We Eat and Animals We Care For: Hegel's Ambiguous Notion of the Animal as Soul* focuses on animal organisms, while also extending the discussion into contemporary ethical contexts. It begins by addressing a persistent contradiction in human behaviour toward animals: on the one hand, we nurture them, name them, and treat them as companions; on the other, we tolerate – or even endorse – their slaughter and consumption. Although this tension is particularly evident in the modern world, with its industrial slaughterhouses, petting zoos, and pet culture, it is by no means a modern phenomenon. As the ancient Chinese Confucian text *Mencius* notes, the noble individual cultivates compassion yet avoids the kitchen, where animals are butchered. While Descartes famously depicted animals as soulless machines – mere natural automata – Hegel offers a more complex view. For Hegel, the animal is not reducible to matter, nor is it equivalent to the human being. Animals are *ensouled* precisely because they are permeated by the Concept and engage in purposive activity. They embody a form of normativity rooted in life itself, particularly in the impulse toward self-preservation. Unlike inorganic nature, which is moved only by external forces, the animal initiates its own movement. Animal life, in this sense, represents the highest level of self-determination within nature, synthesizing all prior stages of natural development. Unlike the plant, which lacks a unified center, the animal perceives itself as an integrated whole. Yet animals remain distinct from rational, self-conscious beings such as humans. Drawing on the *Science of Logic*, the *Philosophy of Nature*, and Hegel's reflections on Descartes in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Ennen explores this nuanced conception of animal subjectivity. He ultimately argues that Hegel provides the conceptual tools to recognise the animal as a subject, yet stops short of affirming its moral or ontological dignity. In this, Hegel mirrors the very contradiction we still face today: our unresolved tension between the claims of nature and the aspirations of spirit – a contradiction that, in the end, defines our own condition.

Andrés Ortigosa's essay *Hegel on Physical Health and Illness: A Brunonian Influence*

and a Metaphysical Approach addresses an overlooked topic in Hegelian studies. Except for a few contributions (such as those by Dietrich von Engelhardt), Hegel's views on physical health and illness have received limited attention. According to Ortigosa, this neglect stems partly from the complexity of the medical discourse of Hegel's time and partly from the long-standing marginalisation of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature. To clarify Hegel's position, Ortigosa reconstructs the broader context of late 18th- and early 19th-century German medicine, marked by a crisis in which foundational concepts like 'life' lacked clear definition. He examines the debate initiated by Johann Benjamin Erhard, who called for a rigorous theoretical basis for medicine, and highlights the divide between two main currents: one reducing medicine to chemical analysis, the other invoking *Lebenskraft* (vital force) as a principle of equilibrium. In this context, the Brunonian school gained influence. John Brown introduced the concept of *excitability* – the organism's responsiveness to stimuli – as a unifying principle of life and disease, understood as imbalance. Brunonianism thus sought to bridge the gap between the two rival approaches, and even Schelling praised its insights. Hegel, shaped by this milieu, developed a metaphysical understanding of health and illness. According to Ortigosa, illness in Hegel arises when a particular function becomes rigid, disrupting the fluid unity of the whole. Health, by contrast, is defined by dynamism and the interplay of solidification and fluidity – two core metaphysical principles. Tracing this concept back to Hegel's Logic, Ortigosa interprets fluidity not only as essential to living processes but also as a key to grasping reality as a whole. Medicine, in this view, restores fluidity where it has been lost.

The essay by the present author, *The Life of/in Nature. From Hegel to British Idealism and Its Twentieth-Century Afterlives*, traces the development of the concepts of organic life and nature from Hegel's Philosophy of Nature through British Idealism, culminating in the twentieth-century thought of Whitehead and Jonas. It highlights how Hegel's understanding of the organism as a self-generating, purposive unity shaped later views of nature as dynamic, interconnected, and teleological. Beginning with Kant's account of teleology in living beings, the essay examines how Hegel reformulates these ideas within the framework of Romantic and Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, in dialogue with scientific developments of his time. The organism is presented not as a static entity, but as a process in which life and purpose are internally structured and directed toward self-realisation. The discussion then turns to British Idealists – particularly Samuel Alexander and John McTaggart – exploring their continuities and departures from Hegel's conception of nature and the living organism. This tradition, the essay argues, serves as a key intermediary leading to Whitehead's process philosophy and Jonas's philosophical biology, both briefly examined in their essential elements. What emerges is a relational and non-reductionist view of life, offering a philosophical lens for rethinking the place of living beings in nature and the role of humanity in the broader ecological context. In an age of ecological crisis and ontological uncertainty, this speculative lineage affirms that to exist is to participate in a living, evolving totality. Revisiting these Hegelian insights is not merely a historical

exercise, but a way of reclaiming a vision of the world in which life, nature, and spirit are deeply interconnected.

The final two essays engage with Hegel's conception of life, both in its biological dimension and in a broader existential sense, offering insights that remain highly relevant today. The first of these is a translation of a chapter originally published seventeen years ago, whose significance has not diminished with time.

In his essay *Life as Self-Maintenance*, Dieter Wandschneider explores the organism as a living being – an individual engaged in its own self-preservation, endowed with intrinsic purposiveness, self-regulation, and a form of self-related agency – fundamentally distinct from an automaton. The essay addresses the contemporary challenges of explaining life's essence through scientific means, while tracing a philosophical trajectory that begins with Kant, is developed by Hegel, and further advanced by Helmuth Plessner, ultimately finding resonance in 20th-century Systems Theory. Three major themes structure the argument: the organism's drive for self-maintenance; the origin and evolution of life; and the emergence of spirit or mind from nature. Beginning with Kant, life is presented as governed by inner purposiveness and a teleological organisation, distinguishing natural organisms from mechanical artifacts. Although Kant viewed natural teleology as merely regulative and denied the possibility of scientific knowledge of the organism, the underlying intuition – that nature may be intrinsically rational and purposive – sets the stage for later developments. Wandschneider integrates concepts from Systems Theory, particularly the idea that a system is more than the sum of its parts, characterised by holism. He distinguishes between closed and open systems, emphasizing the organism as an open system in constant interaction with its environment. Drawing on cybernetics, he highlights the organism's capacity for self-regulation, autonomy, intrinsic teleology, and even subjectivity – a notion already present in Hegel's thought as related to the Concept. The analysis culminates in Hegel's accounts of plant and animal life, extending even to Earth as an ecological system. Wandschneider closes with Plessner, whom he regards as the most important thinker of organic nature since Kant and Hegel.

Erzsébet Rózsa's essay *Hegel's Theory of Love as an Attitude to Life* challenges the widespread image of Hegel as a rigid system-builder or apologist for the Prussian state. Surprisingly for some, love plays a central and enduring role in his philosophy. Far from being a marginal theme, it proves essential to understanding his theory of emotions and remains highly relevant to contemporary debates on affectivity – provided it is interpreted with textual precision and philosophical depth, as Rózsa does. The essay traces Hegel's reflections on love across the full arc of his philosophy of spirit. Beginning with his early writings, love is examined in the context of historical development and the tension between religious and philosophical worldviews. There, Hegel attributes to love a fundamental intersubjective and existential significance, positioning it as a force that shapes human relationships. Rózsa then explores how love functions within the frameworks of *subjective* and *objective spirit*. In the former, it is part of a broader theory of emotions and is tied to

natural vitality and the fullness of life, understood not only biologically but also in its existential meaning. In the latter, love becomes a constitutive element of socio-cultural institutions and acquires normative and ethical dimensions. This evolving concept of love retains a unifying function throughout Hegel's system, later integrating into his idea of reconciliation. Finally, the essay follows the manifestations of love within *absolute spirit*, particularly in artistic and religious representations. Ultimately, Rózsa shows how love traverses Hegel's entire philosophy of spirit, emerging not merely as an emotion but as a vital structure of human existence – central to understanding selfhood, community, and the ethical life.

Taken together, the essays in this issue reveal the conceptual richness and enduring relevance of Hegel's conception of life. Far from being a merely historical framework, Hegelian thought continues to inspire new interpretations of the living – from vegetal and animal existence to human subjectivity, social bonds, and even ecological systems. Life, in all its forms, emerges here not as a fixed concept but as a dynamic and evolving reality – one that calls for philosophical reflection as much today as it did in Hegel's time. With its wide-ranging inquiries and diverse approaches, this issue invites us to think life anew: not as something to be mastered or reduced, but as a force to be understood, cultivated, and protected.

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