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## Unfolding Life – The Dialectic of the Living in Hegel's Thought. Philosophical Foundations and Contemporary Resonances

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## ***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)<sup>1</sup>. 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 expressions<sup>2</sup>. 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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

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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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## ***Deduction of the Concept of 'Vitality' in Hegel's Philosophy***



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**Abstract:** In Hegel's philosophy, the dialectic of life is based on the expedient course of the concept. This contribution sets itself the task of conducting a hermeneutical and historical-critical reconstruction of the foundation of Hegel's speculative-dialectical method. The aim is to reveal the philosophical genesis of the concept of 'vitality' and its interrelation with spirit. In such a perspective, the idea of the emergence of living matter, which is opposed to the processes of decomposition in the universe, is proposed. The hypothesis here offers a treatment of negative entropy (negentropy) in terms of Hegel's speculative-dialectical methodology and the spiritual force of the concept that resists the decay of matter. Within such a philosophical conceptualisation arises the concept of vitality, which clarifies the relation between the form of consciousness that a subject can achieve and the energy it will expend to build and structure such a form of consciousness. Of interest is the result that the infinite growth of vitality simultaneously achieves absolute spiritualisation.

**Keywords:** Hegel; speculative-dialectical methodology; self-consciousness; dialectic of life; vitality; Absolute Spirit.

### **I. Introduction**

The problem of life in philosophy was often considered, more thoroughly and extensively, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. It became an alternative to the hegemony of absolute idealism and the absolute power of reason. The philosophy of life [*Lebensphilosophie*] arose as a reaction to the

1 In the title of my article, I use 'concept' instead of 'notion', referring to the argumentation of G. di Giovanni and his *Translator's note* before *The Science of Logic* (2010, Cambridge Edition). I have departed from long standing usage and have translated *Begriff* as "concept" rather than as 'notion'. B. C. Burt also used "concept" in his 1896 translation of Erdmann's *Outlines of Logic and Metaphysics*, for the very good reason that "notion" carries the connotation of being a subjective representation. Its meaning is also much too vague. It should be reserved for precisely such contexts as require a term without too precise a meaning. 'Concept' has the further advantage of being patently connected with 'to conceive', just as *Begriff* is connected with *greifen*, and can easily be expanded into 'conceptual' and "conceptually grasped" or replaced, if need be, with 'comprehension' and 'conceptually comprehended' (Hegel 2010, lxvii-lxviii).

general and classical philosophizing that operated with reason, understanding, and experience<sup>2</sup>. It classified itself as irrational, purely subjective, and non-scientific. That is why some scholars have looked for its foundations earlier, with the Romanticists, such as Fr. Schlegel.

According to the ‘philosophers of life’, the inner spiritual life is different from absolute thought. For instance, Schlegel talks about ‘*vollständiges Bewußtseyn*’ (Schlegel 1827, 6, 15) as a complete consciousness in all of its aspects and capabilities that is opposed to Hegel’s ‘abstract’ categories, on the one hand, and to scientific mechanism and mechanistic philosophy, on the other. The contrast between Hegel’s dialectics and Schlegel’s form of ‘romantic irony’ is noteworthy. Schlegel’s perspective is more similar to I. Kant’s, as he acknowledges that man is unable to comprehend the absolute or unconditioned. The nature of God and the nature of man are entirely distinct. By contrast, Hegel explains the *Selbstverwirklichung* of Absolute Spirit as man’s self-consciousness reflection.

In his famous letter to Schelling, dated 2 November 1800, Hegel elucidated the necessity that propelled him towards scientific development. The youthful ideal had to be given a reflective form – it had to become a system (Hegel 1969, 59). His lectures at Jena that addressed logic, metaphysics, and the philosophy of nature constituted an initial formulation of the comprehensive philosophical system. At Jena, Hegel developed and tested the dialectical methodology that was not a product of the system, but a means of ensuring its consistent construction. With the advent of the dialectical method and its effective application, Hegel commenced his critique of the Romantic tendencies prevalent during his era.

This is what distinguishes him, and it is this shift that the present text will seek to elucidate, in order to arrive at a different and heuristic concept of vitality. This concept of vitality is metaphysical in nature, engaging with the vitality of the spirit and the *Begriff* as the result of the development of the *Absolute Idea*. The aim is to deduce vitality from the concept itself, where it is distinguished as a fundamental element in the activity of reason. Vitality is thus conceived as a state of movement, change, and development.

Later in the nineteenth century, Fr. Nietzsche and W. Dilthey considered themselves to be ‘philosophers of life’. Dilthey developed the foundations of the principle of differentiation between natural and spiritual sciences. Nietzsche brilliantly posed the question of science in general, and its principle of reevaluation. In the perspective of the presented paper, my intention is focused on the hermeneutical and historical-critical reconstruction of the genesis of Hegel’s speculative-dialectical methodology, in order to establish a philosophical concept of vitality as a possible basis for the treatment of negative entropy (hereafter negentropy). This would be an extraction of the philosophical concept of vitality and the heuristically-philosophical interpretation of the essence of negentropy.

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<sup>2</sup> In terms of Kantian philosophy and classical German philosophizing, in J. Fichte, Fr. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel.

In line with Hegel's categories (which are not 'abstract', as Schlegel thought, but rather a concrete and complete knowledge) and his dialectic of life, I reveal a possibility for a philosophical vitalism that reveals a specific form of consciousness. This consciousness rethinks the usual perception of time and poses the question of its being.

Hegel was a critic of both Romantic tendencies and formalism, countering the purely naturalistic formulations that were prevalent during his lifetime. He sought to affirm the role of philosophical science that proceeds from its own method. In a sense, the approach taken in this paper is entirely speculative, in line with the methodology demonstrated by Hegel. This paper aims to present an alternative interpretation that, while differing from the conventional wisdom, is nevertheless grounded in philosophical reasoning and asserts the conceptual foundations of philosophy. The opposing thesis is purely naturalistic, positing that spirit in Hegel is the inevitable outcome of evolutionary processes in nature, representing the pinnacle of organic organisation and development (Beiser 1993, 9; Beiser 2005, 80–87). Indeed, when posed in this manner, the issue in question serves to reinforce a naturalistic interpretation that is in opposition to both the specificity of Hegel's thought and his genuine and earnest aspiration – namely, to establish philosophy as a distinct science with its own unique methodology. It is accurate to conclude that Hegel's engagement with natural philosophy and natural science facilitated the advent of the speculative-dialectical approach. However, this does not substantiate the assertion that his absolute idealism is rooted in organicism.

Consequently, my research focuses on the derivation of the philosophical concept of vitality that is subsequently self-produced and self-projected as the phenomenon of negentropy in contemporary theoretical physics and cosmology. This concept precedes and sets a horizon for the natural sciences. It can be argued that the results of natural science also provide philosophy with material for further analysis. However, my position is that the initial – the philosophical, the metaphysical – is of greater value as the absolute foundation: the self-development and self-disclosure of the Absolute Idea, the Absolute Spirit. Hegel's critique of formalism, romanticism, and naturalistic views is evident in his late Jena lectures. Thus, my historical and critical analysis will focus on their development and further influence on the construction of his speculative method and system.

## **II. Hermeneutical and Historical-critical Reconstruction of the Genesis of Hegel's System and Speculative-dialectical Methodology**

The hermeneutic reconstruction of the emergence of Hegel's speculative-dialectical method requires historical and critical analysis and meticulous examination. It is commonly recognised that there are a few noteworthy and consequential periods in Hegel's philosophical evolution that are connected to the composition of his major works. The rigorous critical and historical analysis of the formation of Hegel's complete system and method, including the emergence of the concepts of self-consciousness (*Phenomenology*

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*of Spirit*) and life (*The Science of Logic*), develops into a sort of hermeneutic reconstruction of them, aiming to show the derivation of the philosophical concept of vitality that subsequently influenced some modern ideas in theoretical physics.

A fundamental issue for historians of Classical German idealism has always been the specific links between the great philosophers. They are intricate, distinctive, and crucial to the development of their philosophical ideas. The association between Schelling and Hegel is no exception. It presents the most vivid example of the necessity that drives the concept's inevitable development, including the enrichment of philosophy in general. Hegel would not have been feasible without Schelling, Fichte, or Kant. What is more essential, however, is that each subsequent representative, in addition to following in the footsteps of his immediate predecessor, must also contradict and therefore supersede him. All of this is a legitimate consequence of philosophical thought's growth. As the zenith of Classical German idealism, Hegel's systematics has an underlying potential for philosophizing the concept of vitality. Accordingly, it is 'vital' to begin with the distinctive relationships and influences between Schelling and Hegel, which also delineate the unique intellectual atmosphere of that time.

Unlike Schelling, who advanced quickly and became a professor at the age of 23, Hegel evolved gradually and slowly towards deep and true philosophical thinking. Philosophically speaking, and in terms of the two great German idealists, I would say that with Schelling everything appears to occur immediately, completely in sync with his late philosophizing, whereas with Hegel everything is the result of strong negation, of heavy mediation, which, it appears, is the most typical expression of his overall philosophizing. Hegel is frequently accused of employing abstract logic and relying on imprecise, vague, and ambiguous categories. The truth is rather the opposite: Hegel was always concerned with natural<sup>3</sup> and historical reality. Schelling, for his part, sets himself the duty of directing philosophy to reality in order to explain the objective dialectic of natural processes.

The most essential thing Hegel takes away from Schelling's philosophical work is the awareness that there is reason in nature, that there is a single creative beginning that projects and unfolds. The revelation of this self-realisation of genesis is the task of both Schelling and, later, Hegel's dialectical thought; however, it should be noted that this begins with Schelling's natural philosophy, which, unlike transcendental philosophy, seeks to explain the ideal by beginning with the real. With Schelling's two pathways – transcendental philosophy and natural philosophy – the concept of identity pervades

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3 Some scholars have advanced the argument for a naturalistic interpretation of Hegel's entire philosophical system, or at the very least, his epistemology, which is said to contain 'naturalistic elements' (Westphal 2003, quoted by Bar 2016, 197–198); moreover, a distinguished researcher and biographer of Hegel, comments that in 1802–1803 Hegel studied natural sciences and mathematics (Pinkard 2000, 186). Such perspectives uphold the assertion that Hegel remains within the confines of Schelling's paradigm and his natural philosophy. This, in turn, is in direct opposition to the ideas presented here regarding the essential transcendence of any preceding philosophical system – a point that Hegel himself repeatedly emphasised. If Hegel is considered 'a lover of nature' (Bar 2016, 198), this does not necessarily align him with the naturalist perspective. The notion of reason's intrinsic disposition might seem a naturalistic intention, but also, it is a self-mediation of the spirit, characterised by a process of self-denial and, consequently, self-knowledge.

the entire system, penetrating all of its individual elements and conclusions. This idea is emphasised even more by Hegel. However, it is worth noting that he was still developing his philosophical system during the Jena period, when he and Schelling were still on good terms.

The principle of identity of thought and being penetrates Hegel's entire system, supports it, and connects all of its aspects together. In Hegel's philosophy, the principle is speculative, objective reason, which is the essence of being, as well as of thinking, of nature and spirit. It is the fundamental substance that defines the essence of all things, yet it is not perceptible to the senses. The organic unity of being and thinking in Hegel does not provide sufficient grounds for positing his philosophical system as naturalistic. In fact, Hegel's perspective and purposefulness in relation to nature are projected through his conception of spirit<sup>4</sup>. Spirit is the concept that presupposes to itself nature, and at the same time, is its result and true form. Hegel states this clearly at the end of his second part of the *Encyclopedia*. At first glance he distinguishes nature and spirit, but he later sublates their bifurcation, in order to expose the true direction and purpose of natural philosophy. Hegel distinguishes "logical life as idea from natural life as treated in the philosophy of nature, and from life in so far as it is bound to spirit" (Hegel 2010, 677). But the concept [*der Begriff*] is "the soul of life itself", it further pursues its inner necessity to reveal and expand itself to the "externality of existence" (Ibid.). In this manner, the German philosopher explicates the emergence of nature from the Absolute idea. By marking the transition from logic to nature, Hegel points out how the idea posits itself as the absolute unity of the pure concept and its reality as centered in the immediacy of being (Hegel 2010, 752).

The historical and critical setting is important, as it is linked to the periodisation of Hegel's life and work. In the first work of the Jena period, *Die Differenzschrift* (1801), Hegel's objective was to underline and highlight Schelling's positive route with respect to Kant and Fichte. This was an affirmation of the category of identity<sup>5</sup>. But, in the spirit of his philosophizing, Hegel was forced to reject Schelling's philosophy, which continued to deny difference at the expense of identity. With this maneuver, Hegel positions his key methodological lever – mediation as a moment of reflection – between himself and Schelling, between dialectical (concrete) identity and abstract identity. This is the moment of the constitution of substance as a self-moving subject, characterised by a process of

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4 The philosophy of nature treats the 'concept of nature itself' and examines it in its immanent necessity [*immanente Notwendigkeit*], based on the self-determination of the concept [*Selbstbestimmung des Begriffs*] (EN § 246, 15). Generally speaking, this is the main interpretation of Hegel's perspective of nature, as a purely idealistic view of nature, "understood on the model of free human subjectivity, hence as a self-organizing whole" (Stone 2013, 62).

5 The pinnacle of Schelling's philosophical system is the concept of absolute identity. It represents an absolute point of indistinctness and indifference, wherein the subject and object are merged. However, Hegel considers such absolute identity to have no methodological potential, which renders it abstract. Rather, absolute identity must be conceived dialectically, that is to say, as the identity of identity and non-identity – "... die Identität der Identität und der Nichtidentität; Entgegensetzen und Einsseyn ist zugleich in ihm" (GW, IV, 64).



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self-negation and sublation. Hegel's dialectical definition of identity as possessing self and difference, and hence the contradiction, is regarded as a dynamic activity and the foundation of the living concept. In fact, one of the objectives of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to distinguish between his and Schelling's views on identity. At this juncture, Hegel began to persuade himself that in order to construct a fundamentally speculative philosophizing, it was necessary to posit reason as a self-fulfilling objective ontological principle. The self-realisation of knowledge eliminates the distinction between the object and the knowledge of it. In the *Phenomenology*, knowledge is properly turned towards itself; it is both knowledge and object *in* and *of* itself – a unity of concept and object that is also the nature of self-consciousness.

Hegel and Schelling's ideological convergence during the Jena period, including their joint articles in the *Kritischer Journal für Philosophie* (1802–03), marked the beginning of their distinction and rift. With the various journal articles, Hegel gradually made his way to the foundations of his philosophical system. He writes reviews of individual works, discusses individual philosophical systems, and examines and critiques specific ways and forms of thinking, in order to lay the foundations of his own speculative-dialectical methodology (GW, IV, 117–128; 197–238; 313–414). In *Jenaer Systementwürfe I-II-III* (1803/04 – 1804/05 – 1805/06), Hegel began to form and express his basically speculative viewpoints, which molded and characterised his idealism and distanced it from ordinary reflection and understanding (Pippin 1989, 60–61).

Hegel was aware that the potential for philosophy to become a science is contingent upon the implementation of a specific methodology, which must be applied in a uniform manner. At the outset of the Jena period, the nascent stages of dialectical thinking are already discernible. However, it is challenging to identify a comprehensive and systematic methodology that is entirely distinct from those that preceded it. Conversely, it can be observed that Hegel, in 1803-04, is still under the influence<sup>6</sup> of Schelling's method, which was developed as a doctrine of the potencies [*Potenzen*]<sup>7</sup>. In his philosophy, the particular (appearance) and the universal (concept) are unified. These elements, however, are not conceived as moments of a dynamic process; rather, they are regarded as fixed, lifeless, schematic, and abstract. This aspect of Schelling's methodology serves to reinforce Hegel's conviction that his approach to philosophical enquiry is unable to fully capture the intrinsic richness of reality. This resulted in a further widening of the rift between the two philosophers. In the development of the Jena works from 1804-06, Hegel's aim is to present his own methodological potential. His goal is to build the paradigm of objective reason (a new form of the speculative) as an alternative to transcendentalism, plain (ultimate) subjectivism, and Schelling's philosophy of identity. In this endeavor, he takes a

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6 One of the earliest forms of Hegel's natural philosophy is undoubtedly his dissertation from 1801, *De orbitis planetarum*. This work is a typical example of the use of Schelling's method by Hegel; moreover, to an even greater extent, this influence is clearly evident that use in the so-called *System der Sittlichkeit*, a work from 1802–1803.

7 In this regard, it may be appropriate to consider Hegel as a naturalist.

historical and systematic approach, challenging Schelling with the power of mediation. At this point, Hegel's works on philosophy of nature [*Jenaer Realphilosophie*] serve a highly valuable function. They do not constitute the philosophical system, but they undoubtedly prepare the ground for it, as evidenced by Hegel's deployment of his novel dialectical method and the substantive aspects of negation within them.

Schelling's understanding of the speculative is characterised by a predominantly analytical approach. Hegel's objective is to demonstrate the synthetic potential of the speculative. The speculative philosophy is a dynamic and vital force, representing the core of his entire philosophical system and the point of greatest intensity in his theoretical framework. Speculative positive rational thinking involves not mere abstraction and simple separation and negation, but rather a double negation. This is manifested as self-mediated movement and activity. It is understood as a sublation of the mediation.

In Hegel's dialectical scheme, each synthesis and new definition constitutes a 'concrete universal'. This concrete universality is not the result of a process of generalisation applied to objects and phenomena; rather, it is a creative, living activity that generates content from itself. The concrete universal, apart from being produced in the process of methodological and systematic construction, is productive, and it derives its content from itself and from there all the diversity of the world. All is the spirit, the negative,

(...) that which constitutes the quality of both the dialectical reason and the understanding: it negates the simple, thereby posits the determinate difference of the understanding; but it equally dissolves this difference, and so it is dialectical. But spirit does not stay at the nothing of this result but is in it rather equally positive, and thereby restores the first simplicity, but as universal, such as it is concrete in itself (Hegel 2010, 10).

The process of the becoming of scientific development works with the method of mediation, which implies both preservation and change, modification. Such a spiritual movement, according to Hegel, is the immanent development of the concept, the soul of the very content as an absolute method of knowledge and dialectical necessary self-unfolding of genesis<sup>8</sup>.

Hegel is not an advocate of a priori conditions and claims. On the contrary, he seeks evidence that is conditioned (mediated) by both experience and reality. His concepts and

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<sup>8</sup> Explaining the essence of Hegel's dialectical method and in the same way trying to eliminate its vagueness, Michael Forster writes: "Beginning from a category A, Hegel seeks to show that upon conceptual analysis, category A proves to contain a contrary category, B, and conversely that category B proves to contain category A, thus showing both categories to be self-contradictory. He then seeks to show that this negative result has a positive outcome, a new category, C (sometimes referred to as the 'negative of the negative' or the 'determinate negation'). This new category unites – as Hegel puts it – the preceding categories A and B. That is to say, when analyzed the new category is found to contain them both. But it unites them in such a way that they are not only preserved but also abolished (to use Hegel's term of art for this paradoxical-sounding process, they are *aufgehoben*). That is to say, they are preserved or contained in the new category only with their original senses modified. This modification of their senses renders them no longer self-contradictory" (Forster 1993, 132). According to the author, this is the one level of dialectics which is now completed. The next level is when the new synthesised category C begins to play the role that was formerly played by category A (Ibid., 133).

categories are initially abstract, but as a result they become tangible. For instance, the concept of life is no exception. Hegel's idea of life is an objective condition of the absolute method. As Karen Ng understands Hegel's concept of life, it is a "living activity in constant development," a central tenet of Hegel's entire system and idealistic views. Finally, it is a necessary presupposition of cognition (Ng 2020, 3, 151 and 256).

The concept is a mediator between life and itself. It teaches us to find life in the concept, and, conversely, the concept in life. The justification of this mediation between concept and life is science itself. Life is the immediate idea, but it is also the concept [*der lebendige Begriff*] (Sell 2013). Hegel explains life dialectically as pure motion. Life is a dialectical process that combines with itself on a physical level. The question, thus, arises as to how such a conception is presupposed by the spirit and, furthermore, how it relates to the structure of self-consciousness. Additionally, it would be beneficial to ascertain whether this absolute method can be applied to the modern treatment of entropy and negentropy.

### III. Hegel's Conceptual Treatment of Self-consciousness and Life

Hegel says: "With self-consciousness, then, we have therefore entered the native realm of truth" (Hegel 1977, 104). As a reflection, self-consciousness proceeds from the being of sensibility and nature – it is a return from otherness. Along with this, life and self-consciousness oppose each other, but only in so far as this is indispensable in the sense of the triad and the insubstantial in the original immediate unity. Unity is real only when it is mediated by its own becoming, this is the nature of the concept, of self-consciousness, of reason and spirit. This is an entirely new beginning for Hegel's philosophizing, whereby self-reflexivity problematises itself as its own becoming. A typical example in this regard is his famous thesis about the living substance as a subject:

This Substance is, as Subject, pure, *simple negativity*, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its anti-thesis [the immediate simplicity]. Only this *self-restoring* sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself – not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such – is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual (Hegel 1977, 10).

These words of Hegel provide compelling justification for some contemporary scholars of Classical German philosophy to accord particular attention to the impact of B. Spinoza on his thought (Waibel 2022, 46). By introducing the dialectical method of reasoning, Hegel elevates the immobility of substance to the level of the subject. In contrast to Schelling, who concentrates exclusively on the substantiality of reason, Hegel is concerned with the necessity for this reason to become a subject. Dialectical methodology is a form of self-centered thinking, characterised by a focus on self-knowledge and an

"inner criterion" (Waibel 2022). This approach is considered a fundamental basis for both scientific enquiry and the acquisition of knowledge in general. This is the rationale behind Hegel's original designation of *Phenomenology* as the science of the experience of consciousness. In this way, the process of scientific development, and the eventual attainment of absolute knowledge, can be elucidated.

In order for an individual to become a spiritual being, it is necessary for them to gain an understanding of the nature of the concept and to become proficient in the dialectical methodology of self-becoming. It is only through this process that fixed ideas become tangible concepts, capable of self-movement and imbued with spiritual potential. The organisation of both the individual and their scientific pursuits is contingent upon the life of the concept – a concept that is explicitly demonstrated by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Determinateness may be considered the animating principle of a fully contented soul. The content does not derive its determination from an external source, but rather endows it with intrinsic value. Accordingly, Hegel presents the concept of determinateness in its general form as a living entity, as the inner life of its existing being. Consequently, the dialectical methodology of enquiry is inextricably linked to the subject matter under investigation and serves to determine its rhythm through its intrinsic being.

Hegel's examination of the development of consciousness focuses on its differentiation from the body, while simultaneously acknowledging the establishment of a profound internal coherence between self-consciousness and the external world. This is manifested in concrete terms as a processual identity between thinking and being. In theoretical terms, Hegel's approach represents a significant advance on that of his predecessors, particularly Schelling. This is the notion of eliminating dichotomies and their corresponding scientific understanding and resolution – not through introspection and contemplation, but through conceptual analysis. The German philosopher's concept of truth as a process, rather than a static, finalised concept of reason, is a key tenet of the work.

This notion posits that truth is not a fixed entity, but rather a historical trajectory of knowledge, progressing from lower to higher forms of understanding. The concrete history of the formation of knowledge provides the evidence. Consequently, there is a direct correlation between self-consciousness and the processes of life and activity, which may be defined as movement. The whole circle is the truth:

(...) not what was expressed at the outset, the immediate continuity and compactness of its essence, nor the enduring form, the discrete moment existing for itself; nor the pure process of these; nor yet the simple taking-together of these moments. Life consists rather in being the self-developing whole which dissolves its development, and in this movement simply preserves itself (Hegel 1977, 108).

Hegel also considers this unfolding of life as a movement within the realm of self-consciousness. This movement reaches the experience of self-awareness regarding the object's independence. In Hegel's view, the concept of life must be considered in logical

terms, given that it is the fundamental premise of any such consideration. The concept of logical life is distinguished from that of natural life:

In *spirit*, however, life appears both as opposed to it and as posited as at one with it, in a unity reborn as the pure product of spirit. For life is here to be taken generally in its proper sense as *natural life*, for 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. Thus life as such is for spirit in one respect a *means*, and then spirit holds it over against itself; in another respect, spirit is an individual, and then life is its body; in yet another respect, this unity of spirit and its living corporeality is born of spirit into *ideality* (Hegel 2010, 677).

In these reflections, the rationale is set forth for the way in which the present text poses the problem of the influence of Hegel's conceptualisation of life on the view of life according to modern researchers in the field of theoretical physics and biophysics, such as E. Schrödinger. It is evident that the conceptualisation of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* plays a pivotal role in mediating the relationship between Hegel's conception of life in the *Logic* and the modern treatment of entropy and negentropy.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* represents a mediating interrelationship between Hegel's *Realphilosophie* and the *Logic*. This represents its most powerful heuristic and methodological potential. Phenomenological mediation progresses from the sensory immediacy to the mental, from the singular to the general, and from the phenomenon to the essence. The absolute knowledge that is reached in this way negates (sublates) the necessity for this phenomenological mediation, and as a result the object is revealed in its intrinsic nature. Consequently, the concept of life in its immediacy initiates a new trajectory towards the mediated, which is the essence of logical mediation.

Phenomenological mediation may be defined as the conceptualisation of self-consciousness as a process of movement and life. In contrast, logical mediation may be defined as the conceptualisation of life as a concept, as self-consciousness, and as spirit. This is also the heuristic interpretation of Hegel himself regarding the concept as such. His innovative approach is to conceptualise the *Begriff* as a moment of the object's own movement, of its entry into and absorption within itself. This stands in contrast to the previous understanding of the concept as a product of ultimate subjectivity, as something dead and motionless, in which there is no life or movement.

In light of these considerations, it seems appropriate to propose a deduction and philosophical interpretation of the concept of life as vitality [*Lebendigkeit*], rather than a vitalistic or naturalistic interpretation of Hegel's entire philosophy. From this perspective, the concept of the *Lebendige* is inextricably linked with the concept of the spirit and the evolution of consciousness. The philosophical essence of vitality is a singular result of the nature of the concept [*der Begriff*] in Hegel. It embodies and represents the self-becoming and self-disclosure of the absolute, of speculative objective reason. Vitality represents a distinctive mode of mediation that elucidates and reflects Hegel's genuine comprehension of dialectics. It is presented in order to demonstrate the "self-organisation" of the subject

matter, its "inner necessity" and "inherent movement" (Beiser 2005, 160)<sup>9</sup>. Hegel posits that the emergence of the spirit presupposes the re-emergence of nature. He states: "The aim of nature is to mortify itself and to pierce its crust of the immediate, the sensible, to burn itself like a phoenix in order to emerge from this exterior rejuvenated as spirit" (EN § 376, 538).

The philosopher argues that the concept of spirit is not merely a metaphysical notion pertaining to nature, but rather that it exists in a pre- and post-natural state. Hegel confirms that the spirit liberates nature from the constraints of its immediate, sensorial form, thereby enabling it to act in accordance with its intrinsic necessity. In doing so, spirit is also set free.

The concept of vitality is thus derived from the fundamental principles of the speculative-dialectical method and constituted through a process whereby spirit is presupposed, and subsequently, life is transferred from nature back into spirit. The evolution of spirit is an intrinsic process that is not contingent upon external influences. This dialectical setting expresses the relation between the development of the spirit and the energy expended in bringing about that development as a completed form.

Attaining genuine spirituality necessitates attaining a state of synchronisation between human self-consciousness and the spiritual self/substance. In the context of human self-consciousness, it is understood that spirit manifests in its purest and most powerful form. The capacity for self-conscious observation enables the discernment of the manifestation and becoming of spirit, which in this context is the process of free and autonomous development of the self-conscious form. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to achieve synchronisation between human self-consciousness and concrete spirituality. This would facilitate comprehension of the metaphysical concept of vitality and enable the attainment of new forms of consciousness and perception of the self and the surrounding world.

#### **IV. Hermeneutical Treatment of the Concept of 'Negentropy'**

Hegel's dialectic of the concept and life provides an explanation and conceptualisation of the metaphysical concept of vitality. The dialectic of self-consciousness and its outcome – the concept of spirit – illustrates how the determinations of life evolve, resulting in a distinctive level of vitality. The concept of vitality is only fully comprehensible when the specific relationship between nature and spirit is conceptualised in a dialectical unity where everything occurs from within. The attunement of human self-consciousness is in accordance with this dialectical unity. In essence, the overarching perspective is dialectical

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<sup>9</sup> Fr. Beiser shows this unique understanding of Hegel: "The dialectic is what follows from the concept of the thing. It is flatly contrary to Hegel's intention, therefore, to assume that the dialectic is an a priori methodology, or indeed a kind of logic, that one can apply to any subject matter. The dialectic is the very opposite: it is the inner movement of the subject matter, what evolves from it rather than what the philosopher applies to it" (Beiser 2005, 160).

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in nature, and the speculative-dialectical method is employed throughout. It is important to reiterate the historical and critical context in which the speculative-dialectical method emerged, as it provides the foundation for the metaphysical concept of vitality presented here.

As we approach and eventually achieve the philosophical underpinnings of vitality, we also inevitably encounter other issues. The metaphysical concept of vitality is frequently linked with a number of disparate ideas, including animal magnetism (or mesmerism), alternative healing practices, energy healing, hypnotism, spiritualism, and a range of parapsychological and pseudoscientific hypotheses. It is important to note that Hegel's speculative-dialectical approach to conceptualizing vitality differs significantly from these other approaches, and thus merits further examination. In contrast to approaches that rely on subjective evaluations, Hegel's methodology could provide a new framework for understanding vitality from a scientific (i.e., metaphysical<sup>10</sup>) perspective, which in turn could relate to modern scientific ideas. In this context, the concepts of entropy and negentropy in physics are particularly relevant.

Entropy and negentropy are both interdependent and mutually exclusive. The concept of entropy was initially delineated by scientists through the utilisation of the Greek term denoting 'transformation'. The etymology of this Greek word offers insight into the nature of entropy. The term 'transformation' implies a departure from a preexisting form or structure. It signifies the dissolution of the formative aspects of content, which can be conceptualised as a process of disorder. This is not a formative process, but rather one that is destructive in nature. Entropy is typically conceived as a measure of disorder in a closed (isolated) system. However, it can also serve as a catalyst for the emergence of new phenomena from chaos. Haukedal and Mylonas heuristically "demonstrate that a dialectical understanding of entropy and anti-entropy is able to accommodate the productive dimension of the former" (Haukedal & Mylonas 2023, 2). Some physicists posit that the advent of human consciousness is an inevitable consequence of cerebral evolution<sup>11</sup>. They propose that the brain's emergent property, known as 'entropy in the brain', strives to optimise information exchange.

Nevertheless, the views of neuroscientists and cognitive scientists offer an alternative perspective. The hypothesis has been put forth that consciousness does not evolve but rather self-creates evolution from the Big Bang to the present day. In order to establish a connection between these two perspectives, it is necessary to employ dialectical thinking for the purpose of philosophical interpretation. In this context, the

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that I do not view the metaphysical as a counterpoint to the dialectical. Rather, I consider the metaphysical to be the primordial foundation and driving force behind the dialectical, and thus a necessary intersection with the speculative-dialectical. This is the pervasive logos, though insensible and in fact supersensible, yet not esoteric or mystical in nature. Indeed, Hegel himself advances this thesis in the preface to the first edition of *The Science of Logic* (Hegel 2010, 7–8).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, the above-mentioned naturalistic interpretation of Hegel's philosophy stays in the same perspective.

concept of vitality can be utilised as a means of achieving this objective.

In his seminal work *What is Life?* (1944), Erwin Schrödinger sets forth his philosophical and scientific approach to understanding the essence of life, with a reference to Theorem 67 in Part IV of B. Spinoza's *Ethics*: "There is nothing a free man ponders less than death; his wisdom is to meditate not on death but on life" (Schrödinger 1967, 2). One should engage with life and endeavor to unravel its mysteries. The pinnacle of human wisdom is to contemplate life rather than death. Spinoza's perspective is somewhat limited in scope. The individual who is prepared to engage in reflection on the subject of death and confront it directly is not daunted by it; rather, they attempt to provide an explanation. Furthermore, from a Hegelian perspective, the enigmas of life can be elucidated through the lens of an understanding of death (EN § 374, 534; EN § 375, 536). It is possible that Schrödinger was drawn to Spinoza's theorem due to the nature of its proof. The impulse to act, live, and preserve one's existence represents a fundamental human instinct. In Chapter VI of his treatise, the Austrian physicist addresses the issues of order, disorder, and entropy, and introduces the concept of negentropy. Chapter VI begins again with a quote from Spinoza and his *Ethics*, which is probably not coincidental:

(...) Nec corpus mentem ad cogitandum, nec mens corpus ad motum, neque ad quietem, nec ad aliquid (si quid est) aliud determinare potest. SPINOZA, *Ethics*, Pt III, Prop. 2 (Neither can the body determine the mind to think, nor the mind determine the body to motion or rest or anything else (if such there be) (Schrödinger 1967, 67).

Schrödinger wrote this book to address the problem of living matter, which involves the emergence of "other laws of physics" that were previously unknown (Ibid., 68). He posits that the genuine laws of physics are, in fact, "statistical laws" that are intimately connected to the natural tendency of matter to move towards disorder (Ibid.). The advent of quantum theory has led to a significant modification of the classical laws of physics. Schrödinger identifies order as a significant aspect of life. The laws of physics that govern the non-organic world, including the Second Law of Thermodynamics<sup>12</sup> (the entropy principle), do not apply to living organisms.

The concept is based on the principle of self-preservation, which involves the avoidance of rapid decay into an inert state of equilibrium and, ultimately, death. Even living organisms exhibit a tendency towards maximum entropy, which is a natural process (Ibid., 70).

(...) Thus, a living organism continually increases its entropy, or produces positive entropy, and tends to approach the dangerous state of maximum entropy, which is death. It can only remain alive by continually drawing negative entropy from its environment, which is a very positive thing as we shall see. An organism feeds on negative entropy (Ibid., 71).

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<sup>12</sup> "The principles of thermodynamics, especially the second law, apply only to inert objects. Life is an exception to the second law, and a new principle of life will have to explain conditions contrary to the second law" (Otsuka 2018, 2157).



As posited by Schrödinger, the organism's capacity to liberate itself from the entropy it generates during its lifetime is a pivotal factor in metabolic processes (Ibid).

Engaging with Schrödinger's paradoxical and controversial thought is essential, as it is pivotal for establishing a connection with Hegel's speculative-dialectical method. All systems, including living organisms, exhibit a tendency to accumulate opposing properties and characteristics, which ultimately transform them into their antithesis. The very nature of living organisms is paradoxical and controversial. From a natural perspective, it is to be expected that living organisms (simply creatures with lower forms of consciousness) will gradually increase their entropy and follow the 'order-disorder' direction. Conversely, living (spiritual) organisms tend to self-produce maximum negative entropy in order to maintain their own survival, resist disorder, and preserve themselves, following the opposite direction of 'disorder-order'.

This concept is closely aligned with Hegel's speculative-dialectical understanding of the nature of reality. The capacity for self-preservation and self-organisation is a defining feature of all living organisms, manifesting in both material and conscious forms, but with different intensity, and consequently, in different directions. Accordingly, the philosophical interpretation of negentropy is inclined to focus on self-consciousness (and more specifically, the spirit) rather than on information. In the field of philosophical science, the primary subject matter is self-consciousness, which is not to be confused with the physicists' comprehension of information.

In philosophical science as understood through speculative Hegelian dialectics, the examination of the subject matter is undertaken for its intrinsic value (Beiser 2005, 160). The tendency of life to gravitate towards maximum entropy is counterbalanced by its inherent capacity to resist this process through the consumption of negentropy. In its universal spiritual form, natural life is capable of both halting and transforming the negative aspects of the entropy process, which ultimately gives rise to concrete life in its individual form.

This is not merely a recuperation of the original abstract form of the unity of spiritual and natural life; rather, it is a novel and concrete universality that is mediated by the active (i.e., speculative-dialectical) and constructive aspect of the spirit. This process represents a speculative-dialectical synchronisation of the natural and the spiritual realms. The concepts of entropy and negentropy, and their interaction, illustrate the self-organisation of systems and the vital force inherent in living organisms. This vital force is spiritual in nature and serves as the driving force behind the speculative-dialectical process. The philosophical treatment of negentropy adheres to the stages of the speculative-dialectical method: "The dialectic through which the object itself as nothing in itself, is the activity of the self-conscious living being, which in this process against an inorganic nature hereby preserves itself, develops and objectifies itself" (EN, § 219, 375).

The organic<sup>13</sup> and the inorganic are in a state of dynamic equilibrium, with the

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13 It would be remiss not to mention the study of Annette Sell, entitled *Der lebendige Begriff. Leben*

former exerting a dominant influence over the latter. In Hegel's terminology, inorganic nature is 'in itself' [*an sich*] what the living is 'for itself' [*für sich*]. Life is in a constant state of conflict with inorganic forces, and the genus ultimately prevails:

(...) The living entity perishes due to the contradiction inherent in its nature. It is both the common, the genus, and yet exists immediately only as the singular. In death, the genus demonstrates its capacity to exert control over the immediately singular (EN, § 221, 376). (...) The death of the immediate single vitality is the genesis of the spirit (Ibid., § 222).

The degree of negentropy is understood as systematisation, according to Otsuka (Otsuka 2018, 2158). It is the key concept in understanding the influence of Hegel's speculative-dialectical methodology projected in the realm of theoretical physics. Negentropy as a process is understood as evidence of self-consciousness's (spiritual) impact on the living organism and its survival. The philosophical perspective is of paramount importance in this context. It is a fallacious assumption to believe that these processes occur exclusively at the organic, purely natural and physical level. Conversely, it is the spiritual substance that instigates a process of negentropy, which occurs, certainly, within the natural tendency of the entropy process itself. The phenomenon of negentropy is a consequence of the spiritual-natural (i.e., in terms of speculative-dialectical, not strictly physical) process of entropy; the two are inextricably linked. For instance, the universe develops in accordance with the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In the universe, matter is created and subsequently degraded, ultimately succumbing to thermal degradation due to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. However, living matter resists this process of degradation and instead experiences a phenomenon known as negentropy. It can therefore be concluded that life in the universe serves to retard this process of decay, thus giving rise to the metaphysical and spiritual concept of vitality.

The phenomenon in physics illustrates the relationship between the information that a system is capable of producing and the energy that it expends in order to structure that information. In Hegel's philosophy, vitality emerges through the speculative dialectic of life, as outlined and characterised by the interaction between nature and spirit, both in *Phenomenology* and the advent of self-consciousness to the form of spirit, and in the *Logic*, where the concept of life is under examination, from its abstract to its concrete form. Vitality is observed to increase at the core of this logical mediation, which is conceptualised as a degree of consciousness that takes into account the synchronisation of organic and spiritual elements. Accordingly, the concepts of entropy and negentropy were subjected to hermeneutic analysis with a view to developing a heuristic metaphysical conceptualisation of vitality and potential new interpretations.

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*und Logik bei Hegel* (Sell 2013), which is worthy of further investigation. In this work the author considers the concept of life as a methodological concept, from which modern theories of self-organisation, constructivist philosophy, and the philosophy of biology, among others, are derived.

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## V. Conclusion

Contemporary scholars of Hegel's philosophy and the speculative-dialectical method share his concerns about the mediating relationship between the German thinker's logical categories and empirical reality. In this context, the explication of the concept of life, of vitality, as a result of speculative dialectics and its conceptualisation as a phenomenon in biophysics and neuroscience also presents difficulties. Nevertheless, the same authors still acknowledge a possible application of the dialectical method to empirical reality, at least as a dialectical apposition of this empirical reality (Williamson 2016, 7–8). Hegel presents the dialectical aspect of empirical reality as a transition between the sciences. The aforementioned example is particularly evident in the field of philosophy of nature, as well as in the transitions between the physical sciences and the biological sciences, including the transitions between mechanics and physics, physics and organics, and hence to anthropology: "The dialectical method can thus be productively employed in examining the transition from e.g. chemistry to biology, that is, in examining the metaphysical emergence of the category of life in physical reality" (Williamson 2016, 8).

This conceptual and historical-critical analysis explores Hegel's understanding of life and its relationship to the philosophical concept of vitality. The analysis also presents some examples and comparisons with contemporary theoretical physics, with the objective of demonstrating the relevance of Hegel's speculative-dialectical methodology and its applicability to such natural-scientific problems. This ultimately gave rise to a re-evaluation of the nature of time, the dynamics of matter, and their relationship to self-consciousness. The conventional interpretation of time is founded upon the notion of causality, which serves to elucidate the distinctive facets of time, namely the past, the present, and the future. The evolution of the universe, as postulated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, illustrates the 'arrow of time' – the linear progression of time through the development and transformation of material particles.

In accordance with contemporary theoretical physics, the universe is posited to have originated with 10–11 dimensions, which subsequently underwent a process of cooling and contraction to attain its current state of four dimensions (three spatial and one temporal). In contrast, at the macroscopic level, time is understood to be a function of the dynamics of matter. This leads to the question of whether time exists independently of material particles. In other words, is it possible that time and consciousness (spirit) exist in parallel and in an interdependent relationship? In the material world, time progresses in a linear fashion – from the past to the future. However, in the spiritual realm, the concept of time is not applicable, and the boundaries between time and space are transcended. It is also pertinent to draw a parallel with physics: A. Einstein's theory of relativity describes the structure of the material world, whereas quantum mechanics has been proposed as a framework for describing the spiritual world, including consciousness, due to the absence

of time in the quantum vacuum.

Hegel posits that the concept exists free from temporal domination, and it is the power of time and matter: the natural and finite are subject to time, whereas spirit is eternal (EN § 258, 49–50). Within this philosophical framework, it is important to note that the deduction presented here – regarding the growth of vitality and the possibility of achieving new forms of consciousness – suggests a perspective from which the nature of time perception may be questioned. This is also the case in reverse, as the process is two-way: a different perception of time would promote an increase in vitality and, consequently, the regeneration of living organisms.

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## ***Tending and Logic between Bardili and Hegel: The Operativity of Reason beyond the Philosophy of the Subject***



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**Abstract:** The paper traces some stages in the process of the speculative emancipation of the *Trieb* in Post-Kantian philosophy with the aim of reconstructing the context that allows explaining the outcomes of the treatment given to it by Hegel in the *Science of Logic*. Initially, some elements that underlie the speculative assimilation of the concept of *Trieb* in the course of the development of post-Kantian philosophy are presented, and in a second step, the position of an author central to the development of Hegel's *Logic*, namely Christoph Gottfried Bardili, is discussed. The theory of the drive developed by Bardili in *Grundriss der ersten Logik* makes possible a clearer understanding of the different levels at which Hegel makes use of the notion of *Trieb* in the doctrine of the concept and particularly in the understanding of teleology developed in *Wissenschaft der Logik*. The overall purpose is to show how the debate on *Trieb* does not take the form of the evolution of a purely anthropological interpretation, oriented toward a supposed critique of 'subjectivity', but rather is the result of its integration in a speculative sense.

**Keywords:** Hegel; Bardili; tending; the concept of *Trieb*; teleology; realism.

### **I. Tending, Life and Reason**

The post-Kantian debate and the rise of so-called German Idealism have opened new perspectives on the philosophical understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and reality. Traditionally, idealism has been interpreted as a phenomenalism that reduces the real to a result of subjective performance. This is a position that some thinkers, such as Jacobi, have labelled as nihilism or a form of self-enclosed subjectivism. However, recent literature has challenged this view. Through extensive and detailed historical and textual reconstruction, also linked to the acquisition of new materials, a different trend has emerged. According to this tendency the core of so-called 'German Idealism' could be seen not as a denial of the real in its autonomy, but as a reaffirmation of it in non-empirical terms.

This alternative view proposes that the real is not simply a projection of the mind, but a manifestation or concretisation of an absolute, understood as an extra-subjective operativity rather than a static entity. Idealism is thus transformed into a new kind of realism. The absolute is accepted as the living and operative ground of reality itself, in light of a richer and more complex view of the interaction between mind and world and of a holistic solution that conceives of seemingly opposite polarities as manifestations or articulations of an underlying unity (for this thesis see the extensive and recent treatments by Lorini 2015 and Theilke 2013).

The holism that develops in the process of discussing Kant's philosophy is particularly relevant to the contemporary problematisation of the structure and nature of life. It overcomes the alternative between mechanism and vitalism and renews teleological thinking beyond the complications of its association with creationism. Philosophers such as Fichte, Reinhold, Schelling and Hegel were protagonists of this development, which transforms the anthropological or philosophical-natural lexicon into a speculative sense and conceives of reason as a hyper- or supra-intentional propositionality that cannot be identified with the performance of an individual subject.

A significant example of this movement within post-Kantian philosophy is the reflection on instinctive life, which emerges as a dimension that is identified neither with the anthropological aspect derived from the analysis of the subject nor with the biological aspect derived from that of the organism. Tending, in its different meanings of effort, impulse, drive and tendency, no longer expresses, or not only, the unconscious dimension of the subject's conscious performance. It reflects, rather, an implicit operation of reason, which manifests itself through these subjective performances, as well as in the historical, ethical, biological structuring of the real as such<sup>1</sup>.

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1 The flexibility that characterizes the semantic field of the tendency is due to the structural hypertrophy that the word *Trieb* assumes throughout German philosophy between the 18th and 20th centuries, which has to be traced back to a work of condensation that the German language carried out in the Enlightenment era with regard to words, whose origin was predominantly anthropological, such as *nisus*, *appetitus*, *impetus*, *conatus*, *instinctus*, or expressions frequent in the philosophy of nature at the end of the 19th century, such as *Bewegung*, *Neigung*, *Anstoss*, *Streben* etc. A 'conceptual history' of this phenomenon, which accounts for and justifies this flexibility, has already been carried out (see Cesa 1993; Fabbri Bertolotti 1990; Buchenau 2002). What stands out as the historiographical presupposition of the research on this topic is the valid observation that the origin of the philosophical understanding of the concept of drive should not only be found in the development of the philosophy of nature (as Drouet 1972 claims), but also in a specifically ethical-anthropological context. By 'anthropology' is to be understood that philosophical perspective – which matures in the middle and late Enlightenment – referring to the investigation of human nature, which does not yet arrive at a separation between body and soul, aiming to keep together the scope of psychological research, concerning the faculties of the human spirit, which touches on the moral implications of this investigation. This perspective was developed by important authors of pre-Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, such as Tomasius, Wolff, Heydenreich, Abicht, Reinhold etc. In this historical context, the focus on the concept of impulse makes it possible to explain the human being as a "finite rational being", that is, as an entity who acts in a world, who has a specific rational and emotional constitution that motivates his action, which, moreover, develops concretely in the relationship with other human beings, who form the community of which he is a part. The aim of this paper is to show how this anthropological dimension of the *Trieb* shifts towards a speculative horizon that does not only identify the performances of the concrete subject, but rather the extrasubjective structure of reason that is articulated through subjective performances.

It is well known how Hegel's thought is characterized by a deepening of this concept and how tending should not be seen, for Hegel, only as an epiphenomenon of life. It represents the very core of pure thought in its internal dialectical movement, or the pure energy of thought itself, independent of any specific subject or mental capacity. This position of Hegel can be seen to emerge from a complex path in which two dimensions appear to intertwine. The first is that of a critique of subjectivity understood as self-empowerment, of which tending, in its articulations, is a fundamental expression (Franks 2006, 298). The second is an assimilation of tending from the anthropological dimension of the investigation of subjectivity into a speculative dimension (Zöller 2000, 201–202; also, see Buchenau 2002, 12; for the comprehensive treatment see Gambarotto 2018). Research on these topics has greatly enhanced historical-scientific inquiry, highlighting how a certain de-subjectification of tending has a consistent impact on an understanding of nature as a process that cannot be traced to an abstract causalism<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the need for a historical and conceptual deepening of the process of speculative emancipation of tending, through which the anthropological (or anthropological-transcendental) dimension is assimilated to a more significantly metaphysical dimension, still seems to be alive.

In this paper I will try to show some stages of this emancipation process and I will try to reconstruct a context to explain Hegel's outcomes. I will begin by presenting some elements that underlie the speculative assimilation of the concept of *Trieb* in the course of the development of post-Kantian philosophy and will focus, in a second step, on the position of an author central to the development of Hegelian logic, namely Gottfried Bardili (a bio-bibliographical profile of Bardili can be found in Klemme 2016, 37–40). The theory of the impulse [*Impuls*] developed by Bardili in the *Grundriss der ersten Logik*, a work that Hegel certainly knew, makes possible a clearer understanding of the different levels at which Hegel makes use of the notion of *Trieb* in the doctrine of the concept and in particular in the understanding of teleology developed in the *Wissenschaft der Logik*. Beyond a resumption of the philosophical-historical discussion of the topic, my general purpose is to show how the debate on *Trieb* does not take the form of the evolution of a purely anthropological interpretation, oriented toward a supposed critique

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2 Notable in this regard is the research inspired as early as Lenoir 1980 and developed in more recent years (significant research in this regard is worth mentioning: Gambarotto 2018 and Kisner-Noller 2022). The former aims to one-side German life sciences of the period as arising from a unified Kant-Blumenbach research program, showing exactly the limits of the Kantian appropriation of the *Bildungstrieb* debate, and the latter aims to show how this debate is received in the post-Kantian discussion. Gambarotto's book has the merit of showing how historically the debate on *Trieb* emancipates itself from the discussion of the subject in favor of a general problematisation of nature as organism and a conception of mechanism that is not exclusively reducible to external causal connections (Gambarotto 2018, 18). The collective volume published by Kisner and Noller has the merit of showing how the terms of this debate are developed in a specifically philosophical context on the basis of the assumption that a purely mechanical view of nature cannot account for the complexity of the living (Kisner-Noller 2022, 4–5). In both cases, and especially in the case of Kisner and Noller, there is a lack of justification for the forms in which the philosophical assimilation of the impulse takes place and the way in which this concept, in philosophy, no longer identifies a specific living being, but the general structure of reason.



of ‘subjectivity’, but rather is the result of its integration in a speculative sense. This also suggests that the current valorisation of the hyper-subjective side of consciousness does not stand in a critical perspective to the alleged modern subjectivism, culminating in so-called German Idealism, but rather deepens and radicalizes some of its genuine implications (Beiser 2008, 2–3).

## II. From the Formative Force to Reason

Hegel’s position, an expression of a ‘realist’ reaction to the alleged idealism of the Jena-period Reinhold and Fichte (Onnasch 2006), can also be seen as a synthesis between the developments of the new biological science and those of the specifically philosophical discussion, with Kant, beyond Kant (an exhaustive reconstruction of Bardili’s influences on Fichte, Schelling and Hegel can be found in Zahn 1965; Onnasch 2006; Valenza 1994; on the speculative assimilation of the impulse in Hegel see Nuzzo 2022, 283 ff., and Wittmann 2006, who follows the same line; and Kunio 1988, who dwells only on the anthropological horizon, neglecting its speculative dimension). The synthesis of these factors unfolds in a path through which tending becomes, from a tool for the subjective interpretation of natural phenomena, a general determination of the representational connection between subject and object and, finally, a dynamic all internal to the concretisation of reason, understood as extra-subjective operativity. Underlying this path, we can identify at least three relevant factors.

The first Involves a rethinking of the results of Kantian reflection in the Third Critique. Here Kant argues that organized beings are not mere machines, since they possess in themselves a formative force [*Bildungskraft*] that is an expression of a self-propagating formative power inexplicable through mere capacity for movement (i.e., mechanism, AK, V, 374), which is communicated to matter that does not need to organize itself. But insofar, organisation as such is not traceable to a physical force, the concept of a thing as a natural end cannot be constitutive of reason or intellect, but only as a regulative concept for the force of reflective judgment, the teleological characteristics of organized beings should not be considered as ontologically definitive properties, but rather attributed to the way we understand them (AK, V, 376). This principle should guide our research on objects of this kind, considering their teleological characteristics only heuristically. However, Kant fails to consistently separate the concept of finalism from that of intention. He argues that teleology cannot find a complete answer to its inquiries except in a theology, highlighting an unstable position between mechanical and technical explanations of teleology, leading to the antinomy between mechanical inexplicability and illegitimacy of the technical-theological argument. On the other hand, Kant paves the way to overcome a technical understanding of teleology, but ends up blurring the conceptual distinction between internal and external finality, interpreting the former as the latter, that is, understanding teleology exclusively as the result of a subjective

intention. This represents a significant limitation in his philosophy, as he fails to conceive of finality outside the model of practical-technical action, thus denying the possibility of scientifically explaining the teleological characteristics exhibited by organized beings (a reconstruction of the assumptions and historical-philosophical implications of this passage have been summarized by Zamitto 2022).

The second factor consists in an emancipation of the tending from the context of biological science and its return to the set of theoretical and practical components that define the subject's forms of access to the world. In § 86 of the third book of the *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Faculty of Representation*, where he lays out the basic outlines of the theory of the faculty of desire, Reinhold understands drive not as a force of the subject or a property of the object of nature, but as a function for understanding the relationship between the formal or material element that motivates representation and the limits imposed by the representational form<sup>3</sup>. In this way, the drive reflects the result of the tension between the totality of the determinations of an object and the fact that the latter can only be partially understood through the representational filter (more on this in Selling 1938, esp. 58 ff., and Fabbianelli 2011). It is from this correlation that the object acquires meaning and it is through this correlation that the object can not be reduced to a mere thing, but understood as a represented object. In this way, the drive is released from a purely philosophical-natural context and rather indicates a form of relationship, or a function of consciousness, rather than a psycho-physically active force.

The third element is related to this conclusion and offers a deeper insight into the functional interpretation of tending. It can be found in Bardili's *Grundriss* and shares similarities with elementary philosophy. In the *Grundriss*, in fact, Bardili understands thought and matter as parts of a single fundamental principle common to mind and world, thinking (GEL, 1–2). By this term he does not mean the property of a subject, but a general meaningfulness common to subject and nature (GEL, 4) or, as Frege would say, the sense that is repeated and remains constant in every concrete act of thought (see Frege 1918–1919, 19; for further insights in this regard, see Bondeli 2018). Thinking, in its purest form, is therefore similar to the act of counting, as distinct from calculating, since it is based on the infinite repeatability of a unity constantly identical to itself, unconditioned by external elements. Unlike calculus, which involves externality, counting is a self-determined and self-referential process, operating within the confines of its structure and a priori (GEL, 2). At the same time, the identity of thinking is not static, nor is it closed upon itself. It is also determinative of the meaning of a specific cognitive or conative act. In its infinite repeatability it implies the possibility that each repetition is distinct from the others and, therefore, that thought binds itself to another than itself, or to matter (GEL, 4, 15–17). Thought and matter would, thus, be parts of an original disjunction through which this

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<sup>3</sup> "I call the *impulse* of the representative subject the relation of representational force to the possibility of representation, determined *a priori* in its faculty, the relation of force to its faculty, of the foundation of actual reality to the foundation of the possibility of representation, that is, to representability" (Reinhold 1789, 560).

meaningfulness is extrinsic in representative knowledge and in the very constitution of an object for individual consciousness.

Tending in this context does not represent a subjective element or a force of organized matter, but the very act of thinking not yet fully brought to consciousness. In this sense it represents a pure passivity, or even a mere 'being' of reason, insofar as it reflects the mere being of thinking. Bardili thus assimilates an aspect of Reinholdian elementary philosophy, tracing tending back to the internal structure of rationality<sup>4</sup>. This, however, in line with what Hegel would later argue, is not a subjective function that emerges from a purification from the empirical<sup>5</sup>, but rather the very movement of reason, which common consciousness perceives, and philosophy disclosed in its logic.

### III. Impulse through Matter in Bardili's Logical Realism

Resuming the results of a development already defined in his early writings (see on this the interpretation of Tognini 1976, 794–796), with the *Grundriss* Bardili provides a unified interpretation of the conative dimension of rationality in which the nature of the human being is presented through a kind of rational psychology that prompts him to understand the subject's practical performance as a development that leads gradually from sensibility to reason<sup>6</sup>. In his 1800 work, as well as in *Briefwechsel über das Wesen der Philosophie* with Reinhold, published in 1804, Bardili develops these conclusions more radically, but not with the aim of describing the structures of the human spirit. Indeed, he is convinced that this description must be the correlate of a doctrine of the general structure of reason understood as a 'rhythm' shared by subject and nature, thought and being, consciousness and world (BW, 105, Karsch 1925, 439). As Tarli rightly argues, "Bardili's ambition is not to deduce the conditions of possibility of the conceptualisation of reality (...) but to grasp the logicity of the real" (Tarli 2022, 54; GEL, 13–14)<sup>7</sup>. Bardili's

4 It was already Fichte who noted this closeness of Bardili's pre-Bardili logic to Reinhold's elementary philosophy in his 1800 review of the *Grundriss* (cf. GA, I, 6, 436–438).

5 This is a critique closely resembling the one Hegel addressed to Fichte in the *Differenzschrift* (see Hegel 1971, 49). However, the same criticism could be levelled at Bardili's philosophy, since rational realism consists either of pure formalism that achieves no materiality, or of completely material knowledge that loses its formal purity and can be reduced to mere individual and empirical knowledge (Hegel 1971, 101). According to Hegel, the only possibility to trigger this alternative would be to forget oneself in love, faith and the effort to fix knowledge according to analysis, method and discussion (Hegel 1971, 102).

6 The psycho-physical dimension of volition as a starting point and central element for the construction of a practical philosophy appears from the very beginning of the 1795 writing (see Bardili 1795, 1–3 and 18, where the will does not appear as an externally-experienced property of the individual but as a dynamic center evident in its practical [desires, volitions] and epistemic [intellectual performances] manifestations; on this see also Paimann 2009, 33).

7 In a word, and against Kant, the *erste Logik* denies the possibility of a transcendental logic and reduces critical philosophy to psychologism (GEL, 358–359). This means that the more a philosophy is based on subjectivity, defined essentially by the relationship with what is other than thought, the more it is empirical. Particularly insightful in this sense is Barone's observation (Barone 1999, 202) that the formation of Bardili's philosophy marks "with full evidence" the "subordination of the same transcendental logic to metaphysical logic" with the consequent process of "removing

‘first logic’, in other words, provides for the formalisation of the laws that allow for the direct understanding of the objectivity of the real, freeing it from any epistemological agent. For Bardili, the only certain being is not that of the subject, but that of the object-thought, which, at the logico-noematic and ontological level, is independent of both judgments and representations (GEL, 17–19; Tarli 2022, 55).

Beginning with the original and extraphenomenal objectivity of thinking, the understanding of phenomena, and of their objective reality, would only be the result of a ‘subjectification’ of thinking itself, which, applying to itself, enters into a relation with a matter, which is not given, but postulated as a function of the internal structure of thinking. Phenomenal objectivity can thus be produced only as a correlate of this repetition, at the moment when matter is, even if only partially, assimilated by thinking and configured as an ‘object’ for knowledge (GEL, 69). At the level of the application of thinking, an *Ur-Teilung* (GEL, 67), that is, an original division, is produced between thought and matter, according to which matter offers itself to thought and is annulled in it. But this annulment concerns only what of matter can be made the object of a specific predication. The object, in fact, is seen as the synthesis of possibility (i.e., possible predication) and actual reality (realized predication), and only realized predication is assimilated into thinking (GEL, 68 ff.). However, this general structure needs to be further specified. The synthesis of possibility and reality defines an object in general. But there must be a *plus* that distinguishes a certain object from all others constituted in the same way. This “plus” is the very act of concrete thinking (or preaching) that reflects a specific and unrepeatable direction of thinking which, in turn, exhibits the ineradicable residue of matter in its process of assimilation to thought. Bardili identifies this ‘plus’ with an impulse [*Impuls*] (GEL, 104), which thought, unable to bring back to itself, ‘transfers’ to the matter to which it is applied. Again, the impulse, like all the other elements that appear in the Bardilian description, is not something given by matter or present in matter. Rather, it is thought in matter from thought. The impulse is for [*für*] thought, insofar as it relates to the genesis of concrete thinking. But it is through [*durch*] matter, because it defines the residual element of matter that can no longer be cancelled and constitutes its intrinsic form. The specifically realist feature of Bardilian logic thus lies in the fact that matter as matter cannot be known in an absolute sense. Only the form, that is, that dimension which is assimilated into thought, can be known of it. Matter ‘in itself’ thus remains an inconceivable X, corresponding to that which resists its process of dissolution in thought and also to that which, irreducible to it, binds it in a specific direction. The impulse through matter is thus the vital act of thought, uncategorized and uncategorisable, but the presupposition of all conceptual construction. It shows how thought is not simply an in-itself, but also a for-itself and through-itself: immanent movement that is externalized in the phenomenality of limited and contradictory, individual and finite thinking. Bardili rightly speaks of an *Impuls*,

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Kantism, which was initiated with the declared purpose of faithfully developing the necessary implications of it”.

insofar as the dynamism of thinking is not resolved in an actual causality or creation of matter, but is reflected in the forms through which matter itself can be assimilated, and represented, in individual thinking. Bardilian impulse thus embodies the general conceptual characteristics of the *Trieb*: it reflects an immanent limitation of thinking, it impels thinking to materialize in a certain direction, it is unconceptualisable, because it makes conceptual forms possible, and it is immediate, being the presupposition of all further mediation. Finally, while being “*durch die Materie*,” the impulse does not belong to matter as such, but to matter as related to the process of repetition, or application, of thinking, that is, related to the formal side of matter. In its immanent, simple, immediate and unconceptual nature, impulse is therefore the still obscure consciousness of the living of reason. It is awareness of the fact [*dass*] that thought lives, but not yet of ‘how’ such life unfolds (GEL, 108). The unfolding of life, in turn, is articulated, for Bardili, in theoretical and practical terms: the mere vital act has as its correlate a feeling, which is linked to the apprehension of an object. The consciousness of the impulse has as its correlate an apperception. Here, the impulse to think is an expression of a definite moment in which thinking repeats itself and turns to itself. Finally, impulse consciousness as such has as its correlate a clear representation or desire. At this level, the impulse reflects an articulation of thinking in the concrete forms of succession, proximity and externality and makes matter a represented object. The set of these practical and theoretical determinations defines, according to Bardili, individuality, i.e., the set of determinations that can be interpreted as punctual and irreducible self-limitation through which thinking is particularised.

Bardili thus offers a first demonstration of the way in which the fundamental identity of thinking translates a concrete thinking and representing without admitting an external limiting factor or datum for thinking itself. Obviously, Bardili does not produce a cosmogony, that is, a description of how the real is materially created by thinking. As Reinhold will show in volume IV of the *Beitraege* of 1803, the Bardilian conception leads rather to a phenomenology, that is, a description of the concrete forms of manifestation of thinking. Impulse, too, is therefore freed from a purely anthropological and biological context and made a fundamental term in this articulation. It does not exhibit a force somehow traceable in nature, nor, as Kant would have it, a conceptual tool to make up for the inadequacies of our understanding of natural phenomena. Rather, the impulse through matter reflects the general dynamism of reason, which identifies as much the forms of the structuring of being as those of our understanding of it.

In Bardili, therefore, we observe a development of what Claudio Cesa called the categorical function of the impulse, showing how, in the post-Kantian discussion, the deduction of the conceptual forms through which an object is understood is replaced by a deduction of the dynamic functions of reason presupposed in these forms themselves (Cesa 2002). However, while in Cesa’s interpretation this function is found in the investigation of the modes of action of the human spirit, Bardili understands it as an expression of an extra-subjective operability that the human spirit shares with the other.

#### IV. *Trieb*'s Role in the Development of the Concept

Despite the decisive and vehement critique presented in the *Differenzschrift*, in his *Logic*, Hegel seems to take up a crucial element of the Bardilian logic and, beyond its anthropological or philosophical-natural articulations, enhances the potentialities of the concept of *Trieb* within the framework of a first philosophy<sup>8</sup>. For Hegel, too, tending reflects not the relation of thinking to a given otherness, but a specific and immediate self-relation of reason, which, in relating to the other from itself, is articulated and concretised in an individual manifestation. In the *Science of Logic*, in fact, tending is seen as a fundamental element in explaining the infinite making itself content of the form of thought as pure form (WL, 548–550), and referred to a process in which the fixed substantiality of a supposed “substratum” is completely resolved in the tense of its realisation, without being reduced to mere mechanism.

*Trieb*, in particular, is thematised in the context of the treatment of teleology and its relation to life. Teleology, in fact, is the concept in its existence (WL, 466), and that is the moment when the concept, infinite and free, is no longer characterised by an external determination. The finalistic relation overcomes the distinction of subjective and objective, and in it the concept does not merely assume a specific existence, but reflects a movement of reconnection or return to itself enriched by its relation to the object. In other words, finality defines an ‘order of things’ and does not merely represent a perspective on things. In its general structure, therefore, in finalism the concept is self-determining and, at the same time, lost in the other than itself. Externality is not nihilistically annulled, or brought back to a process of concept enhancement, but integrated and assimilated into the concept itself. In the subjective aim this assimilation is still only virtual and takes the form of an “essential effort and drive to place oneself externally” (WL, 445). Aim is here the subjective concept that urges itself to externality, or a universal that assimilates into itself its own negation. The movement of the aim can therefore be expressed as a dynamic that removes “the presupposition of the aim itself, that is, the immediacy of the object” (WL, 447) and posits it as determined by the concept. The relation of negation to the object, is not direct, but is an expression of “a negative demeanor” of the concept toward itself. In positing the object as determined by itself, in fact, the concept denies itself as such and opens itself to the other than itself. Thus, finality exhibits the object itself as an expression of an order

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<sup>8</sup> A problematisation of Hegelian reflection on *Trieb* in these dimensions has been conducted by, among others, Bonito Oliva (Bonito Oliva 2002) with regard to the philosophical-natural horizon, and by Maurer (Maurer 2018), who thematized the anthropological dimension. Both works have the merit of mapping in detail the recurrence of this notion in the development of Hegelian thought, reconstructing the broad spectrum of relations between impulse, feeling and desire, and showing the crucial function of tending in the translation of subjective spirit into objective spirit, going so far as to highlight how, in Hegel, “the power of spirit is its capacity to endure, by overcoming it, infinite pain” (Bonito Oliva 2002, 29). Schäfer (Schäfer 2020) develops an interpretation of the ethical-practical dimension of the relationship between *Trieb* and desire, supporting Angehrn's (Angehrn 1977, 158) thesis that in Hegel “the object of the theory of freedom is no longer the I in its abstract freedom and decision, but the spirit in its real existence: the objective spirit”. Through the thematisation of the function of the *Trieb* in the *Logic*, the general structure that forms the background to these conclusions is shown.

of nature, independent of the subject that understands it (WL, 447–448). At this level, the drive that characterizes the aim still remains only subjective and is characterised by a tendency to enslave the object that satisfies it, which, precisely because of this, becomes a ‘means’ for the achievement of a certain purpose. “The negative demeanor of teleological activity in the face of the object is therefore not an extrinsic demeanor, but is the change and passing that objectivity in itself makes into that” (WL, 452). If the aim immediately assimilated the object, finalism would fail, since this relation presupposes its exteriority. As a ‘means’ for the aim, the object takes on, instead, a double valence. On the one hand, it remains object, consumed by the extrinsic mechanical relations that characterize it as such. On the other, insofar as it assumes its meaning with respect to aim, it reflects it as something that ‘survives’ its specific realisation: “the plow is nobler than the immediate enjoyments it procures” (WL, 453). Through the understanding of the object as a means, the “drive” that characterizes the subjective aim is understood as an actual activity of the aim itself in which “determining oneself is also determining an object as not determined by the concept, that is, as external” (WL, 460). And, at the same time, externality, in this self-determination, is posited as internal to the determining of the concept itself. In asserting that “by his instruments man dominates external nature, even though for his aim she remains subject to it” (WL, 453), Hegel is not placing himself at the apex of modernity’s nihilism, but is urging us to understand the objective dimension of our existence as an expression of a rationality that transcends the specific interests of an individual and is, in itself, an expression of an order that the subject interprets, but does not produce or manipulate.

In the realisation of the aim, through the means, the moment of exteriority is not only placed in the concept. This does not remain only a tendency, but appears as a concrete totality and is identical with immediate objectivity (WL, 461). The realised aim thus becomes idea, concrete totality, the identity of concept and object. In the problematisation of the idea, Hegel presents the different forms of this identity by showing how it is, on the one hand, immediate (i.e., the concept must immediately be the object) and, on the other hand, is actually the result of a process, a mediation (the concept identifies with the object as a means). In this process, three moments emerge: the liberation from immediacy, the passing of the concept into the other, and the consequent interpenetration of the object by the subject, which “as a negative unit referring to itself is distinguished from its objectivity and is its being in and of itself, but essentially refers to it and thus has itself as its aim or drive” (WL, 466). Impulse therefore appears as mobilizing universal identity and reconfiguring it, not as something given once and for all, but as process and becoming (WL, 467). Thus, while in the realm of the philosophy of nature or the understanding of the organism the impulse can be understood as a specific epiphenomenon of the living being (Nuzzo 2022, 283 ff.), at this level of logic it is a conceptual operator that enables the internal development of the different moments of the idea. With respect to the phenomenon of life, it is the soul that infuses itself into every organism and leads it

back to a universal process. With respect to the moment of knowing, it is the drive that leads to contemplating in the object the subject's identity with itself and thus removing the subjectivity of the concept. With respect to the idea of the good, the drive no longer consists in the elimination of a given difference, but in the production of the difference itself (WL, 545). In this form the foundation has been established for the revitalisation of the logical movement as a "return to life," which is no longer the immediate coincidence of subject and object, but an expression of the convergence of theoretical and practical, of self-understanding and self-production of the idea, of self-consciousness and substantiality of things, or, again, of representation and reflection, which Hegel calls "method" and which is defined as the "supreme and only instinct of finding that is, and knowing for itself, every thing" (WL, 552).

## V. First Logic and Panlogism

In light of this *excursus* on the Hegelian theory of drive in the *Science of Logic*, it is possible to further specify the correspondences between Hegel's and Bardili's approach. In both authors the understanding of the drive is posited as the basis for a teleology grounded in an understanding of rationality as an operativity common to mind and world, both as a moment in which this operativity simply happens (For further details on this aspect, see Ferraguto 2018). In Bardili it is the *dass* of thinking as a tendency to develop in a direction defined by thinking's contact with the other than itself, while Hegel speaks of thinking's drive to preserve itself in the determination of the other or object. In both authors, the drive reflects a not fully conscious dimension of the development of reason, which, in turn, constitutes its fundamental opening to the other from itself and thus the initial moment for its concretisation.

This general structure makes it possible to justify the understanding of life as an expression of a dynamic endowed with an extra-subjective propositionality independent of the intentions of a subject, creator, or *mens*. Hegel in this sense stands as the cornerstone of a process that, while distancing himself from it, moves from Kant and in particular from his understanding of tending as an element found in nature and not in a subject producing it (for historical-philosophical insights in this regard see Zamitto 2022 and Lenoir 1980). Both Bardili's and Hegel's approaches also show how it is impossible to thematize the phenomenon of life for its own sake, without reference to a conceptuality, or a prior and prior logic, capable of legitimizing it. The question remains open as to how it is possible, and justifiable, so much to move from the natural, anthropological or psychological dimensions of understanding the impulse to the speculative dimension. For Hegel, as is well known, these dimensions bring out specific configurations of the idea's being (WL, 549), and philosophy would have the task of finding it in these configurations.

In the development of Bardilian realism, and more considerably in Reinhold's developments of it between 1801 and 1804, the conceptual framework of the impulse is



placed at the basis of the theory of antitypicality, which essentially describes a process by which thought and reality are brought into relation under the same laws, allowing the representation to act as a substitute, as an image, or as a phenomenon of the object in the consciousness that thematizes them (Reinhold 2020, 571–573)<sup>9</sup>. This legal correspondence between object and representation is fundamental to the reorganisation or reproduction of the object in the imagination, for example, in the laws governing the organisation of a plant that return to the imagination of the plant itself, becoming the indispensable conditions for its mental reorganisation or reproduction. The general structure of concrete thinking is specified according to the determinations of these reproductions giving rise to the set of schemas and categories through which both the real and our way of understanding it are organised. One can thus agree with Hartmann when he argues that the Hegel movement and Bardili's movement are different insofar as in Hegel we would have a 'panlogism', that is, the assimilation of the ontological structure of the real into the logical development of the concept, while in Bardili we will have only the presentation of a common legality to thought and reality through the antitype of matter by thought (Hartmann 1972, 37). Both, however, seem to be aware of the fact that the emancipation of life from the rationalistic mortgage passes through, and is made possible by, the emancipation and self-clarification of reason before itself.

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<sup>9</sup> Reinhold uses the term 'antitype', to indicate the appearance, image or mirroring of thought as a function of the realisation of an individual impulse. While in the Stoic and Leibnizian tradition the term 'antitype' was used to define the impenetrability of matter, and as a principle to define the individuality of bodies, Bardili (BW, 104, 166, 208) uses it to indicate an *Abbild* or *Gegenbild*, reproduction or mirroring of thought. For Bardili, in fact, antitype is an individual representation of thought or essence originating through human thought characterized by sensitivity and imagination. Based on this interpretation, Bardili also defines the Platonic concept of participation (BW, 207) and religion as well (for a general presentation of the concept of antitype in modern times, see Perl 1969).

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## ***Between Life and Spirit: The Place of Plants in Hegel's Dialectic of Nature***



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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine the place of plants in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy, highlighting their relevance for understanding the relationship between life and spirit within the Hegelian dialectical system. We will demonstrate how plants are situated in the context of the Philosophy of Nature proposed by the author, emphasizing how, despite being understood through their "incomplete subjectivity" and limited individuality (as there is no individual cohesion due to the separation of their organs), it is still possible to conceive of the basic metabolism of plants as the first expression of the dialectical relationship between inner life and the external environment. In this sense, plants represent a special transitional moment in the progressive realisation of the Idea. We will analyze how plants, for Hegel, embody a universal form of life – self-organized and oriented toward its relationship with the environment – that serves as a point of mediation, or the nexus, between the objectivity of nature and the subjectivity of spirit, which will develop more fully in animal life, especially human life. As we intend to demonstrate, referring to the subjective incompleteness of plant life does not deny it a place in the very history of spirit.

**Keywords:** Hegel; dialectics of nature; life; Spirit; freedom.

### **I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Hegel's philosophy is characterized by the systematic integration of all aspects of reality into a dialectical movement that culminates in the self-understanding of the Absolute Spirit. In this process, nature is more than a contingent stage; it is a necessary and speculative manifestation of the Idea in its exteriority. From this perspective, plants play a significant role by representing a specific form of vital organisation that mediates

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the transition between the realms of life and spirit.

Hegel conceives of plants as beings that express the unity and diversity of life in its most elemental form. Although devoid of subjectivity, they are not mere objects of nature: plants possess a structure that exemplifies the dialectic between biological life and spirit. Through their grow and reproduction, they reveal the dynamics of life as an expression of incipient freedom. Plants, for Hegel, exemplify the dialectical struggle between the determinism of nature and the drive toward freedom, something that will be more fully developed in animals and, ultimately, in the human spirit. In this paper, we aim to analyze how plants, in their apparent simplicity, express themselves as the knot that connects biological life and spirit. Furthermore, as we will highlight, Hegel's understanding of plants goes beyond the biological sphere, involving metaphysical and epistemological aspects that enrich the philosophical debate on plant philosophy.

## II. From Life to Spirit

To understand the structure of Hegel's philosophical system, it is necessary to keep in mind at least two basic conceptions of his philosophy: (1) reality is spirit; and (2) spirit is dialectical. Everything is explained by the unfolding of the idea, because "the spirit is the idea that is realized and contemplated through its own unfolding" (Sousa 2010, 41). From this conception, therefore, we can infer the importance and centrality of nature in the Hegelian philosophical system. As the author explicitly states in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*<sup>2</sup>: Science can only arise from phenomenal knowledge and movement (PG, 70–72). Once the importance of nature is revealed, it is the starting point, for it is through the manifestation of the phenomenon of nature that we apprehend the movement of the absolute idea. It is not by chance that the plant is the example used by Hegel to demonstrate this fact: the seed carries within itself the idea of a plant; it is not yet outside itself but will develop as a reason that unfolds. Thus, the seed is, in itself, the plant, but it needs to disappear as a seed to become a plant and, in this way, return to itself. It is noted how, through this analogy, it is possible to understand the first movement of dialectics, which takes place in a primordial way in the vegetable world.

In the paragraphs devoted to *Organic Physics*, in the third section of the *Philosophy of Nature*, which corresponds to the second volume of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, Hegel treats of *Geological Nature*, *Vegetable Nature* and *Animal Nature*. In these texts, the author states that the Idea does not remain as an abstract concept but manifests itself in a concrete way in reality. For him, 'life' is the first stage of

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2 In this work we will use the following acronyms for Hegel's works, followed by page or paragraph corresponding to the edition that appears in the references: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (EPW); *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (PG). All translations are our own responsibility. We have chosen to work directly with the original German texts, without being influenced by existing translations. As a result, all translations presented here are our own responsibility.

this manifestation, by which the Idea assumes an immediate and sensible existence in the natural world. This is only the beginning of a larger dialectical process, in which the Idea progresses towards its full realisation in the human spirit and in the absolute spirit. To reach this full realisation, the Idea develops in life in three ways (EPW, § 337):

- A. As a *figure*, the universal image of life, the *geological* organism.
- B. As a particular and formal subjectivity, the *plant organism*.
- C. As a singular and concrete subjectivity, the animal organism.

This is because, as stated in § 215 of the *Enzyklopädie*, the idea is “essentially *process*” and possesses “truth and actual reality only insofar as it is in itself subjective” (EPW, § 337). This process begins with the *geological* organism, the first stage of the expression of nature as a figure. At this level, it remains only an immediate Idea, external to itself, being characterized as a non-life. For this reason, Hegel describes it as “only the corpse of the vital process,” representing the organism as “*the totality* of existing nature as non-living, mechanical and physical” (EPW, § 337). Then, in the second moment of the process of development of the Idea in nature, towards the full realisation of the spirit, the *living being in vegetable nature* appears, where subjective vitality begins. The plant, the first individual, is characterized by Hegel as something still outside itself, decomposing into limbs that, in turn, are also individuals. Only in the *animal organism* (on the subject of the animal organism, see the important work of Vasconcelos 2022), according to Hegel, does the Idea develop to the point of reaching distinctions of configuration that make it *subject*. Life, as far as it is natural, expresses itself in the multiplicity of living beings as subjective organisms, but it is only in the Idea that “they constitute *one* life, one organic system of life” (EPW, § 337; also, see Sousa Albertino 2010).

It is noted, therefore, that Hegel situates plants as an intermediate moment in the process of realizing the Idea in nature. Unlike geological organisms, which represent the most inert form of natural reality, plants have an internal organisation that reflects the transition to organic life. According to the author, “the plant is the universal organism, in which the process unfolds in its totality, but without one part dominating or subsuming the others as an individual” (EPW, § 344). Hegel sees plants as universal organisms that exhibit functional integration but do not attain full individuality. Plants are a speculative metaphor for the dialectical unity between the universal and the particular, given that each organ maintains its relative autonomy while contributing to the whole. The fragmented character of vegetable life reflects, according to Hegel, the inability to achieve subjective interiority, which will be fully realized only in animals.

Nevertheless, Hegel attributes to plants a singular and crucial role in the transition between the geological non-living organism and the beginning of subjective vitality, which gives them, in our view, a dignity that is often underestimated, even by the author himself. The plant, for Hegel, possesses the process of life in its totality, but without interiority.

This absence of interiority reveals that plants are governed by a principle of exteriority, in which the relationships between their parts and the environment predominate. However, it is precisely this characteristic that positions them as an indispensable speculative link in the dialectical progression of the Idea in nature.

Hegel highlights the importance of plants as mediators between the inorganic domain and conscious life. They are the transition point at which natural necessity begins to acquire a living organisation. In this sense, plants are not merely lower forms of life, but essential agents that prepare the ground for more complex forms of existence. Their apparent simplicity hides a fundamental role in the process of continuous sublimation of nature by the Idea, evidencing the importance of treating them with the dignity required by their position in the chain of vital development and which has been neglected for a long time.

Plants are a paradigmatic example of how nature organizes itself dialectically in an effort to transcend its limitation. Such an analysis underlines the role of plants as a speculative model that reflects nature's internal dynamics toward freedom. The overcoming of natural exteriority occurs in the search to transcend the conditions imposed by nature, allowing the spirit to free itself as much as possible, in different degrees, from natural needs. This dynamic is noticeable in the more complex dependence relationship of living beings compared to non-living beings. In plants, for example, a self-determination is observed both in their growth and in their reproduction, driven by a force that generates a distinctive unity in their own constitution. It is this dynamic of plants, as beings that grow and interact with the environment, which symbolizes the dialectical effort to overcome simple materiality. In the growth of the plant, it is life itself that expands. In the wake of Hans Jonas' statement in *Phenomenon of Life*, that "life means material life, i.e., living body, i.e., organic being" and that in the "body, the knot of being is tied" (Jonas 2001, 25; also, see Batistoni & Erle 2021; Battistoni 2023), we can affirm that the plant, in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, is also the knot that ties life and spirit<sup>3</sup>. To better understand this process, in what follows, we will analyze the characteristics of plant vitality established by Hegel.

### III. Vitality of Plants in *The Philosophy of Nature*

Hegel begins § 343 on vegetable nature by identifying *subjectivity* in the organic realm as that which defines the individuality of a living being. In the case of animals, this subjectivity manifests itself in a more evident way, since each animal is clearly a distinct 'individual' that maintains its unity as a subject. This subjective individual unfolds into an *objective organism*, which is the physical body, composed of articulated and differentiated parts. Each part has a specific function but is subordinated to the unity of the whole.

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Jonas's conception of vegetal mind (inner activity) and its ontological and ethical implications, see Souza and Oliveira (2025).

In the case of plants, subjectivity (the internal life that constitutes the plant as an organism) and objectivity (the organisation of its physical parts) exist in an immediate relationship. The plant does not possess a clear subjective unity like animals; instead, the plant is a diffuse totality. As Hegel states:

In the plant, in the subjective and only immediate vitality, the objective organism and its subjectivity are still immediately identical, where the process of articulation and self-preservation of the vegetal subject is a coming-out-of-itself and a dissociation into several individuals, for whom the one and the whole individual is more only the terrain than the subjective unity of the members; the part, the bud, the branch, etc., is also the complete plant (EPW, § 343).

The vital process of the plant is described as a *coming-out-of-itself*, that is, it externalizes its life through growth and the production of parts such as buds, branches, flowers, fruits, etc. This results in a fragmentation: the unity of the plant is not as centralized (as in animals), and its parts can be seen as almost autonomous. For example, each branch or bud has the potential to be a 'complete plant'. However, the parts (bud, branch, flower) differ superficially: "Moreover, the difference of the organic parts is only a superficial metamorphosis; and one part can easily pass into the function of the other" (EPW, § 343). This plasticity in which one part can often assume the function of another, demonstrates that plants have a less rigid organisation than animals. Such a characteristic of plants, in our view, denotes a superiority rather than an inferiority in relation to other forms of life, to the extent that, due to its plasticity, the plant inhabits the world better and is capable of reaching land, water and even air that are practically uninhabitable for animals.

In the following paragraph, Hegel argues that the process of formation and reproduction<sup>4</sup> of a singular individual is not separate from the general process of the species. Both coincide, that is, the emergence of new individuals is always part of a larger, continuous and universal movement. This means that the "self-filled universality" (the universal essence or principle that underlies life) does not exist separately from concrete individuals but manifests itself directly in "real particularisation" (EPW, § 344), i.e., in the individuals who are born, grow, and reproduce. In practice, the plant lives by 'sacrificing' itself – that is, its individuality – to generate other plants, in such a way that it is possible to speak of a reproduction that occurs as an attempt to guarantee the continuity of the species at the expense of individual sacrifice, which is nothing more than an expression of the very incompleteness of plant subjectivity.

Thus, the plant is an organism that represents a subjectivity 'not for itself', that is, a form of life that is not aware of itself. In other words, the plant represents an advance in relation to minerals (which do not have life), although they remain inferior to animals in terms of autonomy, for example. The plant, therefore, is defined by its organism that is 'in itself', but that does not separate itself from the environment or act on it autonomously:

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the dialectic of organic life carried out by Hegel in the form of physiological development, especially reproduction, see Suzuki 2020.



The plant, as a subjectivity that is not yet for itself, in relation to its organism that it is in itself (§ 342), does not determine its place by itself, does not move from the place, nor is it by itself before the physical particularisation and individualisation of it; hence it has no self-interrupting intussusception, but a nourishment which flows continuously, and turns not to the individualized inorganic, but to the universal elements (EPW, § 344).

What distinguishes plants from animal organisms, which have greater complexity, is, therefore, the condemnation to their place of rootedness<sup>5</sup> and, to the extent that it does not separate itself from its environment, it establishes a relationship of full individuality with the environment, a homogeneous set with it. In addition, the plant feeds continuously, without interruption, not on individualized elements as animals do. Instead, it absorbs universal elements such as sunlight, water, and minerals, while remaining connected to a broader dynamic of inorganic nature.

According to Hegel, again, the plant is prevented from animal heat or feeling: “Still less is it capable of animal heat and feeling, since it is not the process of bringing its members, which are rather only parts and also individuals, back to the negative and simple unity” (EPW, § 344). This means that the plant is not able to internalize and unify its life processes into a “negative and simple unity,” which is characteristic of animals, as well as the conscious and centralized unity of its parts<sup>6</sup>. This ‘negative unity’ refers to the ability of an organism to perceive itself as something distinct and active in relation to the external world.

Regarding the *figure* of plants, with regard to abstract and concrete forms, Hegel argues that the plant, as an organic being, is composed of differentiated structures, such as cells and fibers (abstract forms), as well as other more concrete ones (for example, organs such as leaves or flowers). However, even with this differentiation, these parts maintain an original homogeneity, that is, they do not individualize completely, remaining uniformly connected. While it has not yet reached a high degree of subjectivity and individuality (“incomplete subjectivity,” Winfield 2018), the plant shows a certain

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5 Even though they are rooted in the soil, plants use the mobility of animals as a way to spread their seeds and thus multiply. There would be, as Stefano Mancuso notes, a collaboration between plants and animals: “there are countless examples of cooperation that proved to be advantageous for both actors. They usually provide a reward to the animal for the services rendered. This is the case of the pollinator rewarded with tasty and energetic nectar, the bird that spreads seeds in exchange for an appetizing fruit, or also man – the best vector that can be dreamed of on this planet – who, in exchange for food, beauty or other advantages, spreads everywhere the plants he needs. However, things are not always so clear. In many situations, the conduct of plants is more suspicious and opportunistic, and the services provided by animals are used without having a reward in return. The seeds of burdock – the plant that inspired the invention of Velcro – and hundreds of other species called *hitchhikers* cling to the skin of animals without offering anything in exchange for the passage” (Mancuso 2018, 75–76).

6 This perception of the greater importance of centralization for animal life is also noted by Jonas: “The stationary plant could no more profit from centralization and individuality than the moving animal could be without them. We see accordingly that centralization is different from organic unity of the complex whole, nor always accompanying such unity, but is a new fact in the evolution of metazoic (multi-cellular) organisms, confined to animal life and coincident with the evolution of sentience and motility” (Jonas 1974, 198).

proximity to “geometric forms and the regularity of crystals” (EPW, § 344)<sup>7</sup>. This means that it is still influenced by simple and regular patterns of inorganic nature, such as those found in geometry. In addition, the results of the vital process of plants (for example, fruits or seeds) also remain close to chemical phenomena, being a less complex and mediated relationship compared to animal organisms.

This debate refers to Goethe’s *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären* (Goethe 2009), referred to by Hegel as a milestone in rational thinking about plants. This work took the focus off the study of plants as collections of isolated parts (singularities) and redirected it to the understanding of the *unity of life* present in them. One of Goethe’s main theses is the idea that all parts of a plant are variations of a fundamental structure that he calls the ‘primitive leaf’ [*Urblatt*] from which the growth and development of plants occurs, as part of a continuous transformation of this same basic structure. This is precisely the metamorphosis of plants, whose orientation is intrinsic and regular, produced from an internal order and according to their own dynamism. Goethe proposes the thesis that there is an archetypal or primitive plant [*Urpflanze*] that would serve as a ‘matrix’ for understanding the variations of the same basic pattern. For Hegel,

*Goethe’s Metamorphosis of Plants* initiated the rational way of thinking about the nature of plants, by wresting representation from the effort around simple singularities and leading it towards the knowledge of the unity of life. The identity of the organs is preponderant in the category of metamorphosis; but the determinate difference and the peculiar function of the members, through which the vital process is placed, is the other side necessary to that substantial unity. The physiology of plants necessarily appears to be more obscure than that of the animal body, because it is simpler; assimilation goes through few mediations and change happens as an immediate infection. As in the whole process of natural and spiritual life, the main fact in assimilation and secretion is the substantial change, i.e., the immediate transmutation of one external or particular matter into another, a point is reached at which the pursuit of mediation, whether in the mode of chemical gradualness or mechanical gradualness, is interrupted and rendered impossible. This point is everywhere and pervades everything, and the non-knowledge, or rather the non-recognition of this simple identification and this simple split, is what makes a physiology of the living impossible (EPW, § 345).

The concept of metamorphosis proposed by Goethe and, in a way, corroborated by Hegel (on the relationship between Hegel and Goethe around the vegetable question, see Kelley 2009)<sup>8</sup>, emphasizes the underlying identity between plant organs, for example, the

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<sup>7</sup> Such perception and effort to bring plants closer to geological nature rather than animal nature (considered the true kingdom of life) has currently been harshly criticized by numerous authors (Marder 2013; Marder 2014; Marder 2021; Marder 2023; Coccia 2016, 2021; Mancuso 2018; Mancuso 2022; Mancuso 2023a; Mancuso 2023b; Mancuso & Viola 2018; Hiernaux 2019; Hiernaux 2020; Calvo 2023).

<sup>8</sup> In her text, Kelley analyzes the problems brought by Goethe’s *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* to Hegel’s interpretation, demonstrating, in a certain sense, that both authors maintain an ambiguous relationship: on the one hand, Goethe becomes an ally of Hegel; on the other, an antagonist. If Hegel recognizes the importance of the idea of internal development and continuity in plant life, he, on the other hand, criticizes any attribution of a spiritual or intentional dimension to plants as such. As we have argued in the present text, although it is true that Hegel disagrees with Goethe on this second point, it is necessary to recognize that plants occupy a special place in the dialectic of nature precisely because they are not totally devoid of an inner dimension – which

transformation of leaves into flowers. However, Hegel emphasizes that, to comprehend the vital process, one must consider not only the identity of the organs, but also their differentiation. *Functional difference* among them, since it is these differences that make the vital process possible. Hence the importance of understanding the physiology of plants, considered more obscure and less comprehensible than that of animals precisely because of its simplicity. An example of this is the process of assimilation (absorption of nutrients) that is direct, without many mediations, and the changes that happen as immediate reactions.

At the heart of life, both in plants and animals, is the phenomenon of transformation of external matter into internal matter (metabolism). This 'substantial change' occurs directly, but at a certain point, chemical or mechanical explanations fail to advance, revealing a limit in the material understanding of life. Hegel recognizes that in all life processes there is a point at which physical or chemical mediation breaks down and can no longer explain phenomena. This point is essential to understand the living being, but it is often not recognized, which makes it difficult to have a true interpretation of life. In other words, plant physiology faces challenges in explaining what the plant is, because life cannot be completely explained solely in material terms<sup>9</sup>.

It is with this conception that Hegel, in the following paragraphs (EPW, § 346, § 347 and § 346), seeks to describe the dynamic and complex process of plant vitality, which is divided into different moments and phases, and is articulated between unity and multiplicity, between the internal and external relationship of the plant with the world, and how the reproduction and continuity of life occur through a dynamic cycle. The vitality of plants is understood by Hegel as a unitary process that is divided into three parts: (1) configuration, (2) growth, and (3) production of new individuals.

The *process of configuration* is the first moment of vitality and deals with the internal relationship of the plant with itself. The plant, as a vegetative being, relates to something extrinsic (such as water and light, for example) and, at the same time, externalizes itself in the environment. The plant, therefore, is not only something closed in on itself, but opens itself to the world and is in constant interaction with what is around it. The plant performs an immediate transmutation of the nutritive flows (such as water and minerals) and the internally transformed vital juice, creating its specific form. This process happens in a direct way, without complications, transforming what is external into a substance of

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would simply be to transform them into minerals, which Hegel avoids, precisely (also, see Suzuki 2020).

9 This critique of materialism, which closed access to life by reducing it to its merely material and mechanical characteristics, is one of the central focuses of Hans Jonas' critique of modern science. For the author of *The Phenomenon of Life* (Jonas 1966), materialism has left aside what should be understood as one of the central marks of organisms: precisely their inner activity (in Jonas' words, their *mind*), which he describes as the first step on the long ladder of freedom, which starts from metabolism and reaches human rationality. As a descriptive concept of life, freedom occurs as the opening of each being to the world: from its vulnerability, each organism needs to make certain 'decisions' so that its life remains possible. Such deliberative acts in view of their own self-affirmation would be expressions and testimonies of the interiority of life.

its own.

On the other hand, as *mediation* with itself, the vitality of the plant manifests itself in two splits: one external and the other internal. As an external split, the plant divides into root, which seeks soil and nutrients, and foliage, which seeks light and air. As an internal fission, cellular tissue is divided more abstractly into woody fibers and vital vessels, which allow for the transport and circulation of nutrients. These divisions aim at both self-sufficiency and reproduction. Thus, the growth of the plant is described by Hegel as a continuous production of new formations. This does not only mean the preservation of the individual (the mother plant), but the production of new individuals that arise from the plant, such as the shoots (new shoots).

The second moment of the vitality of the plant, which is immediately connected with the first, refers to the “*process that specifies itself outwards*” (EPW, § 347), precisely because the configuration, i.e., the structure of the plant, is directly connected to the process that leads it to develop outwards, interacting with the world around it, particularly through the process of germination. According to Hegel, the seed begins its growth process from external stimuli, such as water and light. It does not grow in isolation, but depends on external conditions for its development, which is divided into parts (root and foliage), oriented to different elements of the environment: the roots go deep into the earth in search of nutrients and water, while the leaves turn to light and air. Although the plant, in Hegel’s view, does not have a consciousness or a feeling of itself (characteristics of animals), its growth does not happen in a disordered way. The plant “is rather attracted to light as its external self” (EPW, § 347), it creeps toward the light, with branches spreading out, creating a multiplicity of individuals (like new branches or shoots). Therefore, light is not a mere source of energy for the plant, but responsible for imparting to it specific qualities, such as “strengthening, aromaticity, the spirituality of odor and knowledge, the splendor and depth of colors, the compactness and vigor of the configuration” (EPW, § 347).

Reproduction and its relation to *flowering*, characterized by Hegel as the light generated “from itself as its *own self*” (EPW, § 348), is the third moment of plant vitality. The moment when the neutral green color of the plant transforms into a specific color, as in the case of colored flowers, symbolizes the approximation of the genus process. Such a process involves a “relation of the individual self” (EPW, § 348) to the continuity of life. However, this relationship is not a full self-relationship, but it is a difference that allows the continuity of the process. The germ (plant embryo) must be considered as an individual, but its vitality goes through a process of development that culminates in the production of a new seed. Hegel notes that while the process of germination and flowering is a form of reproduction, the vitality of the plant is not linked simply to the creation of more individuals. This is because the process of configuration and assimilation, that is, the continuous growth of the plant, is already a form of reproduction, since each new branch, each new shoot, is, in a certain sense, a repetition of the process of life.

This process of configuration, growth and reproduction leads the plant to the development of an individuality, which means that it does not depend entirely on external factors but manages to establish an integrated relationship with itself. Hegel says:

But what has been put into the concept is that the process represents the individuality, which has returned to itself, and the parts – which are primarily individuals – also as the moments belonging to mediation and passing through it; thus, the immediate individuality and reciprocal exteriority of vegetable life appear as negated. This moment of negative determination establishes the passage to the true organism, in which the external configuration is consonant with the concept, so that the parts exist essentially as members and subjectivity as the penetrative unit of the whole (EPW, § 349).

The return to itself indicates, in our view, the perception that, although the plant is in constant interaction with the outside world (soil, light, water, etc.), it becomes a self-conscious individuality, even if at a more basic level, that is, it already begins to exist as a unit of life that has internal coherence and its own identity. This is because their parts are not independent or self-sufficient but represent a mediation that connects them and places them in a network of relationships. These parts are seen as moments that contribute to the unity of the organism, that is, they are different, but their difference is necessary for the formation of a unitary whole. Each part of the plant is interdependent and cannot exist without the others, forming an organic whole.

In this process, immediate individuality (the plant as a separate being, with its independent parts) and reciprocal exteriority (the plant's interactions with the external world) are denied. This means that the initial divisions and separations are overcome, that is, the parts, previously considered as independent elements, are now integrated into the organism in an interdependent way. Hegel is suggesting that, in the dialectic of vitality, the plant goes beyond the view of its components as something isolated and reaches a deeper unity, in which the differences between the parts (the roots, leaves, and flowers) are integrated into a cohesive and functional organism.

This movement in which the individuality/interiority and exteriority of the parts are overcome, the parts becoming members of a cohesive whole, reflects the idea that the true organisation of a plant is one in which its parts are in harmony and its external configuration reflects its internal concept. It is this process of organisation, harmony and unity in plants that becomes the node between biological life and spirit, which paves the way for the understanding of more complex organisms, in which the parts of the organism are not just reactions or external parts, but essential components of a living totality.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

Critical of modern science in its fragmented and empiricist form, even inheriting some of the weaknesses of the criticized method, Hegel opens, as we have seen, the possibility for a new interpretation and relocation of plants in the realm of life and

spirit. If he did not carry out these intuitions in a complete way, we can recognize that his clues are sufficient for the reconstruction of a thought that gives plants their place of importance in the history of life. This is because, as seen, plants, although often neglected in philosophical studies, represent an important stage in the dialectical development of life, in which nature begins to reveal its search for freedom by transcending materiality.

While non-living beings remain in the exteriority of their forms, plants offer a principle of self-determination, demonstrating how life emerges as a continuous effort to overcome the inertia of matter. This intermediate stage between the inertia of the inorganic world and the fuller interiority of animals symbolizes the articulation of life as a process of development towards unity and spirit. It is in this context that plants can be understood as an expression of a dialectical movement that not only organizes life, but as mediators between nature and spirit, the knot between life and spirit.

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## ***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)<sup>1</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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)<sup>2</sup>. 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

<sup>2</sup> 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)<sup>3</sup>.

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

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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 space<sup>4</sup>.

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,

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<sup>4</sup> 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

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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 inconceivable<sup>5</sup>. 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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 objects<sup>6</sup>, 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

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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 is<sup>7</sup>.

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-down<sup>8</sup>. 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 diverge<sup>9</sup>. 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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).

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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)<sup>10</sup>. To use Robert Pippin's wording, in contrast to self-consciousness, there is nothing to an animal that “*negates back*” (Pippin 2010, 37)<sup>11</sup>.

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

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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

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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 independence<sup>12</sup>. 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 back<sup>13</sup>. 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

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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)<sup>14</sup>. 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 provides<sup>15</sup>. In contemporary academic discourse, it is often believed that what pertains to

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<sup>14</sup> 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).

<sup>15</sup> 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 is<sup>16</sup>.

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).

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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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## ***Hegel on Physical Health and Illness: A Brunonian Influence and a Metaphysical Approach***



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**Abstract:** Physical health and illness according to Hegel is a topic that has been largely overlooked. To understand its importance in Hegel's philosophy, one must first understand its medical context, which begins with the crisis of German medical theory in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This crisis facilitated the entry of Brunonianism into German medicine. Hegel was influenced by this context but also introduced ideas of his own into his conception of health and illness. According to Hegel, health is related to fluidity and solidification, which are two metaphysical notions. Using the Brunonian vocabulary of his time alongside his own metaphysical framework, Hegel elaborated a metaphysical theory of physical health and illness.

**Keywords:** Brunonianism; Hegel; German Idealism; health; illness; medicine.

### **I. Introduction**

Hegel's philosophy of nature has historically been the least studied part of the system, compared to logic and the philosophy of spirit. However, it is the first of the real philosophies and, therefore, the Concept must also be actualised in the philosophy of nature. In his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel's philosophy of nature contains a considerable number of notions that deserve investigation, but these require sufficient understanding of the scientific context of his time. His ideas on physical health and illness are no exception, appearing towards the end of his philosophy of nature in §§ 371–374. Nevertheless, they remain largely overlooked in Hegel scholarship.

If we compare mental health and physical health as research topics in Hegelian studies, the interest is clearly unbalanced. Mental health and mental illness have become a burgeoning field of research, with Hegel's philosophy of psychiatry slowly gaining prominence. In general, since the publication of *Hegel's Theory of Madness* (Berthold-

Bond 1995)<sup>1</sup>, significant research on mental health in Hegel's philosophy has emerged. In fact, over the past five years, it has become one of the most prominent themes in Hegelian research, as attested by the extensive bibliography. The notion of 'madness' [*Verrücktheit*], Hegel's term for mental illness, has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years. From a historical and textual perspective, notable contributions include the studies by several scholars (Caldeira 2019, 73–80; de Laurentiis 2021, 153–175; de Laurentiis 2024, 63–87; Prestifilippo 2024, 31–39; Ricci 2024, 107–130). From a more conceptual and philosophical standpoint, the volume edited by Iannelli and Failla (Iannelli & Failla 2024) has also appeared, focusing on Hegel's conception of madness and its philosophical implications. Additionally, regarding the relationship between madness and objective spirit, recent contributions by Gregson (Gregson 2023) and Battistoni (Battistoni 2024) have further expanded the discussion. If mental health and mental illness have garnered such attention – despite occupying only a note to § 408 in the *Encyclopaedia* – why has physical health not generated the same level of interest, even though it spans four full paragraphs with notes?

This lack of interest in physical health in Hegel's philosophy can be attributed to three main reasons. First, the medical context of the time is highly complex, and not everyone is familiar with it. Consequently, providing a well-contextualised analysis of the paragraphs on physical health and illness is a challenging task. Secondly, it is true that Hegelian philosophy has historically had a strong influence in metaphysics, particularly through his *Science of Logic* and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. His philosophy of Absolute spirit, as presented in his *Encyclopaedia*, also gained considerable popularity. However, Hegel is not typically studied for his philosophy of nature, leading many scholars to simply omit it. Third, physical health and illness fall within his philosophy of nature, which, as Houlgate has noted, has been the subject of mockery and ridicule since the nineteenth century (Houlgate 1999, xi).

Although it is not a topic that has been at the centre of philosophical discussions on Hegel, that does not mean nothing has been written about it. Von Engelhardt was in charge of this issue throughout his life (von Engelhardt 1975, 1984a, 1984b). Also, in his last work, von Engelhardt wrote a chapter on health and illness in Hegel's philosophy in his *Medizin in Romantik und Idealismus: Darstellung und Interpretation* (von Engelhardt 2023, 63–88). His contribution is highly commendable, but there are important issues that remain overlooked in his chapter. Complementing von Engelhardt's explanation with ideas he has not considered would already provide sufficient reason to write a research paper. However, there is an even more important reason.

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, in his *Hegels Realphilosophie* (Stekeler-Weithofer 2023), provides a series of commentaries on each paragraph of the second and third parts of the

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Berthold-Bond's study was the first, but it is the one that popularised the field of Hegel's philosophy of psychiatry. Although with less impact, there was an earlier monograph on madness in Hegel's philosophy by Severino (Severino 1987).

*Encyclopaedia*. Despite the fact that Stekeler-Weithofer’s work is typically highly rigorous, it is surprising that, when addressing the paragraphs on physical health (*Enz C*, §§ 371–374), he does not hesitate to remark that “almost everything Hegel says here is outdated, it is not relevant in general” (Stekeler-Weithofer 2023, 460). He goes even further. His only comment on the extensive and interesting note to § 373 of the *Encyclopaedia*, where Hegel formulates key ideas about the nature of physical health and illness, is the following: “Basically, you can or should forget the whole passage. Everything is time-conditioned [*zeitbedingt*] and irrelevant for us” (Stekeler-Weithofer 2023, 463). Comments such as those constitute yet another important reason for a rigorous investigation into physical health and illness in Hegel’s philosophy.

My purpose in this paper is to explain physical health and illness according to Hegel in order to understand their importance. Hegel was influenced by the Brunonian medical conception, which presents an added difficulty: ignorance of this context may lead one to believe that the paragraphs on health and illness contain nothing of significance. To clarify §§ 371–374, I will first outline the medical context of Hegel’s time, explaining who John Brown was and how Brunonian medicine entered late eighteenth-century Germany. I will then develop Hegel’s notion of physical health and illness. As we shall see, the ideas of health [*Gesundheit*] and illness [*Krankheit*] in his philosophy of nature are closely related to the notions of fluidity [*Flüssigkeit*] and solidification [*Festgeworden*] in his *Science of Logic*. Consequently, health represents the fluidity of the whole in relation to its parts, while illness corresponds to the solidification of the part that prevents reconciliation within the whole. We will explore the implications of this further. Finally, in addressing illness and physical health, we will briefly examine Hegel’s discussion of medicines, which serves as evidence of both his Brunonian influence and his original conception of health and physical illness.

## II. The Introduction of Brunonian Medicine in Germany

### II.1. On the Crisis of German Medicine

At the end of the 18th century, Germany faced a medical crisis due to the difficulty of conceptualising terms such as ‘health’, ‘illness’, and ‘life’. It is no coincidence that, at the beginning of 1795, *Der neue Teutsche Merkur*, the famous German journal, published a text that criticised – and even satirised – the challenges medicine faced in defining its own terms. The text, widely read at the time, was titled *Ueber die Medizin. Arkesilas an Ekdemus* (1795, 337–378). The piece was written by the German physician Johann Benjamin Erhard but was published anonymously. In it, Erhard introduces two characters engaged in dialogue to illustrate the medical crisis of the period. Ekdemus is a young man unsure about studying medicine, while Arkesilas, his interlocutor, continuously presents him with doubts and criticisms about the field. Arkesilas invokes the Kantian spirit to

properly define what can be considered *Wissenschaft*<sup>2</sup>. In the end, this dialogue concludes that medicine lacked a rigorous theoretical foundation. It explicitly states that medicine is so unfamiliar with its own concepts that “it has no right to the honour of being called science, neither by what it finds in the way of inference nor by what it finds in experience” (Erhard 1795, 364).

Erhard’s writing quickly gained popularity, and his contemporaries did not hesitate to respond to the provocation. Christoph Wilhelm Friedrich Hufeland, a physician considered by many of his peers to be “the greatest defender of the reputation of clinical medicine in his era” (Zammito 2018, 325), was quick to reply to Erhard’s work in August of the same year (see Hufeland 1795, 138–156). Additionally, C. M. Wieland (1795, 153–155) responded to Erhard’s criticism in an attempt to reinforce Hufeland’s ideas, though with little impact<sup>3</sup>. Beyond the medical dispute caused by Erhard’s text, it must be acknowledged that German medicine was in crisis. Within this crisis, two distinct currents emerged. On the one hand, there were the ‘iatrochemists’, who, in their context, were chemical reductionists. Their main representative was Johann Christian Reil. They can be understood as heirs of the scientific approach of Albrecht von Haller (Padial 2022, 464–467). For them, medicine was a branch of chemistry. From their perspective, reality was entirely material, and everything that is matter could be understood through chemical analysis. Therefore, the task of medicine was none other than to chemically analyze patients to provide a reliable and accurate diagnosis of their illness. Thanks to this chemical analysis, physicians could then prescribe the appropriate drugs for recovery. On the opposite side were physicians who adhered to the concept of *Lebenskraft* (life force, vital force), which was a non-empirical principle. These followers of Georg Ernst Stahl’s medical animism believed in a supra-empirical principle that animated living organisms (called *anima*, a non-empirical substance, and finally, in Germany, called *Lebenskraft*)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, this principle explained why people became ill: *Lebenskraft*, though an obscure notion, referred to a certain ‘balance’ within the living (Arquiola & Montiel 1993, 161 and 315–316).

Reil’s late 1795 text *Von der Lebenskraft* bears witness to this dispute. In it, he set forth several criticisms of the idea of *Lebenskraft*. According to Reil – citing Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* in his favour – there can be no true knowledge of a reality that lies

2 In general, Kant’s critical philosophy in the 1790s became the defining criterion for the “epistemological conditions of academic *Wissenschaft* in Germany” (Broman 1996, 131).

3 Sometime later, however, Erhard responded (Erhard 1796, 76–94), insisting that his writing was based on the Kantian philosophy and that, if one were to be rigorous, the medicine of his time did not meet the necessary conditions to be considered medicine in the strict sense of the term. How these physicians applied Kant’s philosophy is a topic I am currently working on, and my findings will be published in a few months. See also the article by Wiesing (Wiesing 2008) for a better understanding of how Kant’s conception of science was received at the time.

4 Stahl’s concept of “anima” would later give rise to *Lebenskraft* in Germany, opposing the chemical reductionism that came from the followers of Boerhaave’s medicine. However, Stahl’s most important influence would be in France, giving rise to the vitalists of Montpellier (Zammito 2018, 19–20).

beyond the limits of human experience. That which transcends the categories of space and time cannot be cognisable. Therefore, to postulate the existence of a vital force, which is suprasensible, is, according to Reil, an implausible argument (Reil 1795, 132–133). For him, this supposed vital force is nothing more than the union of chemical elements, which alone makes life possible (Reil 1795, 24–25). Moreover, he presents a second criticism: *Lebenskraft*, in his view, misuses the concept of force or capacity [*Kraft*]. He observes that *Kraft* is used merely as “the form with which we think of the connection between cause and effect” (Reil 1795, 46). For Reil, the fact that this capacity is only a connection between cause and effect allows the proponents of *Lebenskraft* to understand life as an effect and, consequently, to attempt to ‘deduce’ that there must be a cause. Thus, *Lebenskraft* is framed as the ‘cause’ of life. According to Reil, this is a fundamental error in the very approach to the concept.

From these two medical positions, a third position emerged, popularly known as that of ‘the Kantian Physicians’. Prominent figures from this third group included Karl Wilhelm Nose, Immanuel Meyer, Johann Stoll, Johannes Köllner, Karl Friedrich Burdach, and Andreas Röschlaub (Wiesing 2008, 224). All of them, to some extent, sought to apply a Kantian approach<sup>5</sup>. Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, had already formulated his well-known statement criticizing both dogmatism and empiricism: “Thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind” (KrV A 51 / B 75; CPR, 61). This same dispute “took on a similar form in medicine” (Wiesing 2008, 224). For the Kantian physicians, the debate between iatrochemistry and life force echoed the philosophical debate between empiricism and rationalism. The former focused solely on the empirical, undervaluing anything that did not derive from experience, leaving little room for rational interpretation. The latter, on the other hand, relied on metaphysical principles (the vital force) but tended to undervalue sensory evidence (Wiesing 2008, 224–225). Therefore, these Kantian physicians generally aimed to represent a moderate position.

Among these Kantian physicians, one – Röschlaub – also attempted to introduce Brown’s medicine to Germany, where it had not yet gained widespread recognition<sup>6</sup>. In Röschlaub’s view, Brown’s medicine had the potential to resolve the ongoing theoretical crisis in medicine. Brunonian medicine soon came to be held in high regard throughout Germany, which is why, as we shall see later, Hegel would conceive of health and illness within the Brunonian framework, albeit incorporating his own ideas. Now, let us turn to a brief overview of the medical context of the time.

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5 This topic would require a separate investigation, as “medical Kantianism” largely depends on each individual’s approach (for an overview, see Wiesing 2008).

6 Prior to Röschlaub there was another physician in France, Christoph Girtanner, who published several of Brown’s ideas as his own. He did this in 1790, in his publication *Mémoires sur l’irritabilité considérée comme principe de vie dans la nature organisée* (Girtanner 1790). Years later, scholars denounced this case of plagiarism (Zammito 2018, 333).

## II.2. Brown's Theory in Germany

Brown's medicine was primarily explained in his *Elementa medicinae*, published in 1780 in Latin and subsequently translated into English in 1788. In Germany, his medical ideas were well received. However, it was not his entire work that gained popularity, but rather his key concept, 'excitability', which was translated into German as *Erregbarkeit*. This concept was not entirely original to Brown but stemmed from an existing medical tradition.

Brown's concept of 'excitability' originates from von Haller's 1752 work *De partibus corporis humani sensilibus et irritabilibus*. According to von Haller, there were two key notions: sensibility [*sensibilitas*] and irritability [*irritabilitas*]. He employed these concepts in a physiological sense – sensibility referring to the relationship between the nervous system and the soul, while irritability was used to describe muscular contraction (Padial 2022, 458–467). Von Haller's famous disciple, the physician William Cullen, adopted these same concepts. Some years later, Brown, who was a disciple of Cullen, inherited the notions of sensibility and irritability. However, Brown believed that both referred to the same fundamental idea, as the nervous system (linked to sensibility) was not far removed from muscular contraction (irritability). He therefore coined a single term to encompass both sensibility and irritability: 'excitability', or the quality of what is excitable [*excitabilis*].

Brown used his concept of excitability for medical purposes beyond purely physiological ones. According to Brown, excitability is the inherent quality of organisms that enables them to live by reacting – through their nervous system and, consequently, their muscular contractions – to the environment. As such, it is not merely a chemical principle, nor is it exclusively physical; rather, for Brown, it is the biological principle. Thus, every organism perceives external stimuli and reacts to them (Brown 1804, Vol. 2, 138). What is innovative about Brown's approach, as Perkins-McVey reports, is that his medical proposal "was the suggestion that the level of vital force, called 'excitability', could be quantified by tracking and attributing weighted scores to a patient's activities and inputs" (Perkins-McVey 2023, 362). Thus, there is room for a vital force, but also for chemical stringency.

The Scottish physician divided medicine into two main different approaches to understanding illness. On the one hand, there is asthenia [*asthenic*], which occurs when the organism does not receive sufficient excitation and falls ill. In fact, Brown found that 97% of cases recovered through excitation using his medical method, hence the need to administer drugs and opiates (Perkins-McVey 2022, 46). On the other hand, stenia (*sthenic*) arises when the organism becomes overexcited, also leading to illness (Brown 1804, Vol. 2, 145–166; Vol. 3, 169–171). This division was novel at the time. In the 18th century, numerous classifications of illness proliferated, recalling the classification of T. Sydenham (1848, 12–14) or G. Bagliyi (1704, 210–230). As G. Risse (1971, 5–6) comments, these classifications were widely used across various countries, differentiating between



genera and species of illness by detailing their causes and symptoms. This is why Brown's proposal was innovative in its outlook: he reduced illness to only two major branches, based on a single biological principle – excitability.

Since, according to Brown, every organism possesses excitability, this explains why every living being can become ill. Consequently, health consists in a 'balance' of excitability. He expresses it as follows: "The degree of stimulus, when moderate, produces health; in a higher degree, it gives occasion to illness of excessive stimulus; in a lower degree or ultimately low (m), it induces those which depend upon a deficiency of stimulus or debility" (Brown 1804, Vol. 2, 145). Excitability is not absolute, but relative to the age of each living being. For example, children remain healthy when they receive a high level of excitation, while adults require less stimulation. In contrast, senescence is the stage of human life in which the least excitation is needed to maintain health (Brown 1804, Vol. 2, 147–148).

However, the cure for an illness involves the excitation or relaxation of an organism to achieve this 'balance'. For Brown, treatments can vary greatly, including warm water baths – either cold or hot, depending on the case – or even walking to stimulate the heart properly. The only necessary condition is that it responds to excitability. In fact, Brown does not hesitate to state that:

the origin of illness and predispositions, just mentioned, is the only true one, as proven by the fact that the same powers that produce any illness or predisposition also generate the entire form of illness to which it belongs (Brown 1804, Vol. 2, 181).

This origin, which is "the only true one is excitability." Therefore, any illness can be classified as either asthenic or sthenic. Consequently, excitability is easily controllable if appropriate drugs are administered. Thus, for example, the Scottish physician advocates the use of opiates and opioids as a means of regulating excitability. He also notes that, along with these drugs, certain foods may have stimulating or distending effects (Brown 1804, Vol. 3, 1–3, 125–137). One important consideration is that the dosage must be carefully calculated so as not to overdo it, for in attempting to stimulate an asthenic illness, an excessive amount of excitants may provoke *sthenia*.

As other researchers have already pointed out, Brunonian medicine became very popular in several countries, such as Denmark (Hansen 2016), France (Risse 1971), and Germany, particularly when linked to Romanticism (Neubaer 1967). In Germany, at the end of the 18th century and during the first two decades of the 19th century, medicine generally had a Brunonian orientation, thanks to the work of Röschlaub, who served as the German interlocutor of the Scottish physician. As Tsouyopoulos notes: "It was Röschlaub's interpretation that made Brown's principle acceptable" (Tsouyopoulos 1988, 67).

It should also be noted that this popularity lies in the fact that Brunonianism emerged as an intermediate theory between iatrochemism and the vital force, as it posits a principle that makes living beings alive – one that is not extrinsic to them but

inherent to their nature. At the same time, however, Brown's medicine did not disregard chemical analysis; rather, the cure for asthenic or sthenic illnesses largely depended on correct medication that underwent rigorous chemical analysis. For this reason, Röschlaub saw Brunonianism as a satisfactory response to the crisis in German medicine, as it represented an intermediate position between the two dominant medical currents of the time (Zammito 2018, 325).

Brown's ideas spread rapidly through Germany, causing many physicians and scholars of the time to admire the Scotsman's ideas. For example, Melchoir Adam Weikard (1795) translated much of *Elementa medicinae* in a volume called *John Browns Grundsätze der Arzneilehre aus dem Lateinischen übersetzt*, published in late 1795. A few months later, a second translation, *John Brown's System der Heilkunde* by Christoph Heinrich Pfaff (1795), appeared, and two years later Joseph Frank's *Erläuterungen der Brownischen Arzneylehre* (1797) was published. Additionally, other figures of the time, such as Erasmus Darwin, James Mackintosh, and Thomas Beddoes, helped to popularise Brunonian medicine (Vickens 1997, 48–49). Brown's *Erregungstheorie* soon took root among other physicians, as evidenced by Christian Friedrich Oberrech (1804) in his *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Erregungstheorie*, and also by Joseph Frank (1804) in his *Versuch einer theoretisch-praktischen Arzneimittellehre nach den Grundsätzen der Erregungstheorie*. Of course, the most prominent Brunonian was Röschlaub, known for both his practice at Bamberg's hospital and his writings. The work that became most influential in his context was *Von dem Einflusse der Brown'schen Theorie in die praktische Heilkunde* (1798). This book explained the general ideas of Brunonian medicine<sup>7</sup>, their medical application, and, with respect to the theory of excitability, promised that "far beyond, this theory heralds a formal revolution such as medicine has not undergone since the time of Hippocrates" (Röschlaub 1798, XII). In fact, Röschlaub admired Brown so much that he went as far as to edit Brown's complete works, compiling them into three volumes (Röschlaub, 1806–1807). As Goethe summarised the entry of Brunonianism into Germany, the "Brunonian dogma" had already "taken hold of old and young physicians" (Goethe 1949, 767).

Brown's prominence was not limited to medicine but also extended to philosophy. Kant refers to Brunonian medicine in his letters (Cassirer 2009, 368)<sup>8</sup>. Novalis did not hesitate to assert that "Fichte's *Doctrine of Science* is the theory of excitability" (Novalis 1929, 383). Even Röschlaub himself made it clear that his purpose was to relate Brown's medicine to Fichte's philosophy<sup>9</sup>. Schelling took Brown seriously, as he was the most

<sup>7</sup> This Brunonian theory is not exactly the same as Brown's original theory; rather, Röschlaub developed his own theory of excitability based on Brown's ideas. He called it *Erregbarkeitstheorie* to distinguish it from Brown's *Erregungstheorie*, although Röschlaub always insisted that it was rooted in Brown's work.

<sup>8</sup> Also, in the biography of Kant's last secretary, Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski, entitled *Immanuel Kant in seinen letzten Lebensjahren*, it is recorded that Kant regarded the Brunonian system as the greatest invention in medicine (Wasianski 1804, 42; Perkins-McVey 2022, 4).

<sup>9</sup> This appears in the first edition of the *Magazin zur Vervollkommnung der theoretischen und*

obvious philosopher influenced by Brunonianism and a close friend of Röschlaub. The presentation of iatrochemism<sup>10</sup> and vital force, as well as the introduction of Brunonianism as an intermediate position, was addressed by Schelling in his *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, which provided Brunonian ideas with a philosophical basis (Ortigosa 2023; for further discussion, I refer the reader to von Engelhardt 2023, 48–62 and Ortigosa 2023)<sup>11</sup>. In fact, Schelling, who opposed both iatrochemism and the doctrine of “vital force” [*Lebenskraft*], remarked on the Scottish physician’s theory as follows:

I have to say that Brown was the first to understand the only true and genuine principles of all theories of organic nature, insofar as he posited the ground of life in excitability (...). He was the first to understand that life consists neither in absolute passivity nor in absolute activity, but rather as a product of a potency higher than the merely chemical – yet without being supernatural (Schelling, SW 3, 90–91/2004, 68).

In this quotation, Schelling points out that Brown was the first physician to understand the truth of life, which resides in excitability. Furthermore, he notes that Brown falls neither into iatrochemism nor into the doctrine of vital force but instead represents an intermediate and moderate theory. As Tsouyopoulos summarises Brown’s entry into Germany, “this new combination of Brown’s and Röschlaub’s theory of excitability with Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* was enthusiastically received and was very influential not only in German universities but also in practical medicine” (Tsouyopoulos 1988, 65).

Over the next two decades, German medicine absorbed Brunonian terminology and many of its approaches. Thus, it is not surprising that Hegel was deeply influenced by the German medical context. He refers to health, as well as the use of drugs, within the framework of Brunonian theory. This is what I will demonstrate in the following section.

### III. Hegel on *Flüssigkeit*: Health and Pharmaceuticals

#### III.1. Health and Illness: Fluidity and Solidification

As discussed in the introduction, the themes of physical health and illness in Hegel’s philosophy have received relatively little scholarly attention compared to other subjects.

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*praktischen Heilkunde* (Röschlaub 1799, XI), a journal founded by Röschlaub to report on advances in Brunonian medicine. As summarised by Perkins-McVey, it is noted there that “Röschlaub’s conceptual innovations on Brown’s system were emergent from an effort to bring Brown into agreement with Fichte’s 1794/1795 *Wissenschaftslehre*” (Perkins-McVey 2022, 3).

10 In general, Schelling’s chemical ideas were influenced by Lavoisier, although his philosophical foundation at the time was primarily Kantian. This combination of Lavoisier’s chemistry and Kant’s philosophy lead to a unique notion of chemistry known as ‘dynamic chemistry’ (given the length of this explanation, it is not possible to explore the topic further, so I refer to the brilliant text by L. F. Garcia 2024).

11 Regarding the third medical system in Germany, as opposed to iatrochemism and *Lebenskraft*, Schelling states clearly: “The third system posits the organism as subject and object, activity and receptivity at once, and this reciprocal determination of receptivity and activity, grasped in one concept, is nothing other than what Brown called ‘excitability’” (SW 3, 90/2004, 68).

Here, I will pause to examine what health and illness are in order to ultimately discern the role of pharmaceuticals. As we shall see, Hegel follows ideas influenced by Brunonian theory, although his originality lies in his metaphysical foundation. Furthermore, the concepts of health and illness described in his philosophy of nature correspond to the notions of fluidity and solidification in his *Logic*.

One of the best recent definitions of health in Hegel has been provided by Maurer. She defines it as follows: “Illness therefore arises when an organic function becomes isolated from the others, interrupting that interconnection of the parts with the whole that characterises the healthy state of the organism” (Maurer 2021, 240–241). Similarly, von Engelhardt (2023, 72) also defines illness and health in terms of harmony: “Health and illness are, from a philosophical point of view, the harmony and disharmony of organic functions.” However, neither Maurer nor von Engelhardt in his last work<sup>12</sup> have addressed the metaphysical foundation of this harmonic interconnection between the parts and the whole. To do so, we must briefly turn to the *Science of Logic* to understand the notion of *Flüssigkeit*. It is through this concept that Hegel later examines physical health and illness.

A few years ago, Khurana highlighted an idea that has gone unnoticed by many scholars but is key to understanding health. In his article, he explicitly discusses the role of fluency in Hegel’s *Logic*. There, he points out that it is thanks to *Flüssigkeit* that:

the existence of self-maintaining [*selbständigen*] forms – such as organs or living beings – is mediated here in the movement of life with subjection to the infinity of difference – that is, a vital process that is articulated in various organs or beings, yet never fully exhausted in any of them (...) (Khurana 2010, 30).

In logic, forms are ontologically maintained as self-sufficient because life acquires an infinity of differences. This infinitude of differences necessarily occurs within the immanent activity of the Concept, that is, in the process of self-differentiation through the dynamism of reality (Nuzzo 2016, 128). Each differentiation stands on its own, yet at the same time, all belong to a totality that manifests its reality. That is why Khurana gives the example of organs: organs exist by themselves, but their truth is found only in the organism. The organism, in turn, is composed as a totality of different particularities, distinct from one another yet engaged in a dynamic, fluid relationship. *Flüssigkeit* is therefore key, as it refers to the ‘vital process’, as Khurana describes it: a complex and moving articulation between the particularities. The impossibility of exhausting the vital process within each organ is the reason why Hegel identifies health with fluidity. Let us now examine this further.

For Hegel, health consists in ‘fluidity’ (*Enz C*, § 371)<sup>13</sup>. Fluidity is not a biological notion, nor is it related to the natural sciences in general<sup>14</sup>; rather, it is a metaphysical

<sup>12</sup> Von Engelhardt mentioned the role of *Flüssigkeit* in his previous work (von Engelhardt 1984b, 134).

<sup>13</sup> For the *Encyclopaedia*, I am following A. V. Miller’s translation.

<sup>14</sup> It is true that one could argue that fluidity is so important in Hegel’s *Logic* because he derives

concept, as Khurana has pointed out. Hegel makes this clear in his *Science of Logic*, where he defines fluidity as the harmony of particularity in the organic and dynamic totality. That is why fluidity explains the very meaning of living: if there were no fluidity between an organism's organs, it would be dead. In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel himself had already noted that the work of the Concept is fluidification. He expressed it thus:

for the logic of the Concept, there already exists a fully established and well-entrenched structure – one may even say a materially ossified one – *and the task is to make it fluid again, to revive the concept within such dead matter* (GW 12, 5/2010, 507)<sup>15</sup>.

The contrast between solidification and fluidity is evident, but these terms are not mere metaphors. Reality unfolds through a processual development – an ongoing fluidisation. That is why settling in the Concept means fluidifying: understanding the concept as something living, as opposed to a dead or ossified reality. To understand the living is to grasp what exists in fluidity as a processual whole – to see reality as dynamism. If we were to attempt to understand reality in isolated fragments, separately, without attending to its fluidity as a processual whole, we would end up reducing life to mere chemical elements and mistaking these elements for life itself (*Enz C*, § 359 N). Now that we understand fluidity, what happens if we turn to health and illness in § 371 of the *Encyclopedia*?

Health is fluidity; the life of an organism exists in the complex dynamic relationship among its organs. As long as there is fluidity, or a dynamic process, there is health. In contrast, anything that hinders fluidity is, consequently, an illness. Thus, in his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel defines physical illness as follows:

It [an organism] finds itself in a state of *illness* when one of its systems or organs, *stimulated* into conflict with the inorganic power [*Potenz*], isolates itself and persists in its particular activity against the activity of the whole. In doing so, it obstructs the fluidity and all-pervading process of the organism (*Enz C*, § 371).

We fall ill when a particularity hinders the fluidity of the whole<sup>16</sup>. This particularity has solidified. To solidify means that the particularity disrupts the harmony of the whole, causing an imbalance at the organic level. As von Engelhardt (2023, 72) points out, “in the case of physical illnesses, [they are] a *decompensation* of the organic forces

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his idea of Concept from that of living beings and therefore ascribes to the Concept the qualities of living beings. Therefore, biology would come first and logic second. However, it does not matter whether Hegel took it from biology to characterise the Concept because the importance is in the place it occupies. In Hegel's system, metaphysics (Logic) comes first, followed by *Realphilosophie*. For this reason, *Flüssigkeit* is a concept that, appearing first in Logic, is therefore a metaphysical concept for Hegel, and not biological. If Hegel takes this idea from biology is a secondary issue because the main role of “fluidity” is metaphysical.

15 Italics for emphasis are mine. The translation has also been modified.

16 In § 374, Hegel insists that “in illness, the animal is entangled with a non-organic power [*Potenz*] and is held fast in one of its particular systems or organs in opposition to the unity of its vitality” (*Enz C*, § 374).

and body systems”<sup>17</sup>. This is an obstruction of the activity of the whole, which, as the paragraph highlights, is characterised by its fluidity. When an organ interrupts the dynamic functioning of the organism, illness ensues. Let us note that Hegel uses the term ‘excited’ [*erregt*] in § 371 to describe the excited (stimulated or relaxed) organ, reflecting a Brunonian influence characteristic of his time<sup>18</sup>. This provides an initial clue to Hegel’s engagement with the Brunonian conception of health (Maurer 2021, 104). The affected organ ‘hardens’ against the fluidity of the whole, disrupting the fluid interrelations among organs. This occurs in any physical illness, such as when someone catches the flu. In this case, an infection in the respiratory system – primarily the nose, throat, and lungs – acts as a particularity that obstructs the fluid functioning of the whole. Thus, it is evident that illness arises from what has ‘hardened’ (or solidified) in the body – that which resists the fluidisation of the whole.

The question that arises, then, is how something that has solidified can be ‘fluidised’. Hence, in § 373, Hegel reflects on the use of drugs, as I shall now discuss.

### III.2. Pharmaceuticals and Fluidisation

In § 373, Hegel goes on to explain how drugs aid in the recovery of health<sup>19</sup>. In our present day, this may seem self-evident, but Hegel’s explanation is highly contextual. In discussing how drugs help restore health, he follows the Brunonian theory of his time. As will be recalled, according to Brown, drugs and medicines played a therapeutic role by virtue of their ability to either excite or relax the ill person. Thus, if the illness was asthenic, it had to be excited, whereas if it was sthenic, it had to be relaxed. The key always lay in excitability – that is, the capacity of a living organism to become excited.

When Hegel discusses drugs, he begins by pointing out the following: “The medicine provokes the organism to put an end to the *particular* irritation in which the formal activity of the *whole* is fixed and to restore the fluidity of the particular organ or system within the whole” (*Enz C*, § 373). It is evident that Hegel presupposes a Brunonian framework in his conception of drugs by resorting to the idea of excitation. In fact, Hegel sees in drugs

<sup>17</sup> Despite von Engelhardt’s elaborate argumentation, his reasoning here feels somewhat forced, as there is still no human self in nature – this will only emerge in Anthropology, as the author points out. By using the explanation of the additions of Anthropology as a frame of reference, von Engelhardt loses sight of the characteristic Brunonian terminology of the paragraph, as well as the notions of fluidity and solidification in relation to health and illness. However, in one of his previous work, von Engelhardt (1984a, 19–20) explained that Hegel (and Schelling) try to reformulate Brown’s ideas in a metaphysical way.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel is also a critic of Brown’s ideas. He criticises him alongside Schelling in the note to § 359. In this research, I focus solely on the “positive” influence Brown had on Hegel in conceiving his ideas on health and illness. Hegel’s criticisms of Brown, his “negative” view of him, have been discussed at length in Ortigosa (2025b, forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> In his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des subjektiven Geists*, Hegel also discusses the use of drugs in the treatment of mental illnesses. However, psychic therapeutics – Hegel’s method for healing mental illnesses – devotes only one line to the use of drugs. In this regard, he states that the therapy of a mentally ill person “is, in the first place, medicinal” (GW 25/2, 718; for more on Hegel’s approach to psychic therapy, see Ortigosa 2025a).

the means to overcome a particular excitation – the ‘hardened’ state – in order to restore fluidity to the organism as a whole, that is, to restore health. In his note to § 373, we find robust evidence that Hegel is referring to the Brunonian framework of the time in his conception of health and drugs. In this note, he points out that “Now this theory of Brown, regarded as a complete system of medicine, was simply an empty formalism; but, on the other hand, it did also serve to direct attention beyond what was merely particular and specific both in illness and remedies, to the *universal* in them as the essential element” (*Enz C*, § 373 A). Here, Hegel first presents a criticism of Brunonianism, regarding the difference between asthenia and stenia. A system of medicine needed to be more elaborate, and Brown’s nosology did not convince him because it was overly simplistic. For this very reason, Maurer (2021, 104) argues that Hegel distanced himself from Brown. However, Hegel does not hesitate to acknowledge the usefulness of this medical conception, as Brunonianism enables illness and medicines to be understood in their universality – that is, it brings us closer to their essence. This implies that Brown’s medical approach has helped prevent us from getting lost in the particularities of each illness and its cure, offering a broader perspective that better captures the nature of illness. In other words, distinguishing between, on the one hand, signs and symptoms – such as fever and cold feet – and, on the other hand, the underlying cause – such as a viral infection – represents a significant breakthrough for medicine in understanding the nature of illness. Thus, the praise for Brown’s medical theory is obvious.

After such praise, it becomes even more evident that Hegel’s conception of illness and medication – where he employed the concept of ‘excitation’ [*Erregbarkeit*] – is influenced by Brunonianism. However, this influence is not only evident in his technical use of vocabulary; Hegel also applauds this medical approach for contributing to a deeper understanding of what constitutes illness, health, and medicine.

In short, the Hegelian conception of health stems from his notion of *Flüssigkeit* in the *Science of Logic*. *Flüssigkeit* is what allows the parts to form a harmonious whole – this is the health of an organism. The opposite of fluidity, namely solidity, is identified with illness – that is, the moment when a part is not reconciled with the whole, producing disharmony in the organism. To restore health, medicines are, as is evident, of immense help. Hegel’s conception of medicines, as we have seen, is influenced by Brunonian ideas, as he approaches them from the perspective of excitability. Moreover, his conception of illness reflects a debt to Brunonianism, which has brought us closer to understanding the true nature of health, illness, and the role of drugs.

## IV. Conclusion

In contrast to mental health, which in recent years has become an emerging field in Hegelian research, physical health has not received the same level of attention. Recently, two scholars have commented on Hegel’s perspective on physical health. The first,

Stekeler-Weithofer, quite simply – as quoted in the introduction – considers the subject entirely irrelevant. The second, von Engelhardt, takes a far more respectful approach to Hegel and has elucidated fundamental ideas on physical health in his work. However, von Engelhardt did not explore the Brunonian context of Hegel's medical era, nor did he examine the relationship between physical health and fluidity or between illness and solidification. Hence, this paper complements von Engelhardt's ideas while also aiming to demonstrate, in contrast to Stekeler-Weithofer, that physical health and illness in Hegel are neither minor nor negligible subjects.

Hegel's theory of physical illness and health was at the forefront of the medicine of his time. To demonstrate this, the introduction of Brown's medicine into Germany has first been explained. It was necessary to outline the crisis in German medicine, exemplified by Erhard's writing *Ueber die Medizin: Arkesilas an Ekdemos*. This led to three medical positions: the adherents of iatrochemism, the proponents of *Lebenskraft*, and, finally, the adoption of Brunonianism as a middle path. The popularity of Brunonian medicine owes much of its success to this context. As has been shown, the primary concept that entered German medicine and philosophy was 'excitability'. Hence, Brown's theory became widely known as *Erregungstheorie*.

To show the widespread influence of Brown's medical theory, the impact of the *Erregungstheorie* on both medicine and philosophy has been documented. Philosophers such as Kant, Fichte, Novalis, and Schelling, as well as physicians like Pfaff, Weikard, and Röschlaub, among others, commented on Brunonianism. Given this, it is not surprising that Hegel was familiar with such a widely known medical theory in his time.

To elucidate the notions of *Gesundheit* and *Krankheit* in Hegel's philosophy of nature, it was essential to address two challenges: understanding their relation to the *Science of Logic* and accurately contextualizing Hegel within his historical period. According to Hegel, physical health is characterised by fluidity [*Flüssigkeit*], whereas illness corresponds to solidification [*Festgeworden*]. This fluidity ensures harmony between the whole and its parts, allowing each healthy organ to integrate seamlessly into the dynamic, flowing totality of the organism. Conversely, illness arises when an organ or part of the organism fails to harmonise with the whole; it solidifies against the fluid totality, disrupting the organism's proper functioning. In contemporary terms, conditions such as heart or kidney problems, or infections – whether viral or bacterial – can be viewed as instances where an affected (excited) organ's malfunction impacts the body's overall harmony. For Hegel, this represents the solidification of a part that impedes the harmony of the fluid totality.

Going a little further, it was also necessary to make explicit that Hegel conceived his theory of physical health and illness thanks to the Brunonian context of the time. As we have seen, this idea was supported on three grounds. The first is the context of the medicine of the time, in which the *Erregungstheorie* had taken root. The second is the vocabulary used by Hegel, which refers to health and illness as adequate or inadequate 'excitations' of the organs, revealing a Brunonian terminological influence. Thirdly, Hegel's



praise for the Scottish physician when, after criticizing his nosology, he nevertheless celebrates the progress made by Brunonian medicine in bringing us closer to the essence of health, illness, and the use of drugs. In fact, as already explained, drugs help an ill organism – a prisoner of a solidification – return to health – fluidity to wholeness. This being so, Brunonian medicine had a deeper penetration into Hegel's philosophy than other researchers had previously thought.

Finally, I would like to suggest that this paper opens up new possibilities for research on Hegel. By approaching Hegel's ideas on physical health and illness in their context and in relation to his metaphysics, it is now possible to better conceive what 'living' is for Hegel following his Brunonian inspiration. It will be interesting to reflect in the future on these conceptions of the notion of life [*Leben*], which permeates the whole system, and also to consider what is meant by the Living Concept [*lebendiger Begriff*], taking into account Brown's influence on Hegel. By understanding the notion of 'the living' as something that has a *healthy* life within the Brunonian context, perhaps new readings in his metaphysics can be developed.

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## ***The Life of/in Nature. From Hegel to British Idealism and Its Twentieth-Century Afterlives***



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**Abstract:** This essay traces the philosophical development of the concept of organic life and nature from Hegel's Philosophy of Nature through British Idealism to the twentieth-century thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Hans Jonas. It highlights how Hegel's idea of the organism as a self-producing, purposive unity influenced later thinkers, directly or indirectly, shaping views of nature as inherently processual, relational, and teleological. By uncovering the Hegelian echoes in British Idealism and beyond, the essay argues for the continuing relevance of speculative conceptions of life and nature. This reconstruction offers new insights into contemporary philosophical biology and environmental ethics, suggesting that the categories of organism, purposiveness, and selfhood remain vital for rethinking the place of life within nature today.

**Keywords:** Hegel; organism; life; nature; British Idealism; Whitehead; Jonas.

### **I. Introductory Remarks**

For decades, Hegel's Philosophy of Nature has been largely neglected by both Hegelians and non-Hegelians, dismissed as obscure and, in many respects, simply mistaken<sup>1</sup>. A case in point is the severe criticism levelled by Benedetto Croce against this part of Hegel's system – a critique that resonated even in the Anglophone world, where Croce was highly active and where his works were translated (see Croce 1997; Croce 2006). Still in 1973 John Findlay should claim that “no careful study of the Dialectic in the Philosophy of Nature has been recently attempted, possibly owing to fear aroused

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by the wealth of scientific difficulty in that work” (Findlay 1973, 72). In his view, Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature was, on the contrary, “the best Nature-Philosophy of the classical type” (Findlay 1973, 73). However, as Errol Harris (Harris 1993, 117) points out, Findlay was an exception within the field of Hegelian studies, particularly in the Anglophone world, which was largely focused on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>2</sup>.

A renewed interest in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature thus began to emerge in the 1970s. Over the past decades, scholars have in particular sought to reconstruct his theory of the living organism (for a complete study on Hegel’s understanding of ‘das Organische’, in the context of the philosophy of nature and the biology around 1800, see Breidbach 1982; more recently, Illetterati 2015), highlighting its critical stance toward Schelling and German Romanticism, its dialogue with the natural sciences of his time<sup>3</sup>, and its potential relevance for contemporary biology (the following studies go in this fruitful direction: Gambarotto & Illetterati 2020; Micheli 2011). Central to these studies is Hegel’s engagement with the legacy of Kant and Aristotle on life and teleology. Scholars have shown how Hegel sought to integrate both traditions: unlike Kant, who saw teleology as a merely regulative and subjective principle<sup>4</sup>, Hegel treats it as a constitutive feature of living beings – and of nature as a whole. In doing so, he draws significantly on Aristotle’s conception of natural purposiveness. As one can read in the addition to § 245 of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*: “To see purpose as inherent within natural objects is to grasp nature in its simple determinateness, e.g. the seed of a plant, which contains the real potential of everything pertaining to the tree, and which as purposeful activity is therefore orientated solely towards self-preservation” (Petry 1970, I, § 245a, 196; Hegel 2016, 1177). And, with explicit reference to Aristotle and Kant: “The fundamental determination of living existence is that it is to be regarded as acting purposively. This has been grasped by *Aristotle*, but has been almost forgotten in more recent times. *Kant* revived the concept in his own way however, with the doctrine of the *inner* purposiveness of living existence, which implies that this existence is to be regarded as an *end in itself* [*Selbstzweck*]” (Petry 1970, III, § 360r, 145)<sup>5</sup>.

2 Findlay was born in South Africa and educated at the University of Pretoria, Oxford, and Graz. He went on to teach at various universities in South Africa, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA, concluding his career at Boston University (on the role of Findlay’s work in the revival of interest in Hegel’s philosophy, and in particular in his philosophy of nature, see Harris 1985). Note that with his comprehensive and valuable work on Hegel in 1958, Findlay anticipated the American Hegel-Renaissance, realised by the so called ‘Pittsburgh School’, in the names of Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom.

3 On this topic, Findlay and Milič Čapek defend two opposing ideas: according to Findlay, Hegel’s view was a manifestation of the science of his time, while Čapek takes Hegel’s philosophy of nature to be “far *behind* the science of his own time” (Čapek 1984, 109; Findlay 1984; Findlay 1958, 268).

4 “The concept of a thing as intrinsically a natural end is (...) not a constitutive concept either of understanding or of reason, but yet it may be used by reflective judgement as a regulative concept for guiding our investigation of objects of this kind (...)” (Kant 2007, § 65, 203).

5 As is well known, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant underlines that organic beings must be understood as products of immanent purpose tendencies, that they are to be regarded as something that produces itself through itself (with a kind of inner teleology) (on the concept of teleology and idea of life in the thought of Aristotle and Kant, see Chiereghin 1995).

As is well known, in the § 65 of the *Critique of Judgement*, devoted to “Things considered as natural ends,” namely to organisms, characterised by final causes (*nexus finalis*), Kant recognises a “first requisite of a thing, considered as a natural end,” namely “that its parts, both as to their existence and form, are only possible by their relation to the whole”; and a second requisite “that the parts of the thing combine of themselves into the unity of a whole by being reciprocally cause and effect of their form” (Kant 2007, § 65, 200–201). As a result, Kant claims that “In such a natural product as this every part is thought as *owing* its presence to the *agency* of all the remaining parts, and also as existing *for the sake of the others* and of the whole, that is as an instrument, or organ” (Kant 2007, § 65, 201–202). Natural ends, namely organisms are for Kant organised and self-organised beings. For “in the case of organisms we have already represented to ourselves a causality according to ends – a creative understanding – to account for their intrinsic purposiveness” (Kant 2007, § 82, 254). It is precisely the idea that organisms are actively self-organising and self-producing beings – capable of maintaining and reproducing themselves – that would go on to influence the next generation of natural philosophers, including the Romantics, Schelling, and Hegel, albeit in different ways<sup>6</sup>.

Drawing on this background, the main aim of this essay is to develop the following working hypothesis: Hegel’s conception of nature – and in particular of the living organism – played a significant role in shaping the reflections of British Idealism, a philosophical and cultural movement that has received only limited and often superficial scholarly attention. From there, this influence – albeit indirectly – extended to key twentieth-century positions, such as Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy and Hans Jonas’s philosophical biology. This reconstruction has never been fully undertaken before, partly because serious interest in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature and his concept of life has re-emerged relatively recently, but also due to the fact that the little work done on British Idealism tends to focus primarily on its metaphysical doctrines, rather than on its conception of nature. Furthermore, in the cases of Whitehead and Jonas, scholarship has often emphasised other sources of influence, thereby overlooking the indirect – yet crucial – impact that Hegelian thought had on the development of their philosophical positions. These, in turn, offer valuable resources today, particularly in the context of environmental ethics.

The essay is divided into three parts. In the first paragraph, I will highlight – without any claim to completeness – the essential and core elements of Hegel’s conception of the living organism – elements that, as I will show, proved fruitful (including in a critical sense) for the development of certain positions within British Idealism and, later, in the thought of Whitehead and Jonas (1). The second paragraph will outline some key features of British Idealism, focusing in particular on aspects of the conception of nature in the works of John Ellis McTaggart and Samuel Alexander, which can be seen as significantly

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<sup>6</sup> I have argued for the possibility of identifying a common model of the organism in these thinkers elsewhere (Battistoni 2024).

shaped – albeit often critically and not passively – by Hegel’s philosophy (2). Finally, the third paragraph will explore selected elements of Whitehead’s and Jonas’s thought that, I argue, can be situated along this reconstructive trajectory, in order to show how fundamental aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of nature and his theory of the living organism not only endured over time but were reworked and meaningfully carried into twentieth-century thought (3).

## II. Key Themes in Hegel’s Idea of Organic Life in Relation to Jena Romanticism and the Natural Sciences

Hegel’s conception of organic life and the living organism can be seen as partially aligned with the perspective developed by the Jena Romantics, who sought to emphasise a continuity between nature and spirit by viewing nature as already an expression or manifestation of spirit<sup>7</sup>. However, Hegel articulates a form of continuity that does not collapse into identity: while affirming a developmental link between the natural and spiritual realms, he insists on preserving their essential differences<sup>8</sup>.

One of the central themes of Romantic speculation was the concept of life. This focus prompted a reevaluation of the organic model in opposition to mechanistic explanations, both on a macrocosmic and microcosmic scale (on this see Breidbach 1998; for an analysis of the essential significance of *Leben* in Hegel’s system, and the influence of contemporary natural scientists on its development, see Achella 2019). The *Romantik* developed a dynamic and organic conceptual framework aimed at interpreting natural phenomena in ways that diverged from the atomistic and mechanistic worldview, thus marking a reaction against the Enlightenment. A key starting point was Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (Kant 2004), where matter ceased to be viewed as a mere aggregation of discrete atoms. On the side of the natural sciences, the discovery of galvanic electricity and of gas chemistry plaid a crucial role in the romantic understanding of the unity of organic and inorganic nature, and with it of the *process of life*; magnetism influenced the idea that everything operates through the action of antagonistic forces (the idea of *Polarität*, which

<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is important to bear in mind that German Romanticism was not a coherent or unified movement. As Giampiero Moretti has pointed out, a fundamental distinction must generally be drawn between the Romantics of Heidelberg and those of Jena, particularly in their respective conceptions of nature. According to Moretti, the Heidelberg group was directly influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder, whereas the Jena Romantics were shaped more by Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s philosophy (for further discussion, see Moretti 2013, 22–23; Korff 1923–; on the internal diversity of *Romantische Naturphilosophie*, see also Köchy 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Alison Stone argues that Hegel can be seen as adopting an anti-naturalistic stance regarding human autonomy and spirit. In her view, autonomy is precisely what sets the human being – namely, spirit – apart from nature, such that in its highest functions, spirit is no longer natural (see Stone 2009). While there is some validity to this interpretation, it is important to remember that, for Hegel, a form of freedom is already present within nature itself, and that spirit does not simply break away from nature but rather retains and transforms it (see Hegel’s Anthropology and his account of the natural soul).



is central for the romantics) (for further details, see Snelders 1970)<sup>9</sup>. It seemed, however, that natural sciences were at that moment actually unable to explain and define the phenomenon of life, seen as crucial in nature, and for this reason speculative philosophy of nature had to intervene.

If one looks at the early 19th-century Jena lectures on the philosophy of nature (on this see Breidbach 2000 and Moretti 1992, 310–311), one finds Franz Joseph Schelver – Hegel’s friend, director of the botanical garden in Jena, and later extraordinary professor of botany – delivering a lecture in 1804 in which he adopted the Schellingian vocabulary to interpret nature as a living organism. Similarly, the philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause held lectures on the philosophy of nature in Jena in 1803 and 1804 (Krause 1804), articulating a holistic and organicist understanding of the world. In an 1807 letter to the French naturalist Georges Cuvier, the German biologist Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer – a crucial figure in German *Naturphilosophie* for his efforts to relate the organic and inorganic realms, thus laying the groundwork for a unified conception of nature – responded to his friend’s inquiry about the state of German philosophy of nature and the natural sciences by asserting that *Naturphilosophie* had fostered an awareness of nature as a great organism, in which individual parts were seen as representatives of the whole [*Naturorganismus*] (see Snelders 1970, 196)<sup>10</sup>.

The living organism, examined in its concrete forms – such as plant and animal life – but also developed as a conceptual model, served to illuminate nature as an organic, living whole, in which all parts mutually generate and depend upon one another. In this way, it became a foundational paradigm for interpreting both nature and reality on a macrocosmic scale.

Hegel’s reflections are situated within this intellectual context. In the *Jenaer Naturphilosophie*, particularly in the section devoted to the organic, he repeatedly emphasises the concept of *organische Flüssigkeit* (organic fluidity) in relation to the dynamic between inorganic and organic nature and to the process of assimilation (for the significance of the concept of fluidity as a key to understanding Hegel’s Philosophy

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9 The idea that everything in nature develops through dynamic processes characterised by antagonistic couples had been philosophically elaborated by Schelling in his *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (1799).

10 It is worth noting that Kielmeyer was, in fact, critical of German *Naturphilosophie* (see Balss 1930, 286). His long 1807 letter to Cuvier has been published in English in Azadpour and Whistler (2021, Chap. 6). Kielmeyer was the scientist who identified three fundamental powers of the organism: reproduction [*Reproduktion*], irritability [*Irritabilität*], and sensibility [*Sensibilität*]. This view is elaborated in his 1793 discourse, *Über die Verhältnisse der organischen Kräfte unter einander in der Reihe der verschiedenen Organisationen, die Gesetze und Folgen dieser Verhältnisse* (Bernoulli & Kern 1926, III). Hegel later incorporated these categories into his own theory of the organism, though with modifications and specific reinterpretations. For Kielmeyer, *reproduction* included nourishment, digestion, and procreation; Hegel, however, associated it more narrowly with the digestive system. *Irritability*, in Kielmeyer’s framework, referred to excitability [*Reizbarkeit*] and the motor functions of the body, while Hegel linked it to the circulatory system. Finally, *sensibility* for Kielmeyer denoted the faculties of representation and intelligence, whereas for Hegel it corresponded to the nervous system (see Hegel 2016, 1523 ff.). These three organic properties – reproduction, irritability, and sensibility – were also recognised by Albrecht von Haller as vital functions through which the organism sustains itself.

of Nature – as well as its roots in ancient thought and its close association with the “fifth element,” the ether – see Erle 2001 and Erle 2002). Organic fluidity conveys the idea of a unity that sustains itself through the very process of becoming – where the parts generate the whole and are defined by their fluid interpenetration (see Hegel 1976, 108 f., the part dedicated to “Das Organische” within the *Naturphilosophie*). The *Organische* is thus conceived as something that already is, in itself, what it becomes in actuality: a movement in which the outcome is implicitly contained in its beginning<sup>11</sup>. The Earth, in turn, is understood as an organic totality, inherently characterised by life<sup>12</sup>. In this sense, Hegel’s conception of organic nature as a self-organising whole aligns closely with Romantic thought<sup>13</sup>, particularly in his use of the organism as a model on a macrocosmic scale. With regard to the animal organism, Hegel – already in his Jena period, and likely influenced by the aforementioned scientific and philosophical context – conceives it as an “exclusive self,” characterised by individuality and the capacity for arbitrary movement, and as a being that exists as an end [*Zweck*] in itself.

The examples Hegel employs in the mature *Encyclopedic Philosophy of Nature*, particularly in the section devoted to the organism and its functioning, still reflect – and in some respects further develop – the insights of the Jena period. Central to this development is again Hegel’s appropriation of Kantian and Aristotelian conceptions of inner purposiveness and teleology in living beings, which plays a pivotal role in illustrating how the organic anticipates the spiritual (on this see the part on Teleology in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel 1991, in particular § 204 An, 279–281). With this, Hegel’s position enables a transcendence of both Cartesian dualism and the post-Cartesian monistic alternatives: namely, vitalism or spiritualism on one side, and materialism or physicalist reductionism

11 “Das organische [sic] ist schon *an sich* das was es *wirklich* ist. Es ist die Bewegung seines *Werdens*. Aber was das Resultat ist, ist auch das Vorhergehende” (Hegel 1976, 108–109).

12 In Harris’s words, the Earth is conceived as “an organic whole pregnant with the conditions of burgeoning life.” In this view, Harris sees Hegel as anticipating the position later articulated by contemporary biologist Lewis Thomas (Harris 1985, 220).

13 This view is strongly defended by Alison Stone through a comparison between Hegel and Novalis, which however takes other reference points rather than the model of the organicism (Stone 2009). Stone claims that Hegel systematises the *romantische Naturphilosophie*. She argues that in Novalis’ view the human being is the highest realisation of the self-organisation of nature, of a kind of rationality which is already present in nature itself. Nature lets us glimpse a kind of freedom – a kind of inner telos – that prefigures human freedom. This is linked to the understanding of the human being as the last level in the development of the cosmos, a typical romantic idea, which united Carl Gustav Carus, Friedrich Schiller, and the young Hegel (see Nadler 1938, 167). Through a comparison between Hegel and Carus, also Käte Nadler argues that the young Hegel’s view of nature is very close to the romantic one, arguing that the romantic concept of *Polarität* develops in Hegel to the dialectical contradiction, a polarity which however is then overcome in Hegel’s *Dialektik* – unlike in the romantic scheme. Consequently, for Nadler, idealism – embodied by Hegel – and romanticism – embodied by Carus – do not simply represent a contrast between rationalism and irrationalism. On the contrary, a “deep inner kinship” between the two should be recognised (Nadler 1938, 167). Felix Duque claims, on the contrary, that Hegel gradually detached from the romantic philosophy of nature. He emphasises that, already in the *Naturvorlesung* of 1804/05, Hegel detaches from Schelling’s and the romantics’ view of nature in that his interest seems to be not in nature in itself but in the *Geist der Natur* (against the romantic view, according to which nature always has priority and the philosophy of nature is accordingly the basis for the philosophy of spirit) (see Duque 1998; on Hegel’s position with respect to Romantic philosophy of nature, see also Illetterati 1992).

on the other. This is because the living organism, for Hegel, cannot be reduced either to mere naturality or to pure spirituality<sup>14</sup>.

In § 350 of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), which introduces his treatment of the animal organism in the Philosophy of Nature, Hegel immediately brings to the fore the key concepts that define the living organism: “Organic individuality exists as *subjectivity* in so far as the externality proper to shape is *idealised* into members, and in its process outwards, the organism preserves within itself the unity of selfhood [*die selbstische Einheit*]” (Petry 1970, III, § 350, 102; Hegel 1992, 352)<sup>15</sup>. In Hegel’s view, the animal organism is most fundamentally characterised by *subjectivity*. This refers to its capacity for self-movement and self-production, through which it maintains the unity of its selfhood (Hegel 1992, § 351), thereby securing its self-preservation in relation to the external world. Hegel’s conception of subjectivity in this context points to a dual movement: on the one hand, a naturalisation of the subject, and on the other, a subjectification of nature. What is typically considered a distinctively human mode of being finds its first concrete expression within nature itself – specifically, in the animal organism. As a result, nature appears denaturalised, while subjectivity becomes inseparably linked to the natural and bodily dimension (see Achella 2012, 24).

Furthermore, Hegel’s theory of the organism engages with externality in a way that does not oppose it to the organism but rather integrates it dialectically. His use of the term “idealisation” in this context refers to the organism’s capacity – as an individualised organic totality – to internalise inorganic nature, transforming it through assimilation into its own interiority. This act of incorporation is not external but immanent to the organism’s process of self-formation: a further expression of its *subjectivity*. Through its openness and orientation toward the external world, the organism sustains its identity, individuality, and unity. The animal organism does not merely adapt to or consume the external world: rather, it constitutes itself by passing through externality, without dissolving into it or becoming something else. Its defining power lies in its capacity to transform inorganic nature into its own being (Hegel 2016, § 356a), in a circular process of self-production and self-preservation that ultimately returns to itself. This dynamic embodies its intrinsic teleology: “animal life is its own product and purpose – it is at once both means and end.”

For Hegel, this marks a first form of freedom: a manifestation of inner purposiveness, or *causa finalis*, which distinguishes life from inorganic nature. Unlike *causa efficiens*,

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14 Note that Hegel’s theory of the organism dialectically develops in three stages (earth-plants-animal organism). Harris summarises this dialectical path as follows: “the earth represents the immediate unity of organic conditions. Plant life displays the proliferation of associated living units, loosely coordinated and largely equipotential. Animal life, finally, realises itself in the form of an integrated diversity, of immense complexity, but of such intimate interdependence of organs and processes that none can exist or function except within the living totality” (Harris 1985, 221). The animal organism represents the fullest development of the concept of organism, where the continuity between nature and *Geist*, and the emergence of *Geist* within nature, become manifest.

15 The German expressions in square brackets have been added by me.

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the mechanical causality of non-living matter, *causa finalis* implies that the organism's goal is already present at the beginning of the process – its purpose coincides with its outcome. The living organism is not a mere assemblage of separate parts, as in a mechanical construct, but a unified whole in which each part is intrinsically connected to and dependent upon the others. These parts are “ideal” in the sense that they exist only in relation to the whole and derive their identity from it. As Hegel notes in § 356 of the *Encyclopedia*, each member of the organism “is interchangeably both end and means”, sustaining itself through its interaction with the other members, even in tension with them. The interdependence of the organism's components means that none can function – or even properly exist – in isolation. As Hegel illustrates in the addition to § 350, if a finger is severed, it undergoes chemical decomposition and ceases to be a finger in any meaningful sense. Similarly, when an organ within an animal asserts its independence, placing itself above the whole and disrupting the organism's integrated activity, illness arises (§ 371), and the isolated part reverts to the status of inorganic matter<sup>16</sup>. This perspective reflects Hegel's broader conception of the organism as a system – a term he was already employing during his Jena period – to denote a totality in which each part is functionally and purposefully linked to the others. The integrity of the whole depends on this reciprocal interrelation: a disruption in one part inevitably affects the others, and thereby alters the organism as a whole.

According to Hegel, in the processes of self-production and self-preservation, animals experience a sense of deficiency<sup>17</sup> – unlike plants. That is, animals are aware of their dependence on external matter for survival and are thus marked by a feeling of vulnerability, anxiety, and unease in their relation to the world. This condition reflects what Hegel calls the *Tätigkeit des Mangels* – the ‘activity of lack’ – which, for him, is a defining characteristic of living beings and sets them apart from inorganic matter. As a result, on the one hand, the animal organism is a self-producing being endowed with a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it remains fundamentally dependent on the external world for both its production and ongoing maintenance.

According to Hegel, assimilation is the process through which the organism reconciles the fundamental tension between its selfhood and its orientation toward externality – that is, its dependence on an external, inorganic nature that exists independently of it. Assimilation represents the appropriation of this external nature, a

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<sup>16</sup> The part-whole relation can thus be interpreted as reflecting the broader relation between organic and inorganic nature. The individual elements – or members – of an organism can be considered ‘inorganic’ in the sense that they lack autonomy and derive their function and identity solely from their integration within the whole (see Cinemre 2022). This marks a key difference between animal organisms and plants: in the latter, certain parts can continue to live and function even when separated from the whole, unlike in animals where such separation typically results in the loss of vitality.

<sup>17</sup> This sense of lack and deficiency forms the basis of the organism's intrinsic unity and inseparable relationship with its environment (see Cinemre 2022). This dynamic also reflects the deeper unity between interiority and exteriority, as well as between freedom and necessity (for a detailed discussion of the significance of this concepts, see Micheleni 2011).

movement by which the organism reclaims itself through what initially appears as other. In this sense, it is the process in which externality is transformed into subjectivity, reducing the dispersed elements of inorganic nature to the unified interiority of the subject. This transformation marks the 'idealisation' of externality. Most concretely, it is realised in the act of nourishment, where inorganic matter is converted into living substance – a "transition of inorganic nature into a soma belonging to the subject" (Petry 1970, III, § 365a, 155)<sup>18</sup>. Through assimilation and digestion, the organism not only maintains its health but also actualises its inherent purpose: self-preservation, a goal already implicit at the outset. This dynamic unfolds as a kind of instinct – an unconscious teleology – through which the organism strives to reshape what is external into a bodily expression of its own subjectivity.

Having laid out these conceptual premises – which are not meant to offer an exhaustive account of Hegel's conception of nature and the living organism, but rather to outline the key points of the argument – I will now turn to an analysis of certain elements of British Idealism, in order to examine how they relate to the views just outlined.

### **III. Nature and Life from Hegel to British Idealism: Alexander and McTaggart**

First of all, it is important to clarify certain aspects and elements of the movement known as British Idealism, which is too often treated superficially by critics as merely the opposing pole to the emerging tradition of analytic philosophy – a tradition that, in turn, frequently had only a limited understanding of the idealist and Hegelian position it was reacting against<sup>19</sup>. British Idealism itself encompasses a wide range of views and internal disagreements, which make it difficult to characterise as a homogeneous movement, contrary to how it is often portrayed by analytic philosophers<sup>20</sup>. The latter generally targeted a form of idealism understood as denying the existence of an external world, a position frequently (and mistakenly) attributed to Hegel. However, attentive readers of Hegel and of the British neo-Hegelians are well aware that none of these thinkers denied the existence of a mind-independent world. The idealist position, in both Hegel and his British interpreters, is far more nuanced and complex than such reductive interpretations suggest. It is often a form of epistemological constructivism – rather than ontological constructivism – that is upheld by the philosophers of German Idealism, beginning with

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18 Although assimilation entails mechanical and chemical moments and the organism itself has mechanical and chemical properties, these ones are not sufficient to explain its life, in Hegel's view, meaning that lower stages happen to be insufficient to explain the upper ones. In this, despite recognising a kind of continuity between nature and spirit, Hegel seems to defend an anti-reductionist account of organic nature (on this topic, see Kabeshkin 2021).

19 On the contrary, British Idealism deserves attention for at least two reasons: as one of the major post-Hegelian currents; as one of the catalysts behind the emergence of analytic philosophy.

20 What possibly unites the British Idealists is their common opposition to traditional British empiricism.

Kant<sup>21</sup>. As Tom Rockmore points out, this position holds that “the subject must ‘construct’ what it knows,” meaning that the subject plays an active, not passive, role in the act of knowing (Rockmore 2004, 17). And it is clear that such a position can be perfectly compatible with a form of ontological realism. What analytic philosophers actually criticise is closer to what Kant himself rejected as ‘bad’ idealism<sup>22</sup>. Following Hegel’s own distinction among different forms of idealism – critical (Kant), subjective (Fichte), objective (Schelling), and absolute (Hegel himself) – British Idealism is generally associated with a form of absolute idealism, which is why it is often linked to Hegelian thought (on these aspects, and for a deeper examination of the concept of idealism – particularly with reference to the British Idealist movement as opposed by analytic philosophy – see Rockmore 2004, in particular the chapter on “Idealism, British Idealism, and Analytic Philosophy,” 11 ff.). Hegel’s idealism is an idealism which seeks unity – an identity that both overcomes and preserves difference: it is a speculative identity, one that differentiates itself within itself.

James Hutchison Stirling’s *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) is widely regarded as the foundational work that sparked the emergence of the British Idealist movement. It played a crucial role in introducing Hegel’s thought to the British philosophical landscape and in shaping the intellectual direction of the thinkers who would later be identified as British Idealists (see Mander 2013, 168). However, as for the relationship between British Idealism and Hegelian thought, it must be acknowledged that it was never one of passive assimilation. While the British Idealists adopted Hegelian categories, they also engaged with them critically, reinterpreting and developing them in original ways as the foundation of their own philosophical systems and idealism. This aspect, too, is of considerable interest, as it highlights the generative power of Hegel’s philosophy in stimulating further philosophical development<sup>23</sup>. What seemed to particularly attract the British Idealists was precisely the idea of an organic totality – so much so that, as it has been noted, “Idealists were holistic thinkers” (Mander 2013, 173).

It is already evident that British Idealism warrants closer philosophical attention. However, already in his 2004 book, Rockmore (2004, 31) observed that British Idealism had been more condemned than studied and was, at that time, no longer well known. It does not seem that the situation has significantly changed in the decades since his diagnosis. If this holds true in general, it applies even more strongly to the conceptions of nature developed by the British Idealists – an area that has never received sustained

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21 Recent studies have discussed and reassessed an interpretation of moral constructivism in Kant (see at least Bagnoli 2016; Bagnoli 2022).

22 As Rockmore underlines: “According to Kant, an acceptable theory of knowledge includes an empirical input, or ‘external’ source of the contents of the mind, as well as the activity of the mind in constructing, on the basis of the empirical input, objects of experience and knowledge.” Consequently, “For Kant, idealism is unacceptable when it claims to know things apart from and prior to experience, and rejects experience as a source of knowledge” (Rockmore 2004, 20–21). However, according to this view knowledge cannot be wholly reduced to experience.

23 According to Rockmore, British Idealists were never ‘orthodox’ Hegelians (Rockmore 2004, 35).

analysis nor been meaningfully brought to light. For these reasons, and building upon what has been said so far, an attempt to reconstruct and highlight its key elements is not only timely, but also philosophically valuable in its own right. In what follows, I will focus in particular on the positions of John McTaggart and Samuel Alexander, as they are the main figures who directly engaged with Hegelian philosophy and Hegel's conception of life and nature<sup>24</sup>.

Alexander (1859–1938) is regarded as the forerunner of British Emergentism – the view that mind emerges from nature and that change within nature occurs gradually. While this perspective naturally aligns with Darwin's principle of continuity, it also exhibits distinct Hegelian influences. He also had a significant impact on Whitehead (see Thomas 2014)<sup>25</sup>, which further justifies the inclusion of his thought in this discussion. During his time at Oxford (beginning in 1881), Alexander was closely aligned with the Absolute Idealists, including Bradley, though he later appears to have moved toward anti-idealist positions. What is certain is that, in 1939, he was regarded as “the thinker who, since the death of F. H. Bradley in 1924, has been the leading figure in British philosophy” (Muirhead 1939, 3).

His first publication, *Hegel's Conception of Nature* (1886) reflects his intellectual connection with the Oxford British Hegelians. In that work – addressed below –, Alexander articulates certain ideas that he would later retain in his mature system. From Hegel, he also inherits the notion of an evolutionary ethics (see Muirhead 1939, 6), in which a progressive development can be traced from lower to higher levels, analogous to processes in the biological and natural realms. Moreover, he extends the organic model to his conception of society, going beyond an atomistic view of society. In his later works, Alexander comes to embrace realism – a stance that, as previously noted, is not necessarily incompatible with Hegelian thought. However, Alexander's realism takes the

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24 Here too, the aim is not completeness – which would be impossible within the scope of an article like this and would rather require a full-length book – but rather to highlight elements that may support the initial working hypothesis. The decision was made not to consider Bradley's thought, even though he is often regarded as the most Hegelian among the British Idealists, since he himself did not consider himself as a Hegelian and, in fact, was at odds with several of Hegel's core assumptions. In *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley devotes an entire chapter to the concept of Nature, yet he appears to offer no definitive answers. He conceives of Nature *in relation* to the human body, but at the same time as an abstraction and, in this sense, as ‘appearance’ – something not truly ‘real’. He views it as external to the domain of the psyche, detached from our feelings, thoughts, and volitions, and he offers no clear resolution regarding the existence of inorganic nature – that is, lifeless nature. Nonetheless, Bradley does affirm the existence of a mind-independent world, stating that “The physical world exists, of course, independent of me, and does not depend on the accident of my sensations” (Bradley 1893, 243). Overall, his conception of nature appears to differ, at least in part, from that of Hegel – though like Hegel, he also describes it as the “region of externality” (Bradley 1893, 260; for a detailed discussion of his role and philosophical stance – respectively, a “holistic theory of relations” – see Candlish 1996, Blanshard 1925 and McHenry 1989).

25 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Whitehead's and Alexander's thought in general, see Emmet (Emmet 1992), who also highlights that Alexander's conception of emergence – where genuinely novel qualities arise at successive levels of organisation – allows him to articulate a naturalistic account of mind that avoids reductionism. While mind is, in one sense, continuous with its neural and physiological basis, it also represents a distinct quality that operates in a unique manner within conscious experience.

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form of a naturalistic realism, in which mind exists within the natural world alongside other entities (for a more in-depth discussion of these aspects, see Thomas 2014). But let us now take a closer look at some of the key ideas in his essay on Hegel's concept of nature.

To begin with, it is noteworthy that Alexander mentions not only Hegel's Philosophy of Nature as presented in the *Encyclopaedia*, but also Hegel's lectures on the subject, as well as his earlier reflections from the Frankfurt and Nuremberg periods. Alexander acknowledges that "The *Philosophy of Nature* is certainly one of the most suggestive, and just as certainly the most perplexing of Hegel's works" (Alexander 1886, 495). It is the most perplexing, he suggests – echoing a view still shared today – because Hegel's Philosophy of Nature was grounded in the scientific knowledge of his time, which was undeniably limited not only by today's standards, but even by those of Alexander's own day, just a few decades after Hegel's death. Nevertheless, Alexander is convinced that Hegel's Philosophy of Nature still contains insights of value for contemporary thought. Regarding the relationship between the philosophy of nature and the natural sciences, Alexander emphasises that the former should not be an a priori construction. Rather, it should represent experience transformed into thought – beginning with the findings of the sciences, which in turn provide the raw material for philosophical reflection.

According to Alexander, it is science itself that ultimately leads to the philosophy of nature, as its method eventually proves inadequate – particularly when it comes to explaining the meaning of life and the transition from inorganic to organic nature. Faced with these limitations, the role of a philosophy of nature is, in his view, to "exhibit the whole world of nature as a system of ideas, each of its ideas being contained in the supreme and concrete idea of nature" (Alexander 1886, 498). It is not science that asks the question "What is Nature?", but philosophy. And this is precisely the question Alexander poses in his essay. A possible answer, drawing on the Hegelian system, lies in defining nature either in relation to what precedes it – namely, logic – or in relation to what follows it – spirit. While it is not possible here to examine the argument in detail, the central point is that Nature is characterised as the '*otherness of the Idea*' – it carries within itself the principle of otherness. It is precisely this feature that leads to the dispersion of the Idea into a multiplicity and variety of forms, in which the unity of the Idea appears to fragment – a multiplicity that Hegel, however, could not embrace and appreciate. And this is precisely one of the limitations Alexander identifies in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: the fact that Hegel is ultimately unable to "explain the variety of nature" (Alexander 1886, 516).

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is Alexander's emphasis on *organic life*: it marks the point at which nature – though not yet spirit – begins to display a form of "self-concentration" and "inward reflection" that anticipates the life of spirit (Alexander 1886, 501), which, like the phoenix, is reborn from its own flames. It is in life, Alexander observes, that the concept becomes clear and manifest. He then proceeds to a systematic analysis of the three levels that structure Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: mechanics,



physics, and the organic – “where Nature first acquires the character of subject”, as we have already noted in our earlier reading of Hegel’s text, “with the power which a subject has of gathering up all its parts or differences under its own control” (Alexander 1886, 504–505). Furthermore, Alexander emphasises that in the organism we are no longer dealing with a mere relation between external bodies, but with a negative unity that sustains itself through its differentiated parts: “Such a unity is Life” (Alexander 1886, 505). While plant life still appears simple and immediate, animal life represents true life – real life – characterised by reaction and assimilation, and bearing the mark of life’s inherent freedom, to which all its members contribute: “And in its feeling it reaches the highest expression of self-contained unity which Nature can hope to attain” (Ibid.). From this, it becomes clear just how central the concept of the organism is within nature. In this context, the Earth is reintroduced as the first form of life and as the source of all life<sup>26</sup>. However, it is “Hegel’s treatment of the idea of animal life” that, for Alexander, represents “perhaps the most interesting and profitable part” of Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature – a part which contains processes which represent “the most suggestive results of Hegel’s work” (Alexander 1886, 508). After reviewing the three characteristics of the animal organism – which we have already mentioned – namely sensibility, irritability, and reproduction, Alexander turns to the fundamental process of assimilation. He conceives of it as arising from the organism’s antagonistic relationship with inorganic nature: a process in which the animal transforms what it needs to its own advantage, integrating it into its unified structure. This dynamic defines the organism’s relation to its environment, which, for Alexander, is not merely a causal interaction but rather “a life-process.” He then goes on to examine the organism’s relation to its genus, leading up to the death of the individual and the emergence of spirit.

At this stage, Alexander makes his own reflections explicit. In his view, Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature aims to understand the forms of nature as they truly are, seeking to grasp things as an integrated whole. He also situates Hegel’s philosophy in relation to earlier approaches, particularly that of Kant in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, highlighting in particular the conception of matter as inherently characterised by opposing forces – attraction and repulsion – which had before typically been attributed to the interactions between bodies rather than seen as intrinsic to matter itself. However, Hegel could not agree with the conception of these two forces as independent – a position that also explains his disagreement with Newton, who understood motion as the result of the combination of two separate forces. As Alexander notes, Hegel consistently sought to grasp phenomena in their totality: “these two forces are not different and independent, but identical in the same way as repulsion and attraction, two elements of the total motion which involve each other: they are not combined externally, but exist only in their union” (Alexander 1886, 514). It now becomes clear why, in Alexander’s interpretation,

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander also devotes attention to Hegel’s conception of space and time – concepts that would also become central in his later, more mature works – as well as to sound and heat.

the animal organism is “the highest expression of self-contained unity which Nature can hope to attain”: precisely because within it we see a unity of organs, forces, and members that exist only through – and within – that very unity. This unity – one that Hegel sought to grasp within the whole of nature – is precisely what Alexander, along with other British Idealists, appears to appreciate most in Hegel’s thought: “And strange as Hegel’s method of proof may seem, we cannot help seeing the value of his totality of view: he will not dissect nature, but will in each conception take it as a whole” (Alexander 1886, 515).

Finally, Alexander turns to certain modern theories that he believes could prove fruitful for an updated discussion of Hegel’s conception of nature. In particular, the theory of evolution: with strong conviction, Alexander emphasises the similarity between evolutionary theory and Hegel’s system, which he sees as a form of evolution expressed through the structure of dialectic – though, of course, he is also aware of the important differences between the two<sup>27</sup>. Given that many of the issues that concerned Alexander’s contemporaries – such as the difficulty of distinguishing between plants and animals – would not have been particularly relevant for Hegel, Alexander agrees with Hegel that the central notion philosophy should seek to explain is that of *animal life*. This, he believes, still allows for the preservation of variety, understood as a vehicle for expressing the *animal type*. In conclusion, what Alexander finds of great value in Hegel’s treatment of nature is the idea that “the spirit is at one with nature in spite of its apparent antagonism”. The very aim of the philosophy of nature, he argues, is “to explain how it is that nature, which is penetrated by the spirit, can in the first place be different from spirit and next is by insensible stages overcome so as to be spirit” (Alexander 1886, 523). And this occurs precisely in the living organism. Let us now briefly turn to some key aspects of McTaggart’s thought, which will later prove relevant for the comparison with Whitehead and Jonas.

McTaggart is considered one of the most important systematic metaphysicians of the twentieth century. In his own time, he was widely read and well-known – something that, like in the case of other British Idealists, can no longer be said today. He was a major interpreter of Hegelian thought, to which he dedicated several significant works, including *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (1896), *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (1901) – from which we will draw some relevant elements for our discussion – and *A Commentary on Hegel’s Logic* (1910). Despite these interpretative efforts, his writings on Hegel have received relatively little attention among Hegel scholars, perhaps because, as noted earlier, his approach cannot be classified as orthodox Hegelianism<sup>28</sup>. Nevertheless, McTaggart

27 “Evolution is a history of how things in nature come to pass; dialectic is the process by which one idea logically leads on to the higher idea which is implicit in it and is its truth. Evolution is a history of a process in time; dialectic is a history of ideas which form a process not in time” (Alexander 1886, 518).

28 For example, consider Chapter VII of *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, titled *The Conception of Society as an Organism*, where McTaggart offers strong criticism of the idea that Hegel provides a metaphysical basis for conceiving society as an organism – one in which unity serves as the end of its parts. Although McTaggart does believe that the ultimate ideal for the state or society is indeed the organic ideal, he rejects the notion that our current society should be regarded as our end. While the parts of a living body may find their purpose in the whole, individuals will always seek a

remains a key figure, not least for the influence he had on major thinkers such as Bertrand Russell and Whitehead. McTaggart embraces an ontological idealism alongside an epistemological realism, according to which knowledge is justified true belief, and truth consists in correspondence with reality. His ontological idealism was clearly inspired by Hegel, particularly in the notion of the Absolute as composed of many finite individuals, each in relation to the others. In this sense, he reinterprets Hegel's idea that the Absolute is not an undifferentiated unity, but rather a differentiated one.

In his *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, McTaggart remarkably begins with the category of Life in order to understand how the Absolute is determined. He writes: "There seems to be very little doubt or ambiguity about Hegel's conception of this category as a whole, although the subdivisions which he introduces into it are among the most confused parts of the whole dialectic" (McTaggart 1901, 13). The crucial turning point is when McTaggart applies the category of Life to the entirety of reality – a move that will resonate in Whitehead's thought. He writes:

According to that category [life] reality is a unity differentiated into a plurality, (or a plurality combined into a unity) in such a way that the whole meaning and significance of the unity lies in its being differentiated into that particular plurality, and that the whole meaning and significance of the parts of the plurality lies in their being combined into that particular unity (McTaggart 1901, 13).

Here, we find the application to reality of the part-whole relationship we previously encountered in Hegel's conception of the living animal organism. It is a unity *provided by life itself* – not something external to the individuals it unites, but rather internal to them. The very nature of each individual lies in being part of that unity, just as a regiment has no reality apart from its soldiers, nor is it something found in any one soldier, but in the unity formed by all of them taken together. However, while in the case of the regiment each man would still exist independently of it, "in the category of Life (...) no differentiations can exist independently of the unity. (...) The unity cannot (...) be in each individual as a *merely* separated individual. But it must (...) be found in each of the united individuals, and not merely in the sum of them" (McTaggart 1901, 14). The conclusion of his reasoning is as follows:

Reality is a differentiated unity, in which the unity has no meaning but the differentiations, and the differentiations have no meaning but the unity. The differentiations are individuals for each of whom the unity exists, and whose whole nature consists in the fact that the unity is for them, as the whole nature of the unity consists in the fact that it is for the individuals. And, finally, in this harmony between the unity and the individuals neither side is subordinated to

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kind of perfection that society itself cannot provide. He also expresses a deeply critical stance and skepticism toward philosophy in general when he writes: "The result seems to be that philosophy can give us very little, if any, guidance in action. (...) Why should a Hegelian citizen be surprised that his belief as to the organic nature of the Absolute does not help him in deciding how to vote? Would a Hegelian engineer be reasonable in expecting that his belief that all matter is spirit should help him in planning a bridge"? He concludes, then, that philosophy does not offer guidance, but rather hope (McTaggart 1901, 151 ff., here 166). Nonetheless, there are several Hegelian insights that he adopts and further develops.

the other, but the harmony is an immediate and ultimate fact (McTaggart 1901, 21).

And again:

All reality must be conceived as in perfect unity, and, therefore, individuals must be conceived as forming, not a mere aggregate or mechanical system, but a whole which only differs from an organism in being a closer and more vital unity than any organism can be. The various individuals, then, must be conceived as forming a differentiated and multiplex whole, but by no means as an unconnected manifold (McTaggart 1901, 242).

Starting from what appear to be more than mere suggestions – indeed, actual applications of Hegel’s conception of life and the living organism to reality as a whole, understood through an organic and biocentric model – it is now possible to examine to what extent these Hegelian intuitions can also be found in the thought of Whitehead<sup>29</sup>, who was, in turn, appreciated by Jonas.

#### **IV. Thinking Nature and Life beyond Idealism: Hegelian Echoes in Whitehead and Jonas**

Drawing on the most recent discoveries in physics at the time, Whitehead developed a processual metaphysical conception of reality, in which becoming is understood as the very essence of being. In Whitehead’s terminology, what is – or more precisely, what happens – is defined as an *actual entity*, a foundational concept in his ontology. The unfolding of the world, according to his processual view, is *not* to be understood as the interaction of *isolated, self-contained atoms* scattered in space and time – a view Whitehead explicitly seeks to deconstruct. Instead, reality is composed of *relational nodes*, each intrinsically connected to the whole of which it is a part. In this sense, process metaphysics entails a *relational ontology*, in which being is constituted through interdependence and dynamic interaction. This aspect reflects the legacy of British Idealism, which understood unity as the differentiated identity of parts bound together by essential relations. Reality itself coincides with the process of becoming of actual entities, whose being consists in *concrecence* – that is, in becoming themselves through a process of self-production, a form of self-causation (Lucas 1990, 79; Whitehead 1929; I first developed these aspects in Battistoni 2023). This appears to share certain features of the self-causation and self-production process typical of living beings, in Hegelian terms. For Whitehead, it is a process in which each actual entity is “an act of experience arising out of data” – meaning the elements that are given in the world – “a process of ‘feeling’ the many data, so as to absorb them into the unity of one individual ‘satisfaction’”. Here ‘feeling’ is the term used for the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity

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<sup>29</sup> McTaggart and Whitehead were, in fact, close friends and had daily opportunities to discuss Hegelian thought. Scholarly discussions have rarely addressed the influence of McTaggart on Whitehead. Rémy Lestienne offers a few remarks on this topic (Lestienne 2020, 6).

of the actual entity in question” (Whitehead 1929, 40). It is a kind of “absorption” by the actual entity of objective data into the unity of its individual satisfaction – a transition from objectivity to subjectivity through a process of appropriation of particular elements, which Whitehead defines as *prehension*.

Despite the inevitable linguistic and conceptual differences, Whitehead’s notions of ‘appropriation’ and ‘absorption’ – as well as the transition from objectivity to subjectivity – seem to resonate with the process of assimilation that, in Hegel, characterises the animal organism. In both frameworks, this process leads to a form of satisfaction of the lack or deficiency that ontologically defines the living being, as we have previously seen. For both thinkers, it is a ‘movement outward’ through which the organism produces and sustains itself in unity by assimilating external elements – elements that, in the process, lose their character of externality. This vision of reality as a process of generating individual actual entities – self-realising and purposive – is precisely what defines Whitehead’s philosophy of the organism. Its aim, as he states, is to “to express a coherent cosmology based upon the notions of ‘system’, ‘process’, ‘creative advance into novelty’” (Whitehead 1929, 128). The term *organism* in Whitehead carries both a macroscopic and a microscopic meaning: on the one hand, “the universe in any stage of its expansion is the first meaning of ‘organism’”; on the other hand, the actual entity is understood as an organic process, to the extent that “it repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm” (Whitehead 1929, 215). Organic bodies, as more complex entities, are understood by Whitehead as living societies – systems that require nourishment in order to survive. As in Hegel and later in Jonas, nourishment is closely linked to life itself and entails an ongoing interaction between the living being and its environment. While no actual entity can be considered entirely isolated from its surroundings, this interdependence is even more pronounced in complex living organisms, whose survival fundamentally depends on the external world.

In this application of the category of organism – both at the micro and macro levels – it becomes clear that Whitehead is engaging in a productive reworking of key Hegelian categories, mediated through British Idealism. Whitehead’s organicist thought became an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Hans Jonas, who began to explore it in depth after emigrating to the United States, at a time when he perceived a striking absence of philosophy of nature within twentieth-century philosophical systems. For Jonas, any metaphysical framework, to be complete, had to include a philosophical biology capable of addressing the world of life.

Jonas particularly appreciated Whitehead’s theory of reality for its overcoming of the “annoying dualism” inherited from the mechanistic view of nature, achieved through an “ingenious conceptual scheme” (Jonas 1966, 95). For Jonas, this amounted to a “bold proposition of basic ontology, whose intellectual force and philosophical importance are unequaled in our time” (Jonas 1966, 96). Under the banner of “nature alive” (Jonas 2016, 498 ff.), Whitehead had in Jonas’s view undertaken a genuine reform of both epistemology and ontology, making possible an adequate concept of nature by discovering life within it.

Indeed, Whitehead had shown that neither physical Nature nor life can be understood unless they are fused together as essential factors of the 'really real' entities whose interconnections and individual properties constitute the universe (Whitehead 1934). In *Nature and Life* – a text Jonas valued highly alongside *Process and Reality* – life takes on a central theoretical role, specified in terms of self-enjoyment, and tied to a process of appropriation that echoes the 'absorption' and prehension discussed in *Process and Reality*. Life, in this context, is characterised in Aristotelian terms: as purpose and creative activity.

Unlike Jonas, however, Whitehead holds that life pertains to all of reality, not just to biologically living and sentient organisms. Yet, according to him, life cannot be directly observed in nature by science, which remains blind to it – precisely due to the dualisms introduced in European thought since Descartes. For Whitehead, the sharp division between mentality and nature has no basis in our fundamental experience since we recognise ourselves as living *within* nature. There is, then, a continuity between the human being and nature – an intuition that, despite the differences, is clearly Hegelian in origin. As already said, in Hegel, spirit emerges *from* and *within* nature.

While Jonas highly values Whitehead's recognition of the vital dimension of nature, he criticises him for failing to acknowledge the deep ontological distinction between life and non-life – transforming what Jonas sees as a qualitative difference into a mere difference of degree<sup>30</sup>. In doing so, Jonas argues, Whitehead loses sight of the mystery of biological identity, and with it, the full significance of the ontological rupture that life introduces into nature. For Whitehead, there is no such rupture, since everything is 'alive' from the beginning. As a result, according to Jonas, the boundary between the animate and the inanimate is blurred, and with it, the existential anxiety inherent in biological life – and the existential significance of death – is lost.

For Jonas, however, the interrelation, interaction, and mutual immanence of the parts of nature – so central to Whitehead's thought – are not general features of reality, but rather defining characteristics of life as it becomes manifest in the biological organism. In his interpretation, the organism represents the true ontological revolution within nature: with life come subjectivity, inwardness, and a form of spirituality – features that recent scholarship has traced back to Hegel's theory of the organism (see Battistoni & Erle 2021; Erle 2020; Michelini 2018). Jonas's philosophical biology exhibits Hegelian influences – albeit indirect, and likely mediated through Whitehead and the British Idealism. For example, in Jonas, metabolism corresponds closely to what Hegel describes as assimilation, as previously discussed. Moreover, living beings are seen to develop through a kind of graded progression, from the less complex to the more complex and freer – culminating in the self-aware human being. In this way, spirit emerges from nature in a manner that is

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30 On this point, Whitehead appears rather ambiguous: "In a sense, the difference between a living organism and the inorganic environment is only a question of degree; but it is a difference of degree which makes all the difference – in effect, it is a difference of quality" (Whitehead 1929, 179).

deeply Hegelian and in line with the positions of certain British Idealists.

## V. Concluding Remarks

From what has been shown, a coherent philosophical thread emerges – beginning with the Romantics and Hegel's Philosophy of Nature, developed through British Idealism, and carried forward in the frameworks of Whitehead and Jonas. At the center of this tradition lies the idea that nature is not a fragmented aggregate of isolated parts, but a differentiated unity: a living, dynamic whole in which each part exists only through its relation to the others. Originally grounded in Hegel's conception of the living organism, this vision of mutual interdependence was expanded by British Idealists to encompass all of reality, and reinterpreted by Whitehead and Jonas in response to the metaphysical and scientific challenges of the modern age. Such a view – relational, processual, and non-reductionist – offers a powerful lens through which to reconsider the place of life within nature and of human beings within the world. In a time of ecological urgency and ontological uncertainty, this tradition reminds us that to exist is to participate in a dynamic and integrated totality. Rediscovering these Hegelian insights means more than recovering a chapter of the history of philosophy; it means reclaiming a vision of the world in which everything is connected – and where to understand life is to understand the whole to which we belong.

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## ***Life as Self-Maintenance***



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**Abstract:** The article constructs the organism as a living being and – unlike an automaton – as an individual concerned with its own self-maintenance, endowed with intrinsic purposiveness, autoregulation, and with an agency of the self as well. This is done from the perspective of the philosophy of organism developed by Kant, Hegel, and Plessner, and subsequently in the light of Systems Theory. Hegel's Philosophy of Nature proves to be best suited to emancipate the contemporary, comprehensive *concept* of organism and its selfhood. To put it with Hegel's words, it 'is the Concept that comes into reality' here.

**Keywords:** Organism; self-maintenance; intrinsic purposiveness; self-agency; Systems Theory; Kant; Hegel; Plessner.

### **I. Introduction**

For centuries, the leading science, the paradigm of science, was physics. Today, it is biology<sup>1</sup>. Kant's dictum that there will never be "another Newton may some day arise, to make intelligible to us even the genesis of but a blade of grass from natural laws" (Kant 2007, 228; see also 238) sounds obsolete today. With the decoding of the genetic information by Francis Crick and James Watson half a century ago, biology not only advanced to a rigorous science, but also set out decisively to discover new continents of knowledge. In 1944, Erwin Schrödinger, who, as his research in Quantum Theory shows, certainly cannot be called discouraged about science, still saw a scientific understanding of what *life* is as being a long way off (Schrödinger 1951). This is hardly comprehensible

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the fifth chapter of Dieter Wandschneider's monograph *Naturphilosophie* (Wandschneider 2008), translated from German with the author's permission and made available here courtesy of C. C. Buchner Verlag (Bamberg, Germany).

today. Even if science still has no concise answer to the question of the essence of life, it is nevertheless considered certain that any detail of the organism can be made accessible to empirical scientific research.

This has opened up a new horizon of thought in which, for the first time, questions that have occupied the entire philosophical tradition again and again – more or less without tangible results – appear to be answerable. I am thinking here of three major topics: (1) organismic self-maintenance (problem of ‘intrinsic purposiveness’) (2) origin and development of life (evolution problem), (3) beginning of psychic activity in nature (mind-body problem). The central problem of the first topic, the principle of *organic self-maintenance*, concerns – to put it in anthropomorphic terms – the constant concern for one’s own existence. In contrast to this, inanimate objects, a stone or a star, or a locomotive or a computer, do not care about their own existence. If they are still there, it is either by chance or because they have been maintained by human intervention.

The second topic is devoted to questions regarding the *origin* and *evolution* of life: how can life emerge from non-living? How can we explain that matter organises itself into the form of organismic structures? How is the formation of purposeful structures in the sense of organismic self-maintenance to be comprehended without the need to suppose a purposeful designer? How does the progressive growth of life come about, and might this evolution be steered by a purpose?

The emergence of *mental existence* [*des seelischen Seins*] in nature forms a third topic. Empirically, there can be no doubt that higher animals dispose of sentience, perception, emotion, and that the ‘human’ animal, beyond that, is spirited [*Geist*]. In this way, a further advance in the evolution of nature is made visible: after living systems have emerged beyond inanimate nature, a new, apparently ‘immaterial’ form of being arises on this organismic-vitalist basis: the inner, *psychic dimension*. That entirely new questions arise here is evident from the continuing resistance that the mind-body problem poses to its solution. Nevertheless, one dare to claim that no era was as close to a solution as the present one, which has done more research than any previous one into the material conditions of psychic processes.

As the concept of the autonomous system has already demonstrated, maintenance is always already part of material existence. Nonetheless, we are convinced that the self-maintenance of the organic is of an utterly different quality than, for example, the structural stability of a stone. What this ability of the living may consist of is a perennial enigma that recurs throughout the entire philosophical tradition. Without delving into the historical details, here are just a handful of references to this topic:

For Plato, the soul is the proper principle of life, responsible for motion and control over inanimate matter. Aristotle calls this principle of self-motion *entelechy*, the intrinsic teleology of an organism, which – unlike in automata – is not placed in the organism by humans, but originates immanently from within it. Descartes, on the other hand, attempts to eliminate the problem of life by conceiving the organism technically as a sort of *machine*

and the soul as a separate, independent substance. In contrast, Leibniz develops a view according to which *everything* is more or less alive. Admittedly, such interpretations do not make life any more comprehensible. On the one hand, referring to the Platonic-Aristotelian principle of self-motion merely raises the question anew. On the other hand, given the manifest differences between living and non-living entities, one cannot be satisfied with Leibniz's view that everything is alive, nor with Descartes' reduction of life to technology.

## II. Kant's View of Life as Intrinsic Purposiveness

The problem of the living is recognised and considered in all its sharpness in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant sees that the concept of nature developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) is no longer sufficient in this context. The transcendental interpretation advocated there, according to which the subject itself already possesses forms of perception (space and time) and categories (e.g., substance, causality) prior to all experience (a priori) and imprints them on the yet unformed matter of sensory perception, is expressed in the already quoted formulation from the *Prolegomena* (1783): "*the understanding does not draw its (a priori) laws from nature, but prescribes them to it*" (Kant 2004, § 36) – the principle of causality is an example of this. These are the most general, experience-independent (a priori) principles, which we cannot conceive of in any other way – this is where their 'transcendental' character becomes clear. However, specific laws of nature, according to Kant, can only be acquired through experience; let us consider, for example, thermodynamic or optical laws. This applies in particular to the formations of organic nature, where the *purposefulness* is particularly striking. Transcendental interpretations in line with the *Critique of Pure Reason* do not advance us here. In their abstract generality, they cannot grasp and explain concrete, organismic, functional complexity. One is rather reminiscent of technical constructions, such as a clockwork, whose parts fit together purposefully and make up a functioning system. But such constructs are not the product of nature; they are engineered products whose *purposiveness* is therefore *due to* [another] *rational, purposeful activity* [*deren Zweckmäßigkeit sich vernünftiger Zweckthätigkeit verdankt*]. Thus, the organism's specific nature is not captured in this way because the organism is not a technical mechanism, although both are equally purposeful in terms of their functioning.

The *problem of purposiveness* is precisely the central theme of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: in its first part with reference to art, and in the second part – which is the only one we deal with here – with reference to the organic. The opposition between organism and mechanism is basically what Kant is concerned with there: How can something material, such as an organism, be purposeful, even though it does not originate from technical construction? Is it thinkable that nature itself pursues ends; does it guide the creation of organic, purposeful formations, thus behaving 'teleologically'? Or is

a teleological nature just our interpretation, rationalised into nature? The question of organism versus mechanism thus involves the *problem of teleology*. Kant explains to what extent an organism differs from a mere mechanism by comparing it to a clockwork mechanism. In a clock, one part is

certainly present for the sake of another, but it does not owe its presence to the agency of that other. (...) Hence one wheel in the watch does not produce the other, and, still less, does one watch produce other watches, by utilizing, or organizing, foreign material; hence it does not of itself replace parts of which it has been deprived, nor, if these are absent in the original construction, does it make good the deficiency by the addition of new parts; nor does it, so to speak, repair its own defects. But these are all things which we are justified in expecting from organized nature. – An organized being is, therefore, not a mere machine. For a machine has solely *motive power*, whereas an organized being possesses inherent *formative power*, and such, moreover, as it can impart to material devoid of it – material which it organizes. This, therefore, is a self-propagating *formative power*, which cannot be explained by the capacity of movement alone, that is to say, by mechanism (Kant 2007, § 65).

Tu put it in a nutshell, the difference between an organism and a mechanism lies in the self-organising *self-maintenance* of an organismic system: this is its primary purpose, to which all other functions are subordinate. This does not apply to a mechanism. Its existence is irrelevant to it, and it owes its purposeful construction to its constructor. In this sense, Kant distinguishes between two fundamentally different forms of purposefulness: *Extrinsic purposiveness* is one that has been placed ‘from outside’ into matter by a constructor, i.e., through purposeful activity planned by rationality. *Intrinsic purposiveness* has been brought about by nature itself, i.e., without rational engineer’s purposeful activity.

So would be the first approach to the origin of both forms of purposiveness. Kant also makes an important *structural* distinction: the *intrinsic* purposefulness of an organism is characterized by the fact that its parts “combine of themselves into the unity of a whole by being reciprocally cause and effect of their form” out of their own causality. In an organism, “every part is thought as *owing* its presence to the *agency* of all the remaining parts, and also as existing *for the sake of the others* and of the whole, that is as an instrument, or organ. But this is not enough – for it might be an instrument of art [it could also be a mechanism], and thus have no more than its general possibility referred to an end. On the contrary the part must be an organ *producing* the other parts – each, consequently, reciprocally producing the others”; in short, it is not only “an organized”, but also essentially a “*self-organized being*” [*sich selbst organisierendes Wesen*] (Kant 2007, § 65). For example, the heart, kidneys and liver are not simply ‘organs’, i.e. instruments serving the organism, but are themselves maintained by the organism and thus form a mutually self-maintaining whole – which is clearly not the case with a mechanism. The wheelworks in a clock, for instance, are not reciprocally dependent on each other or on the clock as a whole and therefore, unlike the organs of an organism, require external preservation and repair. In an organism, therefore, the organ is not only a means to the

end of maintaining the organism, but conversely, the organism as a whole is also a means to the end of every one of its organs.

For Kant, the characteristic feature of life is therefore intrinsic purposiveness, and the organism is accordingly a system “*in which every part is reciprocally both end and means*” (Kant 2007, § 66, [204]). It is no overstatement to say that this description of a living being has remained basically unchallenged to this day. In Paul A. Weiss, a classic author of modern Systems Theory introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1949, 176 and 185) the following characterisation of an organism can be found: if, for example, A, B, and C are its parts, then “the *coexistence and common functioning of all three (...)* is the precondition for the existence and functioning of each of them” (Weiss 1970, 27). Weiss accurately captures the sense of *reciprocity between cause and effect* in Kant’s concept of intrinsic purposiveness, whereas an insightful thinker such as *Helmut Plessner* completely fails to grasp this point when he associates self-maintenance with the “filter function” of *semipermeable membranes*, not only in his early work (1928) but also much later: “Organic materials achieve the character of organisms through this” function (Plessner 1964, 200). Kant’s system-functional explanation is therewith reduced to a purely morphological factuality.

With regard to the causal *conditions for the realisation* of intrinsic purposiveness, Kant is confronted with seemingly insoluble difficulties. He considers a *causal explanation* impossible: from the perspective of causality, the *reciprocity* of means and ends required for intrinsic purposiveness is a reciprocity of cause and effect. However, Kant considers this impossible for two reasons: (1) the causal relation is *asymmetrical* and *invariable*, i.e. directed one-sidedly from cause to effect, whereas the *reciprocity* of cause and effect in the structure of intrinsic purposiveness would imply that the cause can also be the effect and the effect can also be the cause (Kant 2007, § 65). Kant further claims that causal processes are *blind* (“the mechanism of blind efficient causes”) (Kant 2007, § 67) i.e. they do not run purposefully, since they are determined solely by determinants lying in the past and not by the end to be achieved in the future, as is clearly the case with the self-maintenance of an organism. One could object that a causally determined process is also goal-oriented, insofar as a future process state is unambiguously *determined* by its past course (e.g. Sachsse 1979, 13). Contrary to this, causally determined processes can be *disrupted* by external factors, i.e. diverted from their original purpose, whereas organismic activity seeks to pursue its specific goals *even against external disturbances*. More on this later (Section V). It is also not very helpful when Hans Driesch postulates his *vitalistic holistic causality* (e.g., Driesch 1924, 375; Driesch 1927, 92). Kant already saw that such ad hoc hypotheses cannot be considered real explanations.

From the perspective of the contemporary *Systems Theory*, Kant’s two criticisms addressing causal relations, namely *asymmetry* and *blindness*, are to be rejected. As far as we know, *cyclical* causal structures are also possible, e.g., feedback mechanisms in which the outcome of a process (‘effect’) is traced back to its input and thus regains the status



of a 'cause'. Despite the asymmetry of the causal relationship, a *structural symmetry* is realised in such a way that each link in such a cyclical system is both cause *and* effect. The asymmetry objection is no longer valid from a Systems Theory perspective. Also, the reproach of *blindness* of causal processes cannot be upheld in general, because behaviour guided by ends – as a conduct guided by set-point values – is known to be causally reconstructable.

So much for Kant's sceptical assessment of causative relations. However, Kant is even more sceptical about the *notion of purpose* contained in the concept of intrinsic purposiveness. He argues that, while we can be certain a priori never to encounter an object in experience that is not causally determined, there are indeed things whose intrinsic purposiveness as organisms is undemonstrable. For this reason, the "purposiveness" of the organic can only be regarded as a "merely *subjectively* valid" principle, that is, "a simple maxim of judgement," which as such guarantees nothing about the nature of the *objects* (Kant 2007, § 71 and § 72), and remains "a mere idea", a "*regulative* rather than constitutive principle" (Ibid., § 72 and § 76), serving only to "reflect" on nature, but not to determine its objective properties (Ibid., § 74 and § 79). For him, the presence of the concept of purpose in this context indicates the concept of life to be merely our subjective interpretation, whereby we attribute something like rational and purposeful conduct to nature – for which, of course, there would be no alternative if we wanted to conceptualise the phenomenon of life in some way.

Unless, of course, natural being is in fact based on *reason*: an *objective, purposefully acting* nature would then no longer be absurd; unless, of course, nature was actually based on *reason*: an *objectively purposeful* nature would then no longer be absurd; its rational character would make the organism's intrinsic purposiveness comprehensible. This tempting interpretative perspective motivates Kant to consider the speculative idea of a *extra-sensory substrate* of nature [*ihrem übersinnlichen Substrat*], i.e., a *reason inherent in nature itself* (Kant 2007, Preface to the first edition, 1790; cf. § 67; § 70; § 73 and § 85; cf. Düsing 1968, 108; Bartuschat 1972, 215 and 253). His argument begins with the moral-philosophical reflection that the will determined by practical reason should also be translatable into real action [*in reales Handeln*] and thus ultimately into physical conditions. This can only be possible, Kant suggests, if nature itself is not utterly unreasonable. Consequently, "there must, therefore, be a ground of the *unity* of the extra-sensory that lies at the basis of nature, with what the concept of freedom contains in a practical way" (Kant 2007, Introduction, II). According to this view, reason would no longer be a merely subjective faculty, but rather "an extra-sensory real ground, although for us unknowable, would be procured (...) for the nature of which we ourselves form part" (Kant 2007, § 77). It would then no longer be merely the foundation of thinking, but of everything that exists. Reason would no longer have merely moral relevance, but *ontological* relevance in terms of a *logos* equally fundamental to both subject and object. From this perspective, it would be understandable that, on the one hand, natural objects

can be organised in a purposeful manner in terms of ‘intrinsic’ purposiveness and, on the other hand, the subject’s reason is capable of adequately grasping this purposiveness of nature. Given his doubts about the possibility of causal conditions for the realisation of intrinsic purposiveness, Kant certainly found the idea of such a reasonable – i.e., ‘extra-sensory’ – natural substrate extraordinarily attractive. Transcendental conception of reason in its subjective, cognition- and knowledge-regulating function, developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, would then be left behind. Kant ultimately refrains from drawing this conclusion. In accordance with his concept of knowledge restricted to its experiential basis, it is essential for him that we have no experience of a potentially extra-sensory, reasonable natural substrate and therefore an “undetermined concept” of it (cf. Kant 2007, XII, *The Division of the Critique of Judgment*). Accordingly, the ontological idea of a logos underlying nature is withdrawn, and the possibility of grasping the intrinsic purposiveness of the organic as a reasonability inherent in nature itself is ultimately rejected. The only way we can comprehend organic purposiveness is teleological, but this remains oriented towards the technical model – as if organisms were constructed by a “supreme Architect” (Kant 2007, § 78). This clearly leads one back to *extrinsic, technical* purposiveness, which as such presupposes an ideal anticipation of purpose. Kant already put this in the aforementioned, resignation-laden formula of the impossibility of ‘Newton’s of blade of grass’ (Kant 2007, § 75) expressing his regret that for human thinking, the principle of intrinsic purposiveness has the status of a *merely regulative idea* for which no *conditions of realisation* can be provided and which, therefore, does not enable any *scientific knowledge* of the organic. The analysis of the means-end relationship carried out in a previous context (Chap. 3.2 of my book) has shown, that even extrinsic purposiveness inevitably contains the prerequisite that natural logic is underpinned by reason. Thus, in the course of realizing a conceptually anticipated purpose, a *transition* from the conceptual-ideal sphere to reality occurs, effected by the arrangement of suitable means. This configuration of means – as I had formulated – facilitates the *translation* of the ideal content of the purpose into the real shape of this purpose, which, at the same time, implies that both are affined, i.e., that reality also possesses an ideal character in some way. With the possibility of extrinsic purposiveness, an ideal underlying nature or, as Kant put it, an “extra-sensory substrate of nature” is always already presupposed. Since Kant holds extrinsic, technical purposiveness to be possible, he could not have rejected the idea of an extra-sensory substrate of nature, i.e., the possibility of a nature that is *purposive* in itself. To put it in a nutshell: if extrinsic purposiveness is realisable – and technology is a unique, magnificent example of this – then intrinsic purposiveness is in principle also *realisable* and not merely a subjective idea. This consequence, which requires an *idealistic* concept of nature, was only drawn in succession to Kant by Schelling and Hegel. However, as explained at the beginning, the triumphant development of the natural sciences, initially above all physics and chemistry, pushed natural-*philosophical* approaches – especially those of Hegel – completely into the background already in the 19th century.

### III. Systems Theory

Under Ernst Haeckel's impact, the problem of life became a topic in the early 20th century, this time in empirical biology. The biologist Hans Driesch (1867–1941) was an eminent supporter of this idea, called *vitalism*, and tried to solve the problem scientifically. He experimented with the division of sea cucumber eggs, which showed that the parts independently reconstituted themselves into a whole. This, he believed, suggested the assumption of a specific '*holistic causality*' [*Ganzheitskausalität*] for organisms, governed by a quasi-Aristotelian *entelechy* (cf. Driesch 1924; Driesch 2027, 89). However, this form of 'vital force' [respectively, *élan vital* – *trans. note*] postulated by Driesch remains nebulous. Only the discovery of genetic information (1953) opened up possibilities of explanatory research into the phenomenon of organismic regulation that do not require ad hoc 'vitalistic' hypotheses, or in other words: that can now explain scientifically what vitalism meant.

The broader framework in which these developments can be viewed is *Systems Theory*. As a *general Systems Theory*, initiated by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Bertalanffy 1949), it examines general properties of systems, e.g. the relationship between the system as a whole and its subsystems, the hierarchy of system structures, the relationship between the system and its environment, closed and open system forms, etc. This approach has subsequently been developed in a variety of ways – from mathematical, physical, technical and even sociological perspectives; this does not need to be explained in detail here.

The essential idea underlying Systems Theory (apart from its sociological variant) is that purely physical and chemical terms are no longer sufficient to characterise systems, because systems are *holistic entities*. Although their constituents are physical and chemical in nature, they form newly organised structures that require new terms to describe them: a system is more than the sum of its parts, as Bertalanffy puts it: "We often believe that if we have studied *one* thing thoroughly, we know everything about *two*, because 'two' is 'one plus one'. But we forget that we still have to examine the 'and'". Systems Theory "is a study of 'and' – that is, of organisation" (Bertalanffy 1970, 90). The organisation – here still without any organismic sense – consists in the fact that elementary laws of nature are 'interconnected' in the system, thereby establishing a new level of specific *system laws* 'above' the elementary laws of nature. Consider, for example, a television set: Maxwell's equations apply to its receiver and electronics, while the laws of solid state technology, thermodynamics, etc. apply to its components and housing. One of the resulting 'system laws' causes the device to be activated by pressing the power button (provided it is connected to the mains). Pressing another button causes a programme change. The fact that an increase in pressure at certain points in the system results in its activation, a programme change or similar is not in the least derivable from the physical and chemical properties of these points. These are new, system-specific laws which, as such, are located

beyond the elementary laws of nature – even if the former inevitably presuppose the latter. What Paul A. Weiss observes with regard to living systems also applies to technical systems such as a television set: There is no phenomenon here “that is not molecular, but there is also none that would be *exclusively* molecular. It may happen that one cannot see the forest for the trees, but it is a very serious matter if one then simply denies the existence of the forest” (Weiss 1970, 20). Another beautiful example coined by Weiss is “the self-supporting arch in architecture. It would be impossible to build such a vault by placing loose stones on top of each other, because they would slip off as soon as the curve began. In other words, the arch as a self-supporting structure can only exist as a whole – or not at all” (Weiss 1970, 27).

It is therefore important not to lose sight of the *holistic nature of the system* and the *new laws* that emerge with it. These are possibilities already inherent in the elementary laws, which can only manifest themselves at the system level, i.e., in this particular constellation of elementary laws of nature. Technology as such offers a paradigm for this. It constantly constructs new laws that have never existed in nature before – without, of course, violating the laws of nature, but solely through the appropriate ‘interconnection’ of such laws (cf. Wandschneider 2004, chap. 1.2.4.). The term ‘*emergence*’ describes this manifestation of something new at the system level which is not yet present in the subsystems. And it is not only technological achievements that are based on the emergence of new laws, but – as will be discussed in detail later – basically also the diverse forms of living nature and, apparently, of the psyche.

The fact that emergence allows something *new* to appear means, on the one hand, that the *potential* for this already exists within the system components, but on the other hand, that this potential can only become *a reality* at the level of the system itself. Interpreting this as ‘reductionism’ would be a misunderstanding. For the emergentist interpretation does not say that a phenomenon occurring at the system level is already realised in subsystems and can therefore be reduced to them. The subsystems only contain potentialities which in their entirety – i.e. at the higher system level – result in something *new*. Reductionism notoriously overlooks the ‘and’ emphasised by Bertalanffy, which connects the parts to form a *new whole* that is more than the mere sum of its parts. I will leave it at these general remarks on the concept of emergence; this is not the place for a *theory* of emergence.

The subsequent paragraph will focus on characterizing the *organismic* system in more detail. An initial approach allows a distinction to be made between closed and open systems.

A system is *closed off* when it has no exchange of matter or energy with its environment. By the Second Law of Thermodynamics, its behaviour tends towards the most probable state, which is the state of Entropy Maximum in Equilibrium, i.e. the greatest possible disorder under existing environmental conditions. Gas molecules, for example, which are initially located in the corner of a container (or in any other position)

will soon occupy the entire available volume of the container due to their self-movements and constant collisions with each other (for a more detailed explanation, see Weizsäcker 2006, chap. 8.5; note from Janós Boór).

In contrast, an *open system* is in a state of material and energy exchange with its environment. This prevents it from reaching a state of Maximum Entropy. Nevertheless, *dynamic* forms of equilibrium such as '*flowing equilibria*' are possible. Examples include the constant bow wave of a moving ship or the relatively constant shape of a candle flame. In the first case, the water of the wave is constantly lifted and exchanged, and the energy required for this comes from the ship's engine. In the second case, the combustion produces flammable gases whereas convection creates a flow of air that constantly draws in ambient air, thereby maintaining the burning process. Ilya Prigogine (1985) calls such dynamic equilibrium forms resulting from the dissipation of energy '*dissipative structures*'. In this way, systems representing elementary forms of self-organisation (similar to bow waves and flame) become possible. Humberto R. Maturana coined the term '*autopoiesis*' for this phenomenon.

The organism is clearly an open system, because it needs nourishment and uses energy, both of which it obtained from its environment. However, it is also clear that an open and even self-organizing system is not yet an organism, as the examples of the bow wave and the flame show. In the euphoria following the discovery of autopoietic systems (1977), this was occasionally overlooked. For the moment, it is only important that the *emergence* of order characterizing organisms does not violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which predicts the emergence of disorder, but, as already explained, only for closed systems, not for open systems such as organisms. So much for the energetic-dynamic aspect of organismic systems.

#### IV. Forms of Autoregulation

Almost simultaneously with Bertalanffy's idea of a general systems theory, Norbert Wiener developed the concept of *cybernetics*. In short, the central intention of cybernetic systems is the technical realisation of *self-regulating processes*. In order to highlight the specific nature of organismic self-maintenance, let us briefly compare different forms of self-regulation.

Already inorganic systems may have certain self-regulating properties. Let us consider the example of a spiral spring: when loaded with a certain weight, it reaches a stable equilibrium position that is energetically optimal (minimum potential energy). Slight disturbances to the equilibrium cause forces to act on the spring, returning it to its equilibrium position – and, due to inertia, even beyond this point, causing it to oscillate around the equilibrium position. The self-regulating nature of this system lies in the fact that the forces acting to return the spring to its equilibrium position seek to restore this equilibrium. This equilibrium position is, so to speak, the 'process goal' that is achieved

when the process comes to rest in a stable equilibrium (an unstable equilibrium, on the other hand, would be the state of a pencil standing on its tip, which any small disturbance would cause to tip over). Essentially, the process goal in these cases is determined *purely energetically*. If the energy relations change, for example when the spring is loaded with an additional weight, it also changes; the more heavily loaded spring is longer.

In contrast, the form of self-regulation in a *control loop* [Regelkreis] is not energy- but *information-controlled*. The functional principle can be briefly illustrated using the example of a thermostat: A set-point value of temperature is set on the regulator. This is compared with the actual value of the room temperature to be regulated. If the actual value and the set-point value do not agree, the heating (or cooling) system is activated. The thermometer measures the resulting change in the actual value of the room temperature, which is then compared again with the set-point value, and so on.

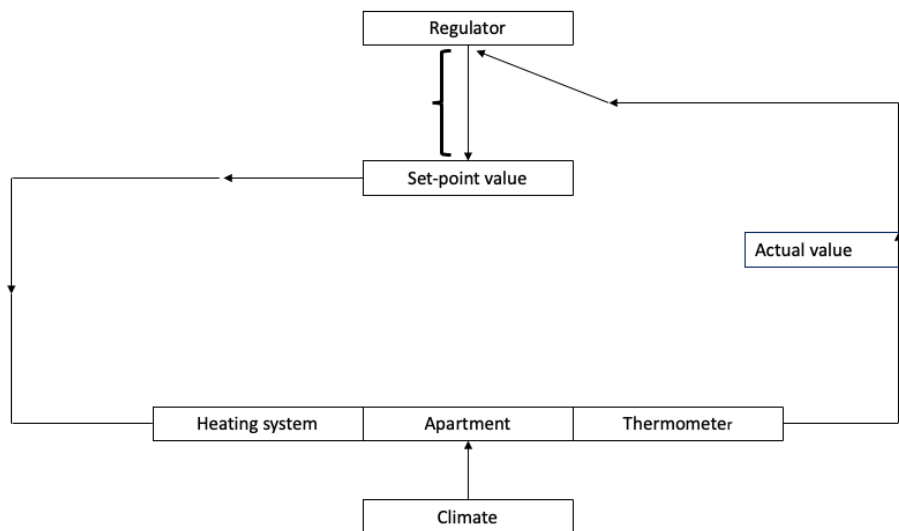


Figure 1: Heating system.

The information about the temperature change achieved by the heater ('actual value') is fed back to the heater control system by comparing it with the set-point value. This feedback enables the temperature to be regulated in accordance with the set-point value. The actual value and set-point value represent the actual temperature and the target temperature, respectively, and therefore provide information. The thermostat is thus already an information-processing system. Self-regulation is no longer mediated by energy relationships, but by information. Although the flow of information requires a certain (minimal) amount of energy, the control process does not depend on this, but solely on the information variables (for the concept of information, see Wandschneider 2004, chap. 1.2.6.). The organism's functions are also controlled by control loops and set-point values; let us consider the complex regulatory mechanisms for body temperature, blood sugar levels, adrenaline release, etc.

Regarding the manifold forms of self-regulating organismic functions, Hans Jonas warned against the misunderstanding that this already captures the specificity of the

organism. Self-regulating mechanisms – Jonas' example is the self-steering, target-seeking torpedo – are merely automata whose behaviour is determined by “mechanical necessity” and is therefore performed “blindly” (Jonas 1953, 183). In reality, a target-seeking torpedo is not “engaged in the attainment of the goal,” but follows solely causal determination in “terms of entropy”, and this should not be interpreted to mean that it *wishes* to follow this course (Ibid.). The missing element here is “the concernedness of all life with itself” (Ibid., 186). “From a strictly semantic point of view, one can say that the entire cybernetic doctrine of teleological behaviour can be reduced to the confusion of ‘acting on purpose’ with ‘having purpose’” (Ibid., 184), so far Jonas.

With regard to Jonas's example, one has to agree with him. There is no doubt that the target of a torpedo is as *irrelevant* to it as the room temperature is to a thermostat. But *what* is missing from the control loop in terms of Jonas's pointed “concern of life for itself”? Clearly, it is the fact that its behaviour is *completely unrelated to the existence of the system itself*. For example, the set-point value for the room temperature on the thermostat is *not* one of the conditions for the thermostat *itself* to function, whereas the normal temperature of a mammal represents a characteristic *value state of itself*. By aiming all its behaviour at maintaining its own, physiological set-point values (within certain limits), it is essentially concerned *with itself*. Organisms therefore differ fundamentally from automata in that their behaviour is not controlled by *any* set-point values, but – essentially – by their *own* set-point values.

The specific difference between automata and organisms is therefore, contrary to Jonas's view, in principle entirely comprehensible in terms of Systems Theory. This also contradicts the view held by Löw (Löw 1980, 298) and Spaemann and Löw (Spaemann & Löw 1981, 249 and 278), according to which the cybernetic interpretation of the organic is to be rejected as inappropriate and superseded by a view that is once again anthropomorphic and oriented towards the human self-understanding. It seems to me that this would merely amount to a *renunciation of knowledge*.

As a model realisation of his idea, Ashby designed a system he called ‘homeostat’, whose set-point values are precisely those parameters that constitute the very existence of the system, similar to body temperature, blood sugar level, etc. in a mammalian organism. The diagram shown is a model of organismic self-regulation based on Ashby's homeostat: The system's relationship to its own constitutive parameters is realised by two hierarchically linked control loops: One interacts with the environment and regulates the actions associated with a behaviour (e.g. nutrition intake) via sensors and effectors. At the same time, a higher-level control loop monitors the system conformity of these actions, i.e., all sensor-determined values are examined for danger in a controlling instance. If this results in an imminent danger (indicated here by a ‘negative area’) an alarm signal is triggered (in higher animals, e.g., a sensation of pain), which is forwarded to a repertoire of possible behaviours and switches the system to a different behaviour (e.g., a flight reaction) until the alarm signal disappears.

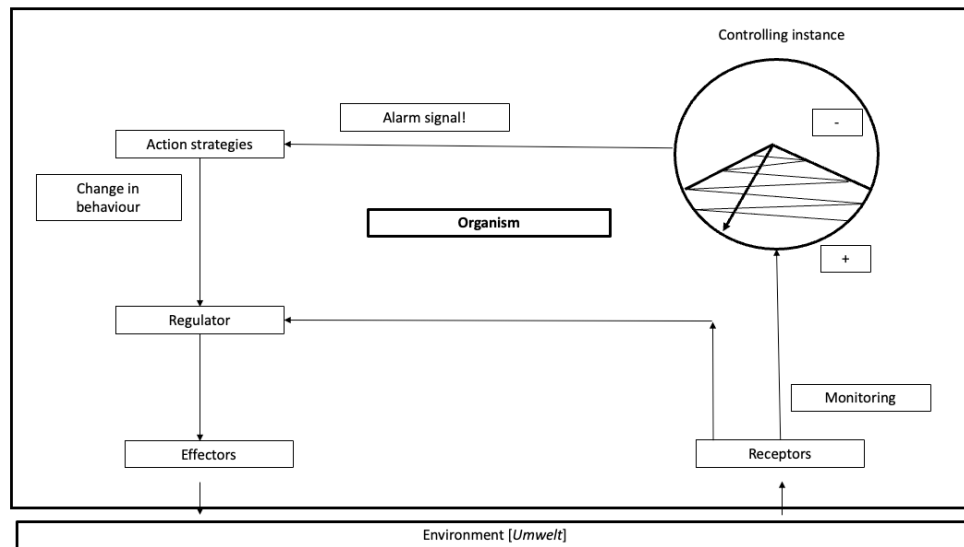


Figure 2: Controlling instance-based control loop.

Admittedly, this is a rather simplistic blueprint of the organism. In Ashby's design, switching to a different behaviour is achieved, for example, by means of a random generator, which corresponds to trial and error behaviour where different possibilities are selected randomly. Previous 'experiences' cannot be taken into account, i.e., the system does not become 'smarter' but always starts 'from scratch'. However, the value of the model lies in the fact that the *principle of existential self-reference* can be technically illustrated in this way and, once reconstructed, becomes understandable.

In the sense outlined above, efficiency improvements can be achieved by implementing *capacity for learning*: this makes action patterns available that have been successful in previous similar situations. From a technical point of view, this is not a problem: decades ago, Karl Steinbuch (1971, chap. 11) presented a learning system based on a '*learning matrix*' model, which has since been further perfected into the elaborate form of '*neural networks*'. Another serious shortcoming of Ashby's model is provision only for external perception and not for *internal perception*. Needs (e.g., hunger) and sensations (e.g., pain) are thus not included. In order to take this *internal dimension* into account, the model should be supplemented by an 'inner world' agency representing the entire system itself. As a result, not only external actions, referred to as 'animalistic' regulation with regard to animal's self-motion but also internal functions – analogous to the 'vegetative' processes in the organism – can be regulated.



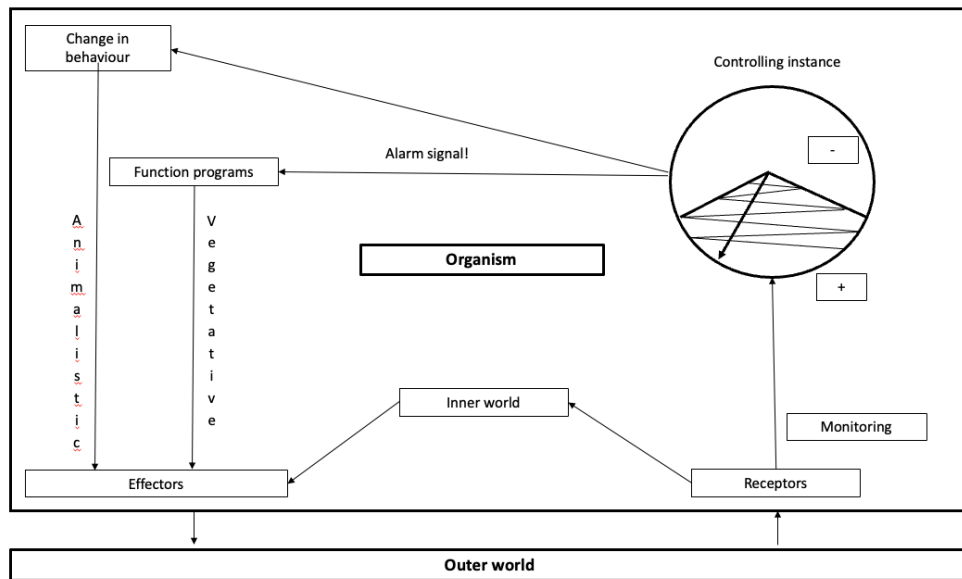


Figure 3: Animalistic vs. vegetative autoregulation.

One more word on Ashby's term 'ultrastability': this is not a particularly fortunate choice of words, since the pure stability aspect is certainly not crucial for characterizing organismic systems – a locomotive is undoubtedly 'more stable' than a fly. Much more essential in terms of active self-maintenance is the previously explained character of existential self-reference, which cannot be predicted by a locomotive. Not 'superstability' but self-maintenance through self-regulation, or autoregulatory self-maintenance, would be characteristic feature of the organism. In this respect, a term such as '*autoregulation*' would seem more adequate and will therefore be used here.

Since the self-regulating *system* is controlled by *inherent* set-point values, i.e. by the physiological parameters constitutive for the system's existence, it therefore contains a '*program of itself*'. Within the system, the system itself is virtually present once again in the form of such a programme of itself. Only in this way can the controlling instance perform the control function assigned to it. Generally speaking, auto-regulatory systems are therefore characterised by the existence of a *self agency* or, in more common parlance, a '*self*'. The somewhat mystical-sounding term 'self' refers here to nothing other than the internal organisational and functional programme of self-regulating systems that controls all system activities, thus acquiring a meaning comprehensible in terms of Systems Theory. This interpretation of the self agency can also be viewed as a Systems Theory reinterpretation of the *entelechy principle* postulated by *vitalism*, which was intended to justify the vitalistic claim of *holistic causality* in organisms (see Section 2).

At the same time, a criterion is available for distinguishing organismic processes from (1) causal-deterministic processes, which as such run towards a specific end state but lead to other end states when disturbed – processes whose 'telos' is therefore *contingent*, are also referred to as *telematic* processes (cf. Spaemann & Löw 1981, 233 and 235) – and (2) from forms of goal-oriented but not yet organismic behaviour, such as processes with

active goal pursuit, which are referred to as *telenomic* (Ibid., 218). In the latter case, the process goal is no longer contingent, but is constantly present as a *set-point value* and effective as a process regulator, as in the case of a thermostat or a target-seeking torpedo, but this goal is not yet identical with the *system's existence itself*.

## V. Characteristic Properties of Autoregulative Systems

After presenting the more technical side of self-regulating systems, it is now time to consider the *principle-theoretical perspective*. Fundamental characteristics of self-regulation – such as *those* of existential self-reference and situation assessment – have already been mentioned. The core points of this interpretative approach will be explained in more detail below.

(1) *Active self-maintenance*: Autoregulation is understood here as a system's ability to maintain itself against all external or internal disturbances of its functions, and is thus defined from the outset as self-maintenance. A thermostat which protects itself against overheating is not yet an autoregulatory system. The temperature set-point value is *only one of the parameters* of the system's existence, but control of all these parameters is required. It would not be equipped to deal with an acid attack, for example, and flight behaviour is also foreign to it. Of course, self-maintenance is not immortality. The emphasis is rather on the 'self'. This should be maintained by the system's inherent means, which is of course only possible within certain limits. No amount of self-maintenance can prevent a shot to the brain.

(2) *Intrinsic purposiveness*: If self-maintenance is to be possible at all, self-regulation can only be conceived as the realisation of Kant's concept of intrinsic purposiveness. For in order to ensure its own existence, the system must also ensure the existence of its components, which are thus simultaneously means and ends for one another. Self-regulation can be understood as a systems-theoretical reinterpretation of Kant's philosophical concept of life.

(3) *Situation assessment*: All impressions received by the self-regulating system are assessed by the controlling instance in terms of whether they are 'beneficial to the system' or 'detrimental to the system'. Implementing this is undoubtedly the greatest technical challenge, but it is absolutely essential to the 'autoregulation' project. In organic systems, situation assessment is encountered at every step, most notably in higher animals as pleasure and pain feeling, but even plants show preferences for nutrients, warmth, light, etc. The criterion for this is always the 'system conformity' of the data received by the system. But how does the system 'know' what is beneficial to it and what is not? Undoubtedly through the 'programming' of life forms in the course of evolution.

(4) *Species universality*: An autoregulatory system maintains itself as a specific system with specific functions. As such, it is *indivisible*, an *in-dividuum*. If one divides a stone, one has two stones. If one divides a fly, one has two dead halves. The specificity of

the fly system, i.e. its species specificity, is thereby destroyed. The self-regulating system is characterised in this respect by a 'this way and no other', i.e. by its specific way of maintaining itself in existence. In this sense, it is essentially determined by its species specificity and is thus essentially an individual of a specific species (obviously, a hydrogen atom is also characterised by specific properties, and in this respect it is also an individual of a specific kind, but it lacks the aforementioned properties of self-maintenance, etc.). An individual living creature always participates in the universality of its kind – just as the individual fly is a fly because it always participates in 'flynness'. This concomitance of the individual and the universal is ontologically interesting and demonstrates that the universal can also exist in reality. But does *cell division* not contradict the alleged indivisibility of the system? No, because in this particular case, the new units created by division each contain the entire, species-specific genetic information. The fact that the organism reproduces and *inherits* its species specificity in this way should be understood in terms of the economy of nature, so that the development of such complex systems does not always have to begin from scratch. And the fact that the division of an earthworm produces two complete individuals (a frequently heard objection) can be understood as a survival strategy, which, incidentally, only works if the earthworm is splitted 'crosswise'; a 'lengthwise' split would certainly result in its death.

(5) *Anticipation of the future*: The stone is what it is. The autoregulating system, on the other hand, is specified to maintain itself not only now, but also in the future. It does not exist solely in its factual existence: "the living being is ahead of itself," as Helmut Plessner properly puts it in his great work *Levels of the Organic Life and the Human* with regard to organisms (Plessner 2019, 236). "Anticipation is the mode of living being, anticipation not of something determined that is still to come, to become, to enter into being, but rather the anticipation of itself as something determined" (Ibid., 167). To exist as this specific system, i.e., to maintain itself in its generality and universality, is the leading premise of its entire existence. The character of the species-universal cannot be lost, it must be preserved as a type (see point 4), and the autoregulatory system is therefore committed to its future existence in every moment.

(6) *Decoupling system existence and environment*: The self-maintenance of the autoregulating system is self-maintenance *as a principle*. Its goal is not merely *random* maintenance, as is the case with equilibrium systems. A stone is stable against ant trampling, but it cracks in fire. In an autoregulating system, however, such contingencies are – in principle – eliminated: receptors continuously evaluate and examine the environment and for potential hazards to the system. So the system itself does not have to constantly put its own existence at risk. Instead, measuring instruments are inserted between the system and its environment to interact and communicate with the latter: it provides a kind of quasi-*symbolic* contact with the environment that spares the system from an existential collision with it, thus *decoupling* existence from the environment.

(7) *Autonomy*: This decoupling of the system's existence and the environment, as

mentioned, is a detachment [*Abkopplung*] from the contingencies of each given factual situation. The self-regulating system thereby becomes free to exist according to its own species-specific determination, and in this sense, it is *auto-nomous*. This does not mean that it is without any relation to the external world – such a relation is indispensable for the organism as an open system. However, since external influences do not directly affect the system's existence itself, but only its receptors (see point 6), the system is merely 'stimulated' by them and thus prompted to transform external conditions into *system-specific* conditions. Plessner described this relative autonomy of the organism as '*positionality*', meaning that the organism, while situated in its environment, nonetheless exists in distinction from it (Plessner 2019, 195).

(8) *Subjectivity*: As already mentioned, the self-maintenance of an autoregulating system means the individual, as such a system, seeks to maintain itself in its species universal nature. The life process of the fly is, in essence, the continuous preservation of the 'fly-ness' realised in it. This persistence of the universal amid the manifold changes of the system resembles the character of the *concept*, for which it is essential that its universality is maintained in its various particularities: just as apples, pears, plums, etc. are all equally *fruits*. According to Hegel, however, this is also characteristic of the *subject*, which retains its *identity* in the manifold changes it undergoes. In this fundamental sense, Hegel argues, the organism – including plants – possesses *subject character*, that is, the structure of the concept [*Das Subject besondert sich zwar, erhält sich als Subjectivität in seinem Beziehen auf Anderes, macht sich Glieder und durchdringt sie – TN*] (GW 24.3, § 337 and § 339 Add.). The fly is, in a sense, a concept buzzing through the air! According to Hegel's objective-idealistic view, the 'concept' that underlies nature as a whole now appears in the organism in *real shape*; "what was previously only our recognition has now come into existence" (Ibid., § 337 Add.); "life is the concept that has come to its manifestation" [*das Leben ist der zu seiner Manifestation gekommene Begriff – TN*] (Ibid., § 251). According to this, the autoregulating system is a subject, i.e. an autonomous universal entity, a being that behaves independently in accordance with the universal characteristics of its species, for example in the form of instinct-driven behaviour.

(9) *Self-agency*: The autoregulating system is existentially self-referential, in the model outlined above, i.e., to the controlling instance that evaluates all impressions for their conformity with the system (point 3), which means (to put it somewhat casually) that it *represents* the *system itself*, for example in the form of the constitutive parameters of the system's existence. In this sense, the autoregulating system contains a representative of the system itself within the system; it contains a *self* to which all external and internal matters relate and through which all functions and actions are governed. The autoregulating system is not simply a system, but a system *and its self*. Only in this *doubling* does it attain its organismic *unity*. This distinguishes it from other natural systems. A hydrogen atom, for example, can certainly be said to have a specific 'generic universality' – in contrast to the helium atom – however, it is not an autoregulating system: it lacks the self-agency;

it shows no striving for self-maintenance; its existence is neither concerned with this existence itself nor moved by 'concern' for its existence.

At this point, the question may arise: is the self-agency of an organism morphologically identical to its genetic structure? Most likely not. Although genetic information contains the general blueprint and functional programme of an organism, self-agency is responsible for the control of concrete behaviour, which in plant organisms is largely hormonal and in animal organisms also nervous. In animals, the brain and nervous system thus form the instance that endows the organism or autoregulating system with 'self-character'. The fundamental characteristics of the autoregulating system outlined here reveal various – often only slightly different – aspects that are essentially related. Taken individually, they are either not feasible or insufficient for autoregulation. Point 9 has shown, that natural systems can have generic properties (e.g. a hydrogen atom) without being autoregulating systems because they lack self-instance. It needs no special emphasis that the concept of 'autoregulation' is to be understood as an *ideal-typical project* without technical realisation. This is another reason why we have repeatedly referred to the organism as a natural exemplification of the autoregulating system. This is not meant to be a subterfuge. The real meaning of the 'autoregulation' concept is that Kant's principle of 'intrinsic purposiveness', which undoubtedly captures the phenomenon of life correctly and can be reconstructed as autoregulation in terms of Systems Theory. With the idea of intrinsic purposiveness is thus a possibility of technical reconstruction of organismic systems – or, respectively, of a 'Newton of the blade of grass' – upheld *with* Kant and, at the same time, *against* Kant.

## **VI. Plants and Animals – Hegel's Interpretation Based on the Self Structure**

The difference between plants and animals encountered in nature has not been taken into account so far. As is commonly known, the fundamental difference is that plants are *autotrophic* and animals are *heterotrophic*, i.e. plants are able to produce the substances they need from inorganic matter, while animals are unable to do so and are therefore dependent on organically structured substances as nutrients (instructive on this point: Höhle 1987). From the viewpoint of Systems Theory, the plant is an autoregulating system characterised by predominantly functional, internal regulations. Due to its autotrophy, it finds its nutrients in situ in the soil, which it transforms into plant compounds with the help of sunlight through photosynthesis. The plant does not need to search for nourishment and therefore does not need to change its location. It resembles a complex biochemical factory, but it has virtually no possibilities for action. One could argue that plants also perform certain actions, e.g., opening and closing stomates on their leaves, tropisms (growth movements) and nastia (movements independent of the direction of the external stimulus). However, these are reactions to external stimuli, whereas the

animal's actions are also largely motivated by internal states (hunger, mating instinct, etc.). As a autoregulating system, the plant must also have *self-character* and *subjectivity*, even if the corresponding self-agency cannot be clearly located in space, but rather must be imagined as a decentralised system of interconnected regulation circuits. This type of controlling instance is referred to as *functional self* [*ein Funktionsselbst*].

Unlike the plant, an *animal*, as a heterotrophic organism, cannot feed on inorganic substances, but needs other living beings, which it hunts and consumes. This means it must first search for and find its food. Unlike the plant, it must therefore move within its environment, carry out actions and thus be better equipped than the plant: it must at least have sensory organs to orient itself in its environment and a nervous system to process sensory data, control and regulate its own actions accordingly. Similar to the plant organism, the animal organism cannot exist without internal functional regulations (e.g., the hormone system) that require a functional self. It also needs a central instance [*eine zentrale Instanz*] – typically a brain – to control the outward actions necessary for self-maintenance: an *actional self* [*ein Aktionssselbst*], as I would name it.

This unveils a striking difference in the subjectivity structure of plants and animals: plants only have functional regulation and therefore possess a functional self. Animals, on the other hand, are assumed to have a combination of functional and actional regulation and, correspondingly, a duality of functional self and actional self. The fact that the form of actional regulation also has a *self-character*, arises from its existential importance in the autoregulatory system: environmental data originating from perception with no physiological-existential importance per se, but rather for the organism – for example, flower shapes and colours for bees – must be evaluated. This data must first be interpreted in existential terms; otherwise, a meaningful actional regulation, which in fact fulfils the function of a *self-agency*, would not be possible. The *dual self*, consisting of functional self and actional self, is thus distinctive for the animal organism – as a structure of subjectivity resulting from the self-movement of the animal and, ultimately, from its heterotrophic *modus existendi*.

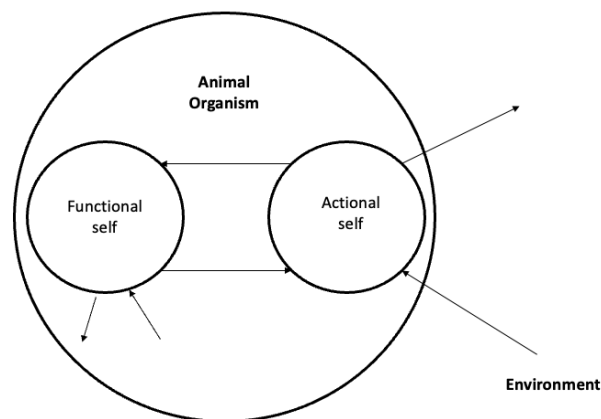


Figure 4: Animal double-self structure.

It is instructive to take another look at Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. The self-preservation of the *general/universal aspect of a species* (for instance, 'the fly-ness') realised in the individual is understood as central to organismic nature as such. With this *form-becoming relevance* (in the broadest sense), the transition "from the prose to the poetry of nature" is accomplished (GW 24.3, § 336 Add.); or, less metaphorically: the organic is an "elevation of existence to universality" [*zur Allgemeinheit*] (Ibid.). It is the "Concept" itself "that comes into reality" (Ibid.), whereby "the universal in itself (...) is also brought into existence" (Ibid.). As the *self-maintenance* of the universal nature and thus of its self-identity (e.g., the fly-ness of the fly), the organism is a "*self-centered*" entity (Ibid., § 344 Add.). Starting from the concept of the self, Hegel provides the following classification of the forms of life:

- (1) 'Geological organism': self-maintenance with no self (Ibid., § 338 Add.);
- (2) Plant: self-maintenance with a non-reflexive self (Ibid., § 343 Add.);
- (3) Animal: self-maintenance with a reflexive self = self-self (Ibid., § 350 Add.).

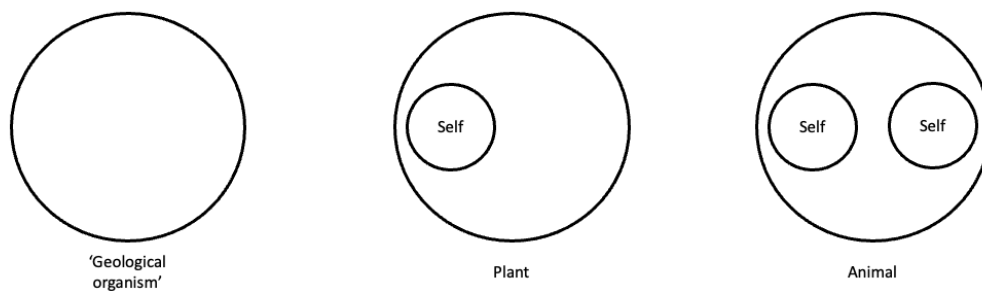


Figure 5: Geological, plant and animal organism with the focus on the self.

The distinguishing criterion, considered from an outside perspective, is therefore the 'number' of self-agencies. However, the 'zero-self system' described by Hegel as a 'geological organism' can hardly be referred to as an organism, because it *lacks* the self-character constitutive of all life, so that, according to Hegel himself, it is "not a living being" [*kein Lebendiges*] (Ibid., § 339 Add.); [*das geologische Leben ... ist das Leben als nicht leben*] (GW 24.1, 133). What Hegel actually means is apparently something like the *ecological system*, as we would say today, which does exhibit a certain 'self-preservation' but can also 'overturn' when the balance is altered. A self-agency that safeguards the species specificity – as is constitutive for organisms – is therefore missing here, along with the "form of subjectivity" (Ibid., § 261). Understood in this way, Hegel's classification of the 'geological organism' makes a lot of sense. Deviating from Hegel, Christian Spahn has argued that the ecological system – entirely in line with Hegel's own reasoning – can be conceived not as the first, but as a later, richer shape of organic nature: namely, as that of "a universality and multiplicity of individuals representing their species and multiplicity

of species as well, which all transcends the individual.” With this reinterpretation of the ‘geological organism’, “the idea of ecological *equilibrium*, which is central to contemporary biology, could easily be integrated into Hegel’s logic as (...) the hidden higher truth of the competitive relationship between plural individuals” (Spahn 2007, 198).

According to Hegel, the *plant* forms “the first stage of being for itself”; but is this still “immediate being for itself”? (GW 24.3, § 342 Add.). It has general nature of its kind, and therefore self, subjectivity, but – if I may use this salop phrasing – it “knows nothing of this” because “the plant’s selfhood does not yet relate to itself” (Ibid., § 344 Add.), so the plant is “*not yet objective for itself*” and, accordingly, has “*no feeling of its self*” [*kein Selbstgefühl*] (Ibid.). As an empirical reason for this, Hegel states that it does not move from its location and has no nervous system (Ibid.); according to the system-theoretical considerations outlined above, the former depends on the latter.

These are predominantly negative statements about what the plant *lacks*, with the *animal* providing the basis for comparison. Only the animal is – to quote some relevant passages from Hegel – “the self that is for itself,” which thus “relates itself to its self as existing for itself” [*Selbst zu sich selbst verhält*], “has its self as its object, the subject as self-self, as a feeling of its self” and is – in contrast to the plant – “a true self being for itself, which attains individuality” (Ibid., § 352 Add.). So: unlike plants, animals have a self-feeling, and their structure of subjectivity takes the structure of a ‘*self-self*’. These are no longer just negative statements about plants. But what Hegel posits here in favour of animals is merely stated, not justified, and is difficult to interpret in this form. Of course, we know what is meant by ‘feeling of the self’ because we possess it ourselves. But what is meant by a ‘self-self’?

In this context, the previously developed theoretical consideration proves helpful: due to its self-movement, not only is internal functional regulation essential for the animal, but actional regulation is also necessary. *This* is why the animal subject is structured as a ‘*double self*’ – a compound of a functional self and an actional self. In this way, what is rather intuitively grasped in Hegel can be readdressed in terms of Systems Theory. This provides some initial structural clarification. Hegel already hints that the animalistic structure of subjectivity in the form of a double self has serious consequences for understanding the inner, psychic dimension: “Only the self as self is able to refrain from all outward activity and relates this activity to itself as a soul; and since the self is both sides of the relation within itself, this inner circle of the soul turns away from inorganic nature. The plant is not yet this [inner circle and self-relational selfhood – *TN*] and lacks inwardness free from outward activity” [*Innerlichkeit, die von dem Verhalten nach Außen frei wäre*] (Ibid., § 344 Add.).

## VII. Helmut Plessner’s Characteristic of the Organic

Plessner’s aforementioned work *Die Stufen der Organischen und der Mensch* of 1928



(English: *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*) is certainly the most significant contribution to the philosophy of organic nature after Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. If it was said in the past that the present day lacked an independent philosophy of nature, Plessner's study must be explicitly mentioned as one of the few – quasi 'selective', though – exceptions. Admittedly, as Plessner himself acknowledges in his detailed preface to the second edition, published over 30 years later, certain shortcomings of the work must be pointed out. For example, Hegel's outline, 'which I should have referred to if I had been aware of the relevant passages at the time', unfortunately played no role whatsoever in Plessner's deliberations (Plessner 1928, xxiii). In addition to the parallel positions of philosophical anthropology (Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen), Plessner mentions enormous developments in the natural sciences of the organic, molecular biology, Systems Theory and cybernetics, Theory of Evolution, etc., which – since the publication of his work – have also significantly shifted the philosophical perspective. Nevertheless, Plessner's arguments are interesting, illuminating in terms of theoretical principles, and still present in philosophical discussion. They are also designed for "an *a priori* theory of the essential characteristics of the organic" (Plessner 1928, 107; Plessner 2019, xxxi; emphasis added), i.e. essentially independent of scientific developments but, as will also become apparent, exemplified by them in a certain sense and occasionally also clarified. For this reason, they deserve at least a brief introduction and explanation.

The aforementioned concept of *positionality*, which refers to an organism's relatively autonomous existence in relation to its environment, would be central to the general characteristic of the organism. It is certainly true that semipermeable membranes – in the sense of permeable boundaries – are of "special significance" (Plessner 2019, 331) from a technical point of view. "This state of affairs gives the body positionality – that is, sets it off against the outside" (Ibid., 333). But making "organic materials" to "become living beings in the strict sense of the word" (Ibid.) through this only must be rejected as a blatant understatement from a Systems Theory perspective. Positionality is rather attributed to the organism through the already described properties of autoregulatory systems, e.g., active self-maintenance, decoupling of system existence and environment, autonomy, etc., which are guaranteed by a self-agency controlling the entire system behaviour. Only then does Plessner's suggestive concept of positionality acquire a content verifiable in terms of Systems Theory.

Plessner characterises the *plant* organism as an '*open form*'. This does not refer to an open system in the physical sense, which the organism naturally always is, but rather to 'a form' in which "the organism in all of its expressions of life is immediately incorporated into its surroundings and constitutes a non-self-sufficient segment of the life circle corresponding to it" (Plessner 2019, 203). Plessner explains this further by referring to a phrase coined by Hedwig Conrad: "all of the plant's movements happen *to* it but never originate *from* it, just as the open form does not have a center from which it would be possible for movement impulses whether instinctive, drive-driven, or volitional – to originate" (Ibid., 207). This

addresses the lack of self-motion and the absence of a central self-agency in plants.

In contrast to plants, animals are defined as '*closed forms*', which in turn should not be confused with the physical concept of a closed system. Plessner explains: "The closed form mediately integrates the organism in all of its expressions of life into its surroundings and makes it into a self-sufficient segment of the life circle corresponding to it" and "has the character of frontality, of a contraposition, of an existence directed against the surrounding field of alien givenness" (Ibid., 209 and 226). In contrast to the immediate dependence of the plant on its environment, Plessner considers managing to insert "intermediate links between itself and the medium" to be essential for the animal (Ibid., 210). However, 'encapsulation' [*Abkammerung*] is undoubtedly a false spatialisation of the relative *autonomy* of the animal in relation to its environment.

According to Plessner, the closed form is possible due to the characteristic '*centrality*' of the animal organism, i.e. the control and coordination of the animal's actions by a central agency, a nervous system, which then also constitutes a kind of '*self*'. "The emergence of a center leads to a doubling of the body: now it is also (that is, represented) in the central organ" (Ibid., 213). Note that this is not the doubling of the *self* claimed by Hegel. The doubling Plessner refers to here is rather the duality of body and self. The concept of centrality takes into account the central organisation of the animal.

This means that the living organism as a whole is no longer immediately the unity of the organs (...), but is this unity only by way of the center. It is thus no longer in direct contact with the medium and the things surrounding it, but is so merely by means of its body. The body, then, has become the intermediary layer between the living being and the medium (Ibid., 213).

What is stated here about the body should probably be clarified by pointing to receptors, i.e., the monitoring and measuring instruments inserted between the organism and its environment, as had previously been argued with regard to the autoregulating [homeostatic – *trans. note*] system.

Plessner finally juxtaposes the '*excentricity*' [*Exzentrizität*] of humans with the centric organisation of animals: "The animal lives out from its center and into its center but not *as* center" (Ibid., 267), but it does not know about this center. The human, in contrast, "as the living thing placed in the center of its existence, knows this center, experiences it, and therefore is beyond it" (Ibid., 270). "If the life of the animal is centric, the life of the human, although unable to break out of this centrality, is at the same time out of it and thus excentric. *Excentricity* is the form of frontal positioning against the surrounding field that is characteristic of the human" (Ibid., 271). The ground for this "excentricity" is thus the *possibility of knowledge*, which elevates the animal "human" *beyond* animality.

Although Plessner's terminology is suggestive, he is aware that his findings, resulting from phenomenological analysis, can be reinterpreted from the perspective of contemporary Systems Theory, as he himself notes in the preface to the second edition of 1966: "Phenomena of regulation, control, and memory, once regarded as arcana of living

matter, lost their special status in the light of cybernetics" (Ibid., xxi).

## VIII. Conclusion

Kant's concept of *intrinsic* purposiveness, which undoubtedly captures the specifically organismic nature, can – as outlined above – be basically reconstructed in terms of systems theory as *autoregulation*. 'Basically' means here that the 'principle of autoregulation' is, on the one hand, rationally comprehensible and, on the other hand, its technical realisation does not face any insurmountable difficulties in principle. Kant's requirement to strive for causal-mechanical explanations as far as possible (because only this allows objective knowledge of nature) is thus – again basically – satisfied to the maximum extent. Today, there are good reasons to assert the compatibility of 'mechanism' (in the broadest sense) and organism, of causation and finality. Kant assessed this differently. Due to its *blindness* and *narrow focus*, he denied the causal relationship the possibility of realizing intrinsic purposiveness. However, as already discussed, this is inaccurate for the *control loop*: processes guided by set-point values enable goal-oriented behaviour, whereby the causal focus is effectively eliminated by the feedback structure. The reciprocity of means and ends asserted by Kant for the life process is thus in principle realisable. Let us keep in mind that the moment when the mystery of humanity will be solved is approaching.

Essential for this is that the *set-point value* (e.g., of the temperature), independent of the actual value and guiding the control loop, does exist. It thus represents something constantly and permanently *universal* [*Allgemeines*]. As such, it already transcends into the realm of the 'extra-sensory'; it has a *normative* character and can therefore define a goal 'beyond the factual' (cf. Wandschneider 2004, chap. 1.2.5.) – without, and this is crucial, violating the laws of nature. The control loop, like the self-regulating system of an organism, represents *system laws* which, as explained above, are to be understood as a suitable 'interconnection' [*Zusammenschaltung*] of elementary laws of nature; they do not negate the laws of nature, but rather presuppose them. *In this respect*, technical and biotic systems are alike (although they differ fundamentally from technical systems due to their 'self-character'). Indeed, it may be said that the potential contained in the laws of nature only comes to fruition in the form of system laws and, in a particular way, in those of the self-regulating system. The 'logic' inherent in an objective-idealistic view of nature is thus becoming increasingly explicit. Hegel's interpretation of the organism as a *concept* that has become active (see above) merely extends this trajectory of thinking.

The phenomenon of organismic autoregulation has so far been completely disconnected from the question of its *origin* in nature. Initially, the focus was solely on clarifying whether and how intrinsic purposiveness can in principle be reinterpreted in terms of Systems Theory.

Trans. by Ewa Nowak

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## ***Hegel's Theory of Love as an Attitude to Life***



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**Abstract:** For those who see Hegel as the philosopher of the closed system or the Prussian monarchy, it may come as a surprise or even a shock that love is one of the greatest and still inspiring topics of his philosophy. Hegel's theory of love can enrich contemporary discussions on the philosophy of emotions and the theory of feeling in many ways, provided that it is reconstructed in a philologically and hermeneutically correct, philosophically profound and astute manner. The present paper will discuss Hegel's views on love in two contexts. The first context is the history of progress summed up in his early considerations, which he treats in the field of tension between religion and philosophy. Within the extremely broad and manifold cultural horizon of the early works, Hegel assigns an existential meaning to love not only in an individual, but above all in an inter-individual sense. It is precisely in Hegel's treatment of love that one can recognise the first germs of his intersubjective model of human existence – including individual existence – as it appears in his mature philosophy (second context).

**Keywords:** Hegel on love; love and life; German Classical Philosophy.

### **I. Introduction**

The idea of *unification*, inspired by Hölderlin and shared by both of them as the basic existential standpoint and attitude of human existence 'in life' has an outstanding significance for Hegel's interpretation of love<sup>1</sup>. The notion of unification reveals how the young Hegel adds a *speculative* meaning to the existential dimension<sup>2</sup> of love. The

1 For the Hölderlinian-Hegelian theme of unification see Henrich (Henrich 2010, 9–41) and Jamme (Jamme 1983, 110–112). Taylor refers to the broader background of unification as a basic intention of German culture in the history of ideas (Taylor 1993, 27).

2 This model can be found in Hegel's principle and theory of recognition, which is one of the most attractive themes in Hegel's philosophy today. Ludwig Siep has provided an overview of the historical development of Hegel's notion of recognition, reconstructing 'pre-forms' like love in the Frankfurt fragments, unification in the "Spirit of Christianity", and recognition as a synthesis of love and struggle in the Jena writings. At the second stage of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he emphasises the reconciliation of the self with the substance (e.g., Siep 1979, 104–105). Honneth (2001; 2008, 187–204) has re-actualised recognition under the perspective of modern freedom; for recognition as an intersubjective model see Quante (2009, 91–106); for the significance of

motivation of the later system also makes an appearance here; to which, however, Hegel still has an ambiguous relation in his early years<sup>3</sup>.

The second context treats love with regard to the construction of the system, which stands in the foreground of his thought in his Jena period, having an essential influence on the concept of love in the mature Hegel. The *speculative basis* provided by philosophy and the corresponding systematics become intertwined, which leads to a *reinterpretation* of love and its *new status*. The modified terminology also refers to a fundamental change: unification becomes tightly connected with *reconciliation*, which strengthens the speculative character and religion-related content of this philosophy in the Christian sense<sup>4</sup>. All this, however, does not mean that early motives are given up, as some may think. These motives are safeguarded in a modified form in the system as well, and maintain a *continuity* within the whole oeuvre<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the new structure of the system with its speculative character also brings forth a set of ideas, the recapitulation of which has an effect with regard to the theme of love. In the context of the system, Hegel adds layers of meaning to love which correspond to the structure of the speculative system, but at the same time, in terms of content far exceed the scope of its external construction. Looking past the external-linear structure (logic, philosophy of nature, philosophy of spirit including the threefold structure of the latter), and observing the internal-relational and circular-dynamic structures of the system, one becomes aware of how multifaceted and thought-provoking the mature conception of love is. It is enough to refer to the *external, threefold, hierarchic arrangement* within spirit, which is also conceived as comprising three *internal dimensions of the concrete thematic* of spirit, and thus of love as well, to see how it can enrich the respective topic, in this case, the topic of love (for this interpretational suggestion of Hegel's system see Rózsa 2005, 13–37). But what do we mean by *concrete*?

On the first level of spirit, i.e., in subjective spirit as the *first dimension* of spirit,

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recognition for contemporary practical philosophy see Siep (2009, 107–124). As for the term 'context' in the abstract: it is used here in the sense that Henrich attributed to it. This paper also attempts to find a perspective under which Hegel's work, and thus love itself in its entirety may be understood as one of his greatest themes. (Henrich 2010, 7). The distinction between two contexts exhibits some traits of today's broad application of the concept of context, but it does not give up the primary aim of investigating the work as a whole in the specific area of love and interpreting the latter as arising from the motives of the whole oeuvre.

3 Hegel's critical approach to the system is shown by his remark on the positivity of Christian religion over the "men of system" (Hegel 1986a, 180–181). It is only in Jena that Hegel starts to adopt a systematic form of philosophy.

4 Reconciliation is not to be reduced to Christian motives. In the very early years of Hegel as a student in Tübingen one already finds an interpretation of reconciliation, which can serve as a pattern of worldly, ordinary life as well. Instead, the mature Hegel treats reconciliation as a structuring principle of the system (cf. Rózsa 2005, 13–51).

5 The debate on Hegel's early motives, including the position of Dilthey on the theologians, and Lukács's account of Hegel as a politician, was treated at length by Pöggeler (1993, 22–23). As he states in his conclusion, Hegel's concept of *spirit* includes the early motives of love and life as well (Pöggeler 1993, 414–415). This also confirms the continuity of motives in Hegel's work, which was the main point made by Henrich (2010).

epistemically and metaphysically colored existential layers of love are introduced and elaborated systematically in the framework of a theory of emotions<sup>6</sup>. Such a *variegated and comprehensive theory of emotions* which Hegel develops in the three disciplines of subjective spirit (anthropology, phenomenology, psychology) are not to be found in any other author in modern philosophy. It is no accident that here Hegel refers only to Aristotle<sup>7</sup>. On the second level, in objective spirit as the *second dimension* of spirit, Hegel focuses on love as a constitutive element of basic *socio-cultural institutions*, namely marriage and the family. In the *third dimension* of spirit, love enters various cultural forms and constellations of *absolute spirit*. In art, love has a systematic place value where Hegel distinguishes between three forms or motives of modern romantic art (honor, love, loyalty). But love appears frequently in the philosophy of art in a phenomenological sense as well, when Hegel discusses concrete works or specific problems of the philosophy of art. In religion, love gains a further place value again: the idea that *God is love* becomes central to Christianity, which constitutes the historical and systematic climax of religion. In philosophy as the highest form of thought and ideas, love plays a role not in the modern sense, but in the ancient one: *philosophy as the love of wisdom* is emphasised by Hegel on numerous occasions. In addition, modern philosophy is for Hegel a *process of withdrawal from love* and the world of emotions, and consequently, from *wisdom as orientation in life* in a general sense<sup>8</sup>. This is explained by the claim that *philosophy strives after the criteria of scientific knowledge*. Hegel's attitude toward this approach of philosophy is fundamentally *ambiguous* from the Jena years on: he wants to maintain both meanings and functions of philosophy, the scientific and the therapeutic as well, which lends an *internal tension* to his mature philosophy, clearly visible in the thematisation of love.

What is important though is that one can find stimulating considerations on love both in the young and the mature Hegel. In what follows, these tension-filled, but at the same time attractive ideas on love will be investigated in two contexts, following Hegel's intentions. First, I will discuss love as an early motive. Second, I will treat it with reference to Hegel's mature system of philosophy. In the second context (or *Standpunkt* in Hegel) it will be investigated for the sake of example, how love as a Hegelian theme is to be understood in both senses of the system: one following the 'external', 'exoteric' structure,

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6 Every stage of the external-linear structure may be understood as a dimension of a given thematic domain, in this case that of love as well. The respective topical domain is described by a complex set of concepts and their relations [*Verhältnisse*] in the given dimension [*Standpunkt*]. These perspectives provide the scientific character of the system, as well as the cultural function and determination of philosophy (Rózsa 2012, 121–144).

7 "The books of Aristotle on the soul, along with his discussions on its special aspects and states, are for this reason still by far the most admirable, perhaps even the sole, work of philosophical value on this topic" (Hegel 1979, § 378; Hegel 1986a, 10, 11).

8 The best-known formulation of this turn is in the *Preface* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "To participate in the collaborative effort at bringing philosophy nearer to the form of science – to bring it nearer to the goal where it can lay aside the title of *love of knowledge* and be *actual knowledge* – is the task I have set for myself" (Hegel 1986a, 3, 14).



the other the ‘esoteric’ structure of the system<sup>9</sup>. The latter is taken as a complex of concepts and their relations [*Verhältnisse*] in relational-dynamic structures. The primary aim of this distinction is to highlight those *contentual and methodological advantages* that can be an inspiration for contemporary discussions of emotions and such human relationships as love.

## II. Love as a Basic Value “in Life” According to Hegel’s Early Thought

The young Hegel considers love in the context of his philosophy of life<sup>10</sup>. In the early fragment *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe* (orig. 1797–1798) love is presented both as an emotion and as physical attraction (see Hegel 1986a).

In the context of interpersonal relationships and with a rich cultural and historical background, physical attraction and the world of emotions express the ‘real’ totality in life, which has a fundamental tension or *contradiction* to it, which Hegel will place at the center of his own methodology in later years. In Frankfurt, however, Hegel treats love primarily as a basic point of orientation and a basic value ‘in life’, the essential character of which is the mutual relation between the self and the initially alien other. Love is a fundamental relation in life, serving as an archetype *qua* explanatory principle and as an ideal type *qua* norm in human relationships.

Love is tightly connected to *unification* in Frankfurt period (Kotkavirta 2004, 15–31). Love as unification is a *challenge and a task* in the existence of the individuals; the fulfillment of this task requires epistemically grasped acts of consciousness and ontological, i.e., practically conceived attitudes of the individuals in their lifeworlds. Love as an attitude to life, to the other, and to oneself is not absolute, and *ab ovo* cannot be absolute. There are always alternatives regarding the various relationships in life. One can even decide to reject love in favor of separation and opposition in interpersonal relations.

‘Absolute relativity’ is an extremely important idea, tackled by the mature Hegel as well. Human beings never exist in an absolute sense; their forms of life are always relative and relational<sup>11</sup>. Love as a mutual relationship between one and the other unites them *in life relationally and not absolutely*. Since these relationships keep changing through

9 Kimmerle refers to the historical roots of the double perspective in the Hegelian system, which stands at the center of this interpretation: “The problem of philosophizing systematically almost spontaneously lets the possibility of a broader concept of philosophy enter the field of vision, which, as an alternative to closed thinking, emerges from tackling this problem” (Kimmerle 1982, 6).

10 Edith und Klaus Düsing have given an overview of the topic of love in Hegel’s Frankfurt writings. They have focused on the ethical dimension of the topic of love (Düsing & Düsing 2004, 1–14).

11 On relationality as a Hegelian problem, it is interesting how Brandom’s account ascribes it to a “rationalistic expressivism”, which is characteristic of Hegel’s own philosophical position: “Furthermore, his version of expressivism is also attractive because it is not only pragmatic and inferentialistic with regard to the conceptual, but also *relational* in the sense that the implicit and the explicit are both, at least partially, constituted by their mutual expressive reference” (Brandom 2001, 53). The present paper lays special emphasis on this internal-constitutive relationality in Hegel’s philosophy.

life, they remain limited, relative, i.e., relational in nature. *Human beings always stand in relation to themselves and the others.* In this relation, one is always for oneself and for the other through the alien force of the other. *The other as alien*, possessing power and standing in opposition, is an unavoidable experience, and thus a structural element of human existence.

Human beings cannot ground their existence in an immediate way, only by separations and oppositions, which appear in the experience of strangeness, and submission through power. *Otherness, strangeness, and submission thus become constituents of love as unification in life.* The integration of oppositions in love in life is not an act of the distinctive intellect. It is rooted in the unifying (later speculative) reason. From this point on, love is always a relation, and not a singular feeling. This *relationality as intersubjectivity* of love and its significance for life is an idea of Hegel which has remained relevant until the present day.

The *extremes of life-experience*: separation, strangeness, and their opposite, *unification in love, are immediately and tightly connected in the early work.* This conception will later be modified by the introduction of ethical love, whereby life-experience becomes *institutionally* anchored through marriage and the family, and therewith life becomes connected to *actuality*. The need for stability, i.e., also for religion and philosophy, arises exactly from this life-experience, as Hegel states in his *Differenzschrift* (Hegel 1986a, II, 20–25)<sup>12</sup>. From this time on, Hegel seeks the stabilising elements in life, not so much immediately in individuals, rather through institutionally mediated ethical ideas, norms, and feelings as components of actuality, and therefore of lifeworld as well. The “ethical feeling” of love in the mature Hegel refers to a new accent: it contains both substantial contents and the subjective form of everyone’s individual freedom. This constellation of the subjective form and the substantial content of life as lifeworld should serve as the highest stabilising element. However, love does not link us only to life, but to *death* as well. It is under the perspective of death that the single absolute: death itself appears. Love as unification in life can *turn transitoriness, death, and the end to their opposite: the immortal and endless, which opens a new perspective and possibility for life.* Love in this case becomes a sort of godly-created act, taking both anthropomorphic and theomorphic features in itself.

The elementary *closeness between love and death*, which comes to the fore here, far from being a merely speculative claim, is rather an experience of being in the existential sense. The attitude of pure feeling is stronger than the flight from death, exactly because

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel identified a close link between the vacillating attitude of the modern individual and the need for philosophy and its stabilising function all his life. On this point, he has been influenced by various impulses. Schiller, first of all, played a special role: His *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* have influenced Hegel’s views on the function of philosophy just as much as the efforts of Kantian philosophy and German idealism to establish philosophy as the highest science in a systematic way. Schiller has not called only the modern character “vacillating” as Goethe, but the “spirit of time” as well (see Schiller 2000, 17–20). This issue was also a concern of Goethe. He described Hamlet as a “young, vacillating man”, with a “vacillating melancholy” (Goethe 1966, 309 and 312).

separations, and even the absolute separation, i.e., death can be overcome by love. This particular power of love with regard to both life and death is explained by Hegel with the fact that people in love enter a relationship of *equality*, which is the *exact opposite of the rules of market relations*. Love is an equal relationship: taking and giving are forms of consciousness and attitudes that consist in mutual interconnection.

*Contact* is a corporeal-bodily as well as a spiritual-intellectual and mental unity at the same time, the “union” of Plato, and not the ‘synthesis’ of Kant; an exchange of thoughts and feelings alike. This moment is the germ of a ‘second immortality’, which is the act of generation: an endless moment, the replacement of divine creation. “Unity becomes dissoluble in the child” (Hegel 1986d, 249). The beginning of a new life in generation is also the beginning of new oppositions, and an element in the existing circulation of life. Love is therefore a sort of *adaptation to the organic, but also to the cosmic order*, adding a new meaning to love, which enriches both the existential, self-centered, and simultaneously the intersubjective structure of love anchored in the lifeworld with further dimensions.

The ‘exceptional state’ of love as an experience of being is followed by the *everyday sobriety* of the modern lifeworld. Lovers are now connected with many *dead things* (Hegel 1986d, 249). The center of the modern individual’s life-activity does not consist only in “inwardness and love”. It might be the case in the private sphere, but this is not necessary. In addition, Hegel has not yet directly thematized marriage and the family. The spheres of life mentioned here, economy and the legal order link people to dead things: *property, possession, and wealth*. Hegel thereby has taken a decisive step on the road of self-positioning, primarily through his thorough examination of British economics from his Berne period (on Hegel’s reception of national economics see Riedel 1969, 91–98; Lukács 1973). The re-evaluation of love is detectable in this self-positioning as well. The encounter with dead things, which he had sharply criticized as *positivity*, goes through changes: the mentioned institutionalisation of these dead things is a strong sign of Hegel’s insight into the ‘objective order’, representing a decisive step on the road towards the mature concept of modernity<sup>13</sup>. This is the road that leads to Hegel’s theory of institutions.

Nevertheless, we are more fascinated by the young Hegel, who glimpsed in love the archetype and ideal type of human relationships. In the depths of love-based relationships, he has found such forces that could make us capable of transcending our finite and contingent existence, and could give an orientation to our life-activity, raising us above ourselves. All this may very well be so. But Hegel’s particular and in many ways still relevant achievement consists primarily in the fact that he directed our attention to the *prosaic side* of modern life-activity and its consequences in the structures of the lifeworld and ‘inner world’, as well as in love. That is exactly why his road in a few years’ time

13 Schiller’s expression ‘civil order’ is akin to Hegel’s term “objective order”. Schiller compares this to the attitude that deviates from the ‘civil order’ (Schiller 2000, 18–19). In contrast, Hegel discusses a structured objective order, whose components may be effective “objective guarantees” in the face of the vacillating attitude.

led him far beyond the limits of German idealism<sup>14</sup>. The *prose of actuality*, in the context of present- and actuality-oriented systematic, lends the mature conception new accents, in so far as the leading concept of actuality, which follows the leading concept of life in Hegel's story of development, relativises the particular potentiality of life which made it possible to overcome death, i.e., to bring finite life closer to the realm of infinity. This present- and actuality-oriented basic position of the mature system reduces significantly the potential of love in life, and its power over death in the mature Hegel.

Unification as the *basic motive* of Hegel's work is what brings together and connects his various positions on love. The idea of unification becomes a *fundamental principle* in the mature system, where it is elaborated both in the external and the internal aspect of the system<sup>15</sup>. Even love in marriage and the family is discussed through the motive or principle of unification: love becomes an ethical, 'substantial unity' taking in itself such subjective elements as physical inclination and particular feeling. In it, a new composition emerges: the very *complementary structure of love*, which contains substantial-normative and institutional (ethical), as well as elements and aspects of subjective freedom dependent on the individual as a leading principle and basic value of modernity<sup>16</sup>.

Not only the appearance of the *historical aspect* and its Hegelian versions, but also the introduction of *ethical life* represent systematically decisive steps underlying this composition and the re-interpretation of love following from it. They offer a solution for a number of inconsistencies and incoherencies in the early concept which are questionable under the systematic perspective, without however making it necessary to eliminate the inspirational power of the early motive from later works. The early motive of unification can be preserved as a fundamental principle of the system in general. Nevertheless, it is important to note that from the Jena period, unification no longer finds its most appropriate shape in love. The previously eminent place of love is now occupied by *reconciliation*, which, regarding its cultural origins, is also a Christian idea. Hegel's position, however, is more complex in this context as well: reconciliation, just like love before it, cannot be subjected to a given cultural or religious tradition<sup>17</sup>. Just like love, reconciliation also becomes independent from concrete cultural and historical origins and context, being placed in an extremely wide and complex cultural and philosophical contextualisation,

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14 Horstmann sums up Hegel's conception of love in Frankfurt as an exclusively speculative one, ignoring the relevance of the reception of British economics also for the topic of love, which has in turn affected the conception of actuality. Thereby he does not recognise the special significance of the introduction of the dimension of actuality with regard to the inclusion of the topic of lifeworld. Hegel's concept of life, however, is not to be simply identified with an "organicist metaphysics" (Emundts & Horstmann 2002, 22–24).

15 The expression 'basic motive' refers to decisive moments in the history of development. The expression 'fundamental principle' lays stress on the problem of systematic classification and foundations. Love has adopted both meanings in Hegel.

16 Complementarity as a Hegelian method has been emphasised by Moyar (Moyar 2004, 209–253).

17 Reconciliation is understood as (1) a structural principle of the system and (2) as a behavioural model for individuals (Rózsa 2005, 41–51).

acquiring its appropriate (scientific) form in the system. Note that from the Jena period, the systematic interpretation and classification of historicity and ethical life offer new opportunities for the integration of the early motives into the mature system, which is now dominated by *spirit* beyond the *idea*. These changes also refer to the early topic of love, which now has another place value and other contentual accents as a structural component of spirit.

### III. Love in the System

Hegel discusses love in the framework of the encyclopedic system as well. In the esoteric, internal sense of the system, the stages of spirit are considered as giving different dimensions to the treatment of love<sup>18</sup>. This helps us reconstruct Hegel's views on *love as a totality* in a Hegelian sense, without straying into the cul-de-sac of the external, closed system.

In the context of the Hegelian system, love is understood as a more complex and higher form of identification "in life," *both in ethical terms such as community, solidarity, or responsibility, and in individual-subjective terms such as particular inclinations or feelings*; or even the *free decision* of certain individuals about marriage; or the right to one's own "particular existence," which everyone is deemed to possess. All these are explicated in detail in the complex structure of the system. For the reconstruction of the complex-systematic meaning of love, we shall address the following texts: The *Philosophy of Spirit* of 1830, the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* of 1820, the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* of 1823, and the *Manuscript of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* of 1821.

#### III.1. Love in Subjective Spirit as (1) Gender Relation, (2) Feeling, (3) Practical Feeling

Hegel presents the internal structure of love in subjective spirit on the following dimensions: (1) love in gender relations; (2) love in feeling; (3) love in practical feeling (see the subjective spirit section in Hegel 1979).

On the first dimension of love in subjective spirit, the identity-building function of the *natural* and its contentual consequences are thematised. The concrete contentual determination of the natural unfolds immediately in reflective emotion, i.e., in the soul's own, internal existence [*Gemüt*]. It also unfolds mediately, in practically formed, but also readily found ethical-institutional forms (marriage, family), and their solidary-communal

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18 This methodological significance has been discussed by Paul Tillich as 'multi-dimensionality'. He conjoined the protest of Protestantism and Renaissance against thinking in hierarchical levels. Instead of the latter, Tillich suggested a method which he called the "unity of multiple dimensions." When we use the metaphor of 'dimension' with full consciousness, we mean another type of encounter between our spirit and our world, than when applying the metaphor of 'level'. Using the metaphor of 'dimension' does not ignore the relevance of tensions and conflicts, which, however, do not derive from the difference of levels, but from those contradictory elements, that are present in the various dimensions of life (Tillich 1962, 79).

reflective forms (ethical feeling). These relations reveal how the function of the natural is built in a new sort of context, to which these natural elements are traversed through spiritual/social components, i.e., through reflective forms of consciousness, through specific human attitudes, socio-cultural shapes, and their correspondent practices and contents. These modified contents arise from ethical life, and from spirituality after all; and become *socio-culturally mediated* by and in its institutions, such as marriage and the family. They also and most importantly become manifest and real through the decisions and activities of the individuals with determinate, particular attitudes and motivations. *Love in gender relations* obtains its determinations before this background, in a manifoldly articulated field of tension between *natural determinations*, one's own *inner world* and *outer existence*. On the one hand, love is immediately reflected and existentially felt; on the other hand, it becomes mediated and reshaped. In other words, it is constructed in the institutions of ethical life (the family, marriage, and ethical feeling), and unfolds through particular practices of self-determinative and solidary individuals with their actual particular dispositions and attitudes. All this refers to the fact, that love in gender relations cannot be discussed appropriately without the perspective and the determinations of objective spirit.

In this *ab ovo*, love acquires a particular meaning for individuals seeking their identity; a meaning they had not possessed in this form earlier. Thereby Hegel does not neglect the destructive process of modernity either, in which love becomes less important; although it is not highlighted in subjective spirit, rather in objective and absolute spirit. We will return to this point later.

After love in gender relations, *feeling* as such is the next shape in subjective spirit, in which Hegel discusses a further dimension of love. First, it is addressed as *internalisation and incorporation* in sensation. The determination of corporeity in the individual is sensation as the result of sensing, which is "internalised [*innerlich gemacht*], recollected [*erinnert*] within the soul" (Hegel 1979, § 401). The internalisation of what is sensed is its first reflective form: sensation. Feeling, differentiated from sensation in the natural soul, is integrated in the *feeling soul*, in which individual-existential, general-epistemic, and, as a new contextualisation, particular-practical attitudes emerge, which will be both distinguished from, and connected with each other. This leads well beyond the dominance of immediate naturality in sensation as the first stage of pre-reflective human existence. Sensation in this aspect is the side of "passivity", "occurrence", in which the "immediacy of determination" "in feeling" becomes manifest. In feeling, however, this prevents the triumph of passivity through *selfishness*. As the thesis states: "I am what feels" (Hegel 1979, § 402). Selfishness as an early stage and provisional form of self-determination expresses a new shape of existence and of the cognition of the self in the framework of spirit.

Feeling is indeed a simple, yet higher form of existence compared to the form of existence in sensation, which is "the healthy cohabitation of individual spirit in its

corporeity.” This new form of existence has its roots in *incipient self-reliance*, through and in which a further contextualisation of individuality’s *own* attitudes and activities emerges. The new form of existence and the correspondent contextualisation of sensation, further differentiated in feeling, is also joined by specific, proper epistemic forms in incipient reflection, through and in practical attitude which has by now become focal.

The “totality of feeling” as a form of existence (“existence of feeling”) occupies center stage (Hegel 1979, § 405, Remark). Hegel speaks here of the “life” and the “existence of feeling,” and “concentrated individuality” as well. The latter will be called “heart” or “soul,” meaning one’s *own, inner world*. In this “inwardness of individuality”, different aspects of feeling become interconnected, such as the form of existence (existence of feeling or life of feeling), epistemic stages (“unfolding” of the individual’s consciousness), and practical attitudes, or motivational structures (i.e., purposes, ends, interests), as it is shown by Hegel in § 405 of the *Phenomenology*. The totality of feeling is no mathematical sum of feelings and sensations; it is rather a self-sufficient entity, called “concentrated individuality” by Hegel, which is closely related to heart and soul<sup>19</sup>. However, this sort of complexity and totality of the world of feeling is different from that of romanticism<sup>20</sup>. The peculiarity in Hegel’s conception of the totality of feeling lies in the threefold dimensioning of the inner individuality of the feeling soul just mentioned, i.e., in its epistemic, existential, and practical dimensioning.

Feeling has a particular significance for Hegel exactly because one can find in it both the principle and the origin of self-sufficiency, the precursors of individual existence’s self-determination, and its incipient reflexivity (awakening), as well as the basic elements of practical attitude (purpose, end). All this is based on the current shape and stage of individuality, i.e., selfishness. That is how Hegel describes selfishness, its three levels of meaning, and their relations.

After discussing the *general questions of meaning and structuring of feeling*, Hegel gives an introduction to the problems concerning the *particularity of feelings*, which he treats in a critical, but constructive manner. *Self-awareness* is the sphere where the feeling totality as individuality is investigated with reference to its *particular feelings* (Hegel 1979, § 407). This sort of thematisation is also of outstanding importance for *love*, which does not now belong to the general structure of feeling; it is here a *particular feeling*. It is also important to note, however, that, although Hegel addressed the particularity of feeling in the context of self-awareness, the topic of the particularity of feeling still does

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<sup>19</sup> “This concentrated individuality also reveals itself under the aspect of what is called the heart and soul of feeling. A man is said to be heartless and unfeeling when he looks at things with self-possession and acts according to his permanent purposes, be they great substantial aims or petty and unjust interests: a good-hearted man, on the other hand, means rather one who is at the mercy of his individual sentiment, even when it is of narrow range and is wholly made up of particularities” (Hegel 1979, § 405, Remark). Hegel definitely refers here to the conventional sense of feeling in ordinary thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel ascribed a comprehensive significance to the world of feelings in the sense of ordinary thinking, and not in the exclusive sense found in romanticism.

not have a distinguished place value for his conception of love in a general sense.

In the chapter on *Phenomenology*, self-awareness is converted into the shape of *self-consciousness* as a higher form of the existence, the cognition, and the practical attitude of individuality. Self-consciousness constitutes a further provisory stage of *self-determination*, which Hegel discusses systematically as a central topic in morality. Self-determination is at the same time a more comprehensive concept, which integrates in itself self-sufficiency, self-certitude, self-awareness, and selfishness, and represents one of the crucial features of Hegel's basic practical-philosophical standpoint. Desires and appetites are at this stage motivational structures requiring fulfillment or satisfaction. *Satisfaction* as a central element is now bound with the intersubjective structure of *mutual recognition*, which takes the place of the egocentric position of self-awareness. The subject is no isolated individual, but an *inter-subject*, expressing a profound change in the forms of being and knowing. One of the new characteristics related to this radical change is the future-orientation of practical attitude, which has extensive consequences for the forms of being and knowing, and becomes manifest in *foresight* as a practical attitude (Hegel cf., § 434). It is now that *love can gain an intersubjective and practical-ethical meaning and place value*. It is "the form of consciousness of the substance of every essential spirituality, the family, the homeland, the state, as well as all virtues, love, friendship, fortitude, honor, and glory" (Hegel cf., § 436, Remark). The result of these considerations is, that *both the individual-contentual particularity of love and its general-intersubjective meaning, i.e., its epistemic and its general-existential-substantial, ethical aspects can be integrated in love in the framework of the family*.

In the chapter on *Psychology*, Hegel first discusses theoretical spirit under the chief concept of *Intelligenz*, which is enfolded and expressed by the activity of cognition as such. Hereafter practical spirit will be thematised under the chief concepts of *will and freedom*. For the current issue of love, the *context of practical feeling* is of special significance. Hegel refers here to the *discord of feeling in the practical*. The fundamental determination of practical spirit is to "*bring freedom into existence*", i.e., "*into contents and ends of activities*" as practices. This existence is fully manifested through the practical will (Hegel cf., § 469). At this stage, "real freedom" in its existence is ethical life; revealing that practical feeling is not about "subjective" or "selfish", but "universal content", which then becomes "end" for the actual practices of the individual (Hegel cf., § 469, Remark). This context elucidates that "the ideas of God, right, ethics, pertaining as they do solely to thinking spirit, may also be felt" (Hegel cf., § 471, 291). Yet the form of feeling should be transcended; feeling as a "faculty of the soul" attains its reality through reason, which encompasses all faculties: feeling, volition, and thinking<sup>21</sup>. This comprehensive sort of reason will then become contextualised and concrete through ethical life in objective spirit. This new practical

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21 At this locus, complexity and totality should be clearly distinguished in Hegel. Complexity has its roots in the dynamic structures of concepts and their relations; in contrast, totality is bound to the linear structure of the system, which necessarily leads to closing.



attitude has a particular status with regard to practical feeling, and thus to love as well.

Immediate individuality as the immediate subject of this attitude provides the first point of departure in practical motivations, in the field of instincts, inclinations, and passions. This way practical feeling develops itself into *happiness*, which constitutes one comprehensive fundamental motivation for the practically oriented individual (the other one is freedom) (Rózsa 2006, 280–286). Happiness comprehends all practical motivations, wherein the diversity and ambivalence of the world of feeling, and therefore its deficiencies also become clearly visible.

The subjectivity, arbitrariness, and capricious nature of emotionality including love should not be eliminated as it was e.g., in Kant. In Hegel, contingency is an inevitable structural feature of practical feeling and the particular, individual-concrete motivations of practices. Hegel's thematisation of the world of practical feelings is a sort of permanent *recollection of the existentially ambivalent, epistemically deficient specifics of the world of feelings*, which derives partly from the distinguished perspective of thinking for philosophy. An inspiring component in practical feeling is the tension between happiness as the sum of feelings or sensual motivations *and* freedom as a basic motivation of rational-spiritual beings, which Hegel intended to solve in favor of freedom even in the Kantian sense, without however intending to exclude the world of feeling and the world of sensuality from human existence.

The question arises, why Hegel has still not thematised particular feeling in its particularity after all. He has in fact given an explanation. He has advanced a comprehensive explanation of the focal formal-structural points of feeling, for whose particular content, however, as Hegel puts it, “scientific reflection” is not adequate. It shows that the philosophical method of reflection and description of the world of feeling is a rather limited one, which can only concentrate on certain focal formal-structural points. That is why he speaks of “formal practical feeling”. This methodologically founded consideration and restraint remains valid in the realm of love as well. As he writes: “pleasure, joy, pain, and so on, shame, repentance, contentment, etc. are only modifications of formal, practical feeling in general, although they do in part differ from it on account of their content” (Hegel 1979, § 472, Remark). The general features of the world of feeling can only be treated philosophically in a formal and structural manner. On the other hand, its particular specifics, which have highly divergent and subjective-arbitrary features in the individuals' world of feeling, cannot be properly approached by the apparatus of philosophy, i.e., its conceptuality.

What is the benefit, then, of Hegel's conception of feeling? First, Hegel treats the whole world of the soul in its structured complexity, without repudiating, however, the specifics of particular feelings like love, but also without meandering in the arbitrary, subjective contents of these feelings. He rather focuses on the general structures of the world of feeling in diverse contexts, which constitutes the “totality of feeling” as an autonomous, internally structured, inner world, and which integrates in itself both consciousness

and conscious, but also unconscious elements as well. Yet consciousness, or the unconscious as referential relations of thinking with its eminent status for philosophy and its conceptuality were in Hegel's eyes not purely epistemic deficiencies, but structural characteristics of individuality's inner world, to which the totality of feeling belongs as well. This inner world of individuality is to become one of the central cultural forms of modernity, as it is emphatically expressed in art and religion (for more on inwardness see Taylor 1996, 207–372).

The structured inner world of self-awareness with this totality and tautness, as well as practical feeling with the focus of motivational structures of practices obtain an outstanding significance for Hegel's reading of the modern lifeworld and life-activity, but also of modern art in the realm of music, dramatic art, and poetry. Everything that is available and altogether conceivable in the inner world of the modern individual, can become the subject and inspiration of works of art in modernity<sup>22</sup>. Love's status and contentual determination in modern art is exactly dependent on this background.<sup>23</sup>. Thereby Hegel has incorporated an important element of the intellectual world of early Romanticism in his systematic philosophy, lending his position on the autonomous world of feelings an exciting and more powerful emphasis. The spheres of feeling thematised in subjective spirit acquire a particular role for the interpretation of subjective religiosity as well, as components of modern religion in the Hegelian sense (for subjective religiosity see Rózsa 2008b, 135–154).

The subsequent contextualisation of love takes place in *objective spirit*, where modern, subjective freedom, and thereby the place value of individuality is highlighted in the environment of organisations, laws, and institutions, as it has already been mentioned inside subjective spirit in the free spirit.

### **III.2. Love in Objective Spirit**

In the framework of objective spirit, Hegel adds a further meaning to love at the intersection of "worldly existence" as the spheres of law, social and economic structure, or politics on the one hand, and the 'sphere of particular existence' as a particular actuality of single free individuals and associations on the other. This peculiar, particular existence as lifeworld in the dimension of objective spirit is based on institutions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on decisions of free individuals mutually recognizing each other. Thus, marriage and the family constitute complementary structures, i.e., subjectively and

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22 "As however the whole content is held together at the point of subjective human feeling, and every process is transposed herein, also the circle, on the other hand, becomes infinitely larger, and comprises the most boundless diversity" (Hegel 1998, 183).

23 Hegel also explains the roots of change brought about by romantic art. In classic art, one asserts: "nothing can be more beautiful". This, however, is inappropriate for spirit. "Spirit must have itself on the basis of its own existence, and create itself an intellectual world. It is here that inwardness completes itself in itself. And this freedom of spirit is what now constitutes the principle. Thereby appearance contains another relation, which surpasses beauty. (...) The principle is that of absolute inwardness" (Hegel 1998, 179–180).

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intersubjectively determined frames of life for subjects and at the same time institutions as well, in which love acquires a new meaning through this specific contextualisation. It becomes the “disposition of ethical life.” Ethical life, which had borne significance so far for the contents of particular practical acts, comes to the fore in this new context, and determines not just the subjective, but also the *substantial content of love*.

Hegel discussed love in its three aspects, which can also be called reference points, or ‘standpoints’. First, it is viewed as a natural determination. Hegel refers now to the natural side of love, which is also a look back at natural philosophy (Hegel 1986b, § 161; Hegel 1979, § 518, 319–320). Marriage contains “the moment of natural vitality”, even “life in its totality.” The “whole of love” presents itself here not immediately in feeling as in subjective spirit, but natural vitality, which constitutes the “actuality of the species and its process”. Love in gender relations, which had been connected to the natural soul within subjective spirit, also returns therewith. Here, however, it is treated under the perspective of “actuality” and its processes, the general “standpoint” appropriate to objective spirit. Second, love is understood as “inner existence,” which is associated to feeling and temper in the shape of the feeling soul within the framework of subjective spirit. Love as inner existence, however, is not conceived individually and in the shape of the feeling soul as it was in subjective spirit, but incorporated in the *institutional* framework of marriage and the family. Actuality and institutions thus constitute the proper reference points for the first two approaches and determinations of love in the framework of objective spirit. Thereby love gains a normativity which had been unknown at earlier stages.

Third, love appears as *spiritual, self-conscious love*, which evolves into a complex sphere exactly through this manifold transformation process. That is how love becomes crystallised in its conscious forms and in its actual, i.e., institutional embeddings as a reflected, conscious, self-determination, but also as an intersubjective, institutionally and normatively insured, fundamentally interpersonal relationship. On this differentiated horizon, love is assigned to individuals who understand and determine themselves as family-members. *Ethical life* provides this horizon and the most appropriate point of reference for ethical love.

In the context of objective spirit, it becomes “substantial unity”, also expressed as “actual union”. The connection of ethical life with substantial unity as the highest identity is rooted in the context of objective spirit, which is in turn constituted by new relations, *complementary relations* of spheres of actuality, institutions, and ethical life, i.e., of substantiality and subjectivity, institutions and various shapes of individuality. In these manifold relations as the proper contexts of objective spirit, love takes up several different components of subjective *and* objective spirit, which can now lend love a substantial content and substantiality as a specific normativity in general. In this correlation, the *ethical in life* is no longer treated in a natural philosophical or organic context: life gets conceived as an ethically modified, but at the same time self-determined *lifeworld*.

Under the systematic perspective of Hegel and as part of the conceptual background

of modernity, love is conceived as an as an “ethical disposition,” in which the three aspects of its “actuality” and dynamic are brought together, as it has been emphasised. First, the natural components of the bodily-corporeal; second, the internally structured world of feelings *qua* *Gemüt* as the totalizing shape of feelings, which constitutes a subjectively determined “inner world,” or “subjective intimacy.” Third, the intersubjectively-mutually determined and existing relation of free individuals to each other, to organisations, institutions, and norms in the ethical life of the ‘modern world’. Therefore, love is primarily an ethical relationship, which should be understood as a complex arising from these three aspects [*Standpunkten*]. Hegel’s interpretation of love is ruled by the last aspect of ethical life, and is therefore called an ‘ethical disposition’. This third, preferred interpretational level of love refers to the mutual, common, *solidary, responsible attitude* of human beings towards each other, and thereby to themselves in the setting of ethical life, which in turn also integrates the “natural inclination” and the “inner existence” of love in itself. The proper locus for unfolding and asserting these aspects is the actual ‘particular existence’, the lifeworld of the actual particular individual.

Hegel is also critical of marriage and the family as institutions of the lifeworld, as in his conception, institutions should serve people, and not to be served by them. Their primary function is to restrain the radical phenomena and extreme excesses of modern freedom in the various spheres and phenomena of modern life. The effectivity of institutions can be measured exactly on how they can comply with this task and perform it. This expectation also holds for marriage and the family as institutions of love, which are both desirable love (cf. Rózsa 2007, 103–120).

From the start, love is *not of an institutional, but above all of an ethical character*: it has its existential and/or anthropological roots in the *intersubjective* nature of human existence. Love can only be realised, experienced, and fulfilled in a modern, collective, i.e., not simply traditional, but mutually recognised form. Thus, the higher ethical content of love is not to be confused with marriage and the family as its institutional forms. Ethical love is of a *substantial* nature: principally, it is connected to its substantial content, and not to its institutionally regulated form. The institution of love is indeed also “ethical,” which is expressed not only by the sanctity of marriage and traditional values<sup>24</sup>. The ethical should not be separated from the respective concrete attitudes and practices of individuals in their actual, profane world, since it can be practiced exactly in the latter, where the ethical comes “alive”. That is why *the ethical is based primarily on the persons’ own, free decision, and not on institutions; these persons, in turn, do not understand and determine themselves as subjects only, but as ‘intersubjects’ as well*.

Ideality and reality are interconnected in ethical life. The overtaking of actuality and the totality of individual existence as lifeworld in the content of love does not necessarily degrade and trivialize it; love can also become richer this way. The perspective of actuality,

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24 On the sanctity and substantiality of marriage in general, see Hegel’s discussion in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (§ 163).

both as a principle of reality and the ground of concrete ethical norms, contents, and relations, brings a new aspect into the theory of love. Hegel does not therefore see only losses in the modern, profane, prosaic world, but also *new alternatives, perspectives, and forms of both life and love*. Love becomes a constitutive element of ethical life in modernity. Ethical love is an attitude appropriate to the modern world, the infinite subjective principle of which, freedom as a 'value', acquires a special accent in this context as well. But ethical love also integrates in itself particular inclinations and desires. Not in an immediate, but in a reflected, rational, and mediated way, through legally and normatively grounded practices. "Free consent" is one of the first practical expressions of the right of self-determination, in which the reflective, mediating, rational attitude comes to the fore. In Hegel's case, consent is also a requirement for marriage.

Subjective freedom does not mean freedom *from* constraints; on the contrary, it is freedom *to* lead a rational life. Rational life can be realised through activities of self-determinative individuals communicating with each other in a mutually recognised, constrained, and at the same time controllable framework of life. In this articulated framework, the *first subject of modern freedom* is not individuality as the solitary individual, but the *inter-subject*. In this connection, also love is *ab ovo* of an intersubjective, dialogical nature. For Hegel, this seems apt to ease the tensions arising in human relationships in modernity, i.e., to secure life in modernity through appropriate institutional forms of cohabitation, as well as appropriate acts of consciousness ("rational insight") and practical attitudes ("rational stance towards actuality") and ethical contents, at least in the private sphere (Hegel in the Preface to 1986b, 22–28). Subjective-ethical love as a first rank content of the institutional forms of private life (marriage and the family) gains thereby a *stabilizing function* in the life conduct of the persons in question. They understand and determine themselves as free not in general, abstract acts, but in concrete, mutual ones. They make decisions not in an abstract and isolated way, but in their respective actual situations, and through concrete, rational insights and dispositions, in which they can and will observe the *consensually* originated and controllable, affirmed and affirmative *community of their lives*, and manage its consequences. Thus, for Hegel, love is not an end in itself, for it has a "main goal" (Hegel 1986b, § 164): it serves the *minimisation of tensions and conflicts* in the interpersonal relations of modern private life, and offers *consensual possibilities* to solve these conflicts. The essence of love is exactly this determination, which Hegel calls the "speculative nature of substantial relations" (Hegel 1986b, § 164).

This "speculative nature of the substantial relations" of love in marriage will be included in the socio-cultural and historical context of modernity as well, in which *love acquires a stabilisatory function in the life-activity of the modern individual*. Speculative, ethical substantiality "divides itself up in order that its vitality may thereby achieve a concrete unity" (Hegel 1986b, § 165). Ethical disposition as love divides itself up in this context of the speculative, in which, however, precisely vitality and concreteness are accented, as *gender roles*. Hegel has discussed this in many respects patriarchal-traditional

way. The historical roots of this attitude may be traced back to his interpretation of Antigone in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Rózsa 2008a, 455–473). Nevertheless, there are important ideas to be found in his interpretation of gender roles, some of which may give new impulses to contemporary discussions.

This insight has motivated him to search for a way, by which these collisions, even if they cannot be solved, can at least be limited. It was before this background that he conjoined substantiality *and* subjectivity as the two fundamental structural levels of modern societies. In this mutual conjunction and constraint, which is also characteristic of ethical love, he raised the question how the modern individual's lifeworld might be stabilised. This fundamental intention constitutes the central topic of his *Philosophy of Right* and his theory of modernity in general.

One of the most important aspects of his position consists in the fact that the person's situation in modernity should be viewed, understood, and conceptualised first of all under the perspective of *colliding structures and tension-relations*<sup>25</sup>. One therefore cannot explain Hegel's theory of institutions in an adequate manner without taking note of his theory of subjectivity. This constellation of colliding structures is exactly the core of his interpretational suggestion regarding the topic of love as well. That is why love cannot be detached from collisions and crisis phenomena in Hegel<sup>26</sup>. What he looks for in love also, is an appropriate pattern for practical behaviour, which is, first of all, not for philosophers. A distanced identification with modernity in the "apprehensive", i.e., theoretical behaviour, and in the "self-preserving," i.e., practical behaviour of the single individual would be the programmatic center of Hegel's position. He has presented love as an identity problem of the modern individual in this conceptual framework, thematizing it in the mentioned wider context.

### **III.3. Love in Absolute Spirit**

In the *third dimension* of spirit, love is thematised in various cultural forms and shapes, which constitute the 'exoteric' aspect of the also 'esoterically' located and discussed *absolute spirit*. In art, love has a special internal-systematic importance when Hegel distinguishes between *three forms (motives) of modern, romantic art*, to which, in addition to honesty and loyalty, love also belongs (Hegel 1998). But love also frequently emerges phenomenologically in the philosophy of art, when Hegel discusses concrete works or characters (Achilles, Romeo, Juliet, etc.). Love is also connected to certain philosophical

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25 Comprehension, justification and self-preservation are theoretical and practical elements of rational conduct, distinguished and mutually related to each other by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* (Preface to Hegel 1986b, 26–27).

26 On the antagonisms and collisions in law, morality, and ethical life, Hegel wrote the following: "They can come into collision only in so far as they are all in equal measure rights". 'Right' in this respect means not abstract right, but "something sacred", which expresses the concept of freedom as the "highest determination of spirit" (Hegel 1986b, § 30). Hegel refers here to the mutual limitation of individual spheres, with a subsidiary remark: "only the right of the world spirit is absolute in an unlimited sense".

problems of art, e.g., when Hegel attends some questions of drama theory, such as genre problems with regard to the thematic of love. In religion, love obtains another place value once again: *God as love* is moved to the center of Christian religion, which is the historical and systematical climax of religion in general. Note that the power of love over death, and thus the ‘germ of immortality’, which had been crucial in the Frankfurt years, is no longer to be found in the 1821 manuscript of the philosophy of religion. But the overtaking of “modern conditions” in the problematic of love in the field of religion brings about yields as well. In philosophy as the highest form of thinking and thought, love in the modern sense no longer plays any role, while in the ancient, it does: *Philosophy as the love of wisdom* is emphasised by Hegel in several connections (Hegel 1998, 10). Modern philosophy is a process of the alienation of love and the world of emotions, and thus also *of wisdom as a fundamental orientation in the life of single individuals*. This has to do with the *approximation of philosophy to the criteria of scientific research*. Since the Jena years, Hegel sought to preserve both meanings and functions of philosophy, i.e., its modern, scientific, and its ancient, socio-cultural and individual-therapeutical meaning and function. These ambivalent conceptions lend a highly interesting tension to his mature philosophy<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, the overtaking of the modern world in the fundamental problematic of philosophy also induces collisions with prosaic, vulgar elements of this world, which then have a controversial effect on the status of love. These tensions are found in the thematisation of love in and through art and religion.

The treatment of modernity and its consequences in the social, economic, and political sphere, as well as their actual and prospective future effects on the forms and phenomena of art and religion handles the theory of love within the framework of art. It is within this broader framework that we can understand Hegel’s position, which states that *the highest in love as well as the lowest has its roots in the controversial nature of modernity*. The extreme ambivalence of love is not accidentally reflected in the phenomena of romantic art.

### III.3.1. Love in Art

In *romantic art*, love attains a particular place value, in so far as it is based on the *principle of inwardness*. Inwardness is on the one hand a component of the basic principle of “infinite subjective freedom” of the “modern world” in general; on the other hand, it is the proper principle of modern, i.e., romantic art. Through this principle art rises to its highest stage, and becomes able to express the “highest in human” with reference to the Absolute. This revaluation through inwardness in the framework of absolute spirit exalts also the meaning of love in romantic art as the art of inwardness. In contrast, in Greek art as the art of beauty, love has no special role to play, as Hegel emphasises in various

<sup>27</sup> This profound tension in Hegel’s philosophy is manifest in the distinction of the esoteric and exoteric dimension of philosophy, which kept haunting Hegel all his life. In the 1830 *Encyclopedia*, he repeats his claim that philosophy should preserve and apply the ‘exoteric view’ in order to be capable of thematizing the phenomena and the structures of actuality (Hegel 1979, 383 and 393).

connections. Apart from one example, which Hegel treats at length, and this is Achilles of Homer. Although this certainly causes some theoretical inconsistencies in Hegel's position, from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of art, it is also a win, exposed by the wonderful interpretation of Achilles's greatness precisely in his love relations.

Love is discussed further in the conceptual context of drama theory, i.e., circumstances, situations, thinking and feeling, reaction, acts and actions. In this drama-theoretical, systematic contextualisation of the conceptual environment of love, action is of outstanding importance, with reference to feeling as well. In consequence of the strong action-theoretical contextualisation of the art-philosophical conception, Hegel conceives love as *motivation and content* of certain activities of individuals under certain circumstances. Thereby he approaches love to the central concept of objective spirit, namely *actuality*, which has a special status in Hegel's social philosophy. This reveals most clearly Hegel's *socio-philosophical and action-theoretical extension of the art-philosophical and drama-theoretical conception of love*.

Love does not arise from nothing, from pure feeling, as the romantics and some *bel esprit* might suggest. Love has its origins in highly diverse circumstances, which then through various feelings in the soul, a sphere that has developed into a self-sufficient world, become reflected, conceived, but above all experienced. Thus, love belongs to the specific, human modes of existence not only in the young Hegel, but also in the mature one; just as in Kierkegaard (1975) or later in Sartre (Sartre 1960). The reflected and experienced circumstances will be transformed through feeling, disposition, and temper, and thereby crystallised as motivational structures, among which love can belong as well, and which can later initiate highly diverse actions. It also means that love is not to be understood as a mere human reflective form and form of existence, as it was in the feelings embodied in subjective spirit, but they become involved in actions as well, for which they become their motivation and/or content.

The human being is a richness of multiple relations. This richness is manifest in one's stance towards the world, to God (or gods), to other people, and to oneself. The richness recollects itself *subjectively* in the soul as a subjective totality of feelings and passions. "From many sides, but as a whole" – is Hegel's standard, by which *greatness as a substantial quality of an individual* is to be measured and determined. We have a *substantial* element to cope with here, which, however, has its immediate place in the inner world. The whole as a normative quality of an individual is also substantial. It is not an arithmetic sum of subjective, accidental relations, feelings, and passions, but not a purely speculative concept, either. The whole is the norm evaluating and structuring the richness of relations, which makes it possible to prevent the failure or even disintegration of the individual among the diversity of relations, feelings, and passions, whose danger belongs to modern existence, by offering appropriate modes to handle these tensions.

For the Greeks, the greatness of a subject or a great character can be measured by his or her love. Homer's Achilles is "a great subject", whose development is demonstrated



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by Hegel in the *multi-level, and at the same controversial richness of his love*. On one side, we see a highly valuable, highly differentiated, but also controversial love; on the other, hatred and cruelty, all in the same subject; moreover, in one of the greatest subjects ever portrayed in the universal history of art. Behind this differentiated interpretation of Achilles's love, one can sense a qualification and value-orientation based on substantial norms; a sort of model, by which the love of other subjects and characters can be measured. It is highly interesting, but not incomprehensible, how the loves of Achilles and Romeo do not lie far from each other, in spite of the centuries and millennia separating them. Achilles and Romeo are closely related in their greatness of subject or character. They are akin in their love as well. In contrast, Juliet is subject to one single passion, which inevitably leads to her fall. This extremely self-centered and also self-destructive love, however, is most beautifully represented by Juliet.

It is important for the explanation of romantic art, that Hegel distinguishes between religious and worldly love. Expressing religious love in art is a new kind of challenge brought about by Christianity, which can only exceptionally be met. The heads of Christ have nothing to do with the classic ideal. It is human earnest that should be expressed in Christ, and love, which hits the middle, stands between the beauty of the ideal and the natural shape, as Hegel claims (Hegel 1998). However, it requires that which is most difficult: the "content of divine love or the idea of love. Real, existing human love is laid out in another figure (...). This is maternal love" (Hegel 1998, 186–187). Hegel's problem here is, that the 'idea of love' in itself is not relevant for art. The 'actuality of love' is not just ideal, spiritual, but also sensual. The pure, spiritual actuality of love as the idea of love may have in principle been appropriate for the Greek. But only in principle, for the appropriate place of love, inwardness was not available for them. On the other hand, the idea of love, expressed in Christ, is inadequate for artistic representation. This new sort of love hits the middle between the beauty of the ideal and the natural shape. The beauty of the ideal and the natural shape stand in a relation of tension, which is, however, artistically uninteresting. It belongs to the nature of love, which Christ represents, and which is even more powerfully expressed in religion, and can be experienced in belief as subjective religiosity. The beauty in the idea of love in Christ offers no appropriate standard for the artistic representation of love. Partly because sensuality and its expression in its own shape become problematic. The Greeks' expression of beautiful sensuality is completely out of the question here. The now emerging ugly in the suffering body is contrasted with love, which is, at the same time, highly appraised as an idea. This is the religious idea of love, which, however, eliminates the sensual, although the latter is indispensable for art: religious love is 'without lust'. Thereby art cannot let the 'real, existing, human love' appear on Christ. In contrast, the love of Mary as maternal love can successfully be expressed by art, since it is "real, existing, human love". The most intimate love of Mary is one without lust, of course. Still, sensuality does not vanish completely from this maternal love: Hegel speaks of the natural unity, which is present for her in her son. Hegel's main point is that

the appropriate medium for expressing and mediating the love in Christ's sense is not art, but religion.

Pure divine love is conjoined with the lowest in human in a way which was unknown to Greeks. For them, the 'nobility of the soul' always remained unaffected by pain and passion. In Christendom, by contrast, *pain became a constitutive element* not only of subjective freedom, but also *of love*<sup>28</sup>. This infinite tension between ideal, purely divine and sensual actual love constitutes the particularity of love in the religious circle of romantic art. The moments accentuated by Hegel allow, even serve the artistic representation of this sort of love of Mary, for which painting is the most appropriate medium.

The result of these novel tendencies is that the "rigor of the sensuality of the ideal" is no longer promoted; instead, the 'height of intimacy' becomes the ideal (Hegel 1998, 185). Intimacy, however, is a complex and rather complicated world in itself. The multifariously tense relation of the soul and single feelings is shown in the love of Juliet (Hegel 1998, 150). The love of Juliet is a characteristic example of how the *inner world is severed from the lifeworld*, and the subjective totality of the inner world becomes one-sided<sup>29</sup>. Unlike Romeo, Juliet is incapable of handling relations in the lifeworld. The richness of aspects in human relationships and in relations with the outside world are self-evident for Romeo, but for Juliet, who is a "precious jewel", are totally alien. "Such a soul is Juliet: unfamiliar with the world like a child; one passion has inflamed her, and she has the power to sacrifice everything for it. Other bonds are unknown to her" (Hegel 1998, 195).

In Juliet's love, there appears the worldly circle of romantic art. Here, in the worldly circle, love is placed in new contexts. "Human being acquires a worldly heart, and has in it an affirmative" (Hegel 1998, 191). In this circle, there are three different forms/motives: honor, love, and loyalty. These motives are not ethical shapes, like e.g., virtue. Honor is now prowess not for a commonwealth, therefore not a virtue. Similarly, love here is passion, and not marital, ethical, mutual, responsible love. The collision of these motives is also characteristic of modernity, as can be seen in *Romeo and Juliet* or in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

We now regard love as a motive under another perspective, under which the particular meaning of love in the worldly circle of romantic art is highlighted (Hegel 1998, 192). The phenomenon of love serves as an example for Hegel to call attention to a striking difference between classic and romantic art, or the ancient and modern world. In a modern piece of art, the "highest in human" can be expressed, contemplated, and enjoyed; however, it might be the ugliest and the lowest in human. The topic of love in romantic art possesses both aspects of love, it contains both the highest and the lowest. It is these deep, internal tensions that can awaken an interest for artistic portrayal. Hegel

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28 The close link between freedom and pain is thematised by Hegel in one of the introductory paragraphs of the philosophy of spirit, where he defines the essence of spirit. It is not love as an affirmative relation, but pain as negativity that is constitutive for spirit (Hegel 1979, § 382).

29 Hegel emphasises the relevance of lifeworld for romantic art in his philosophy of art, saying: "Every individual has to beat its own path of life for itself" (Hegel 1998, 193).

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serves with a number of examples, but “love in marriage does not belong to those topics which are interesting for art”<sup>30</sup>.

The “prose of ordinary life”, which is a primary feature of the modern world, also *pervades the motives of art, among them love*, which is one of the three motives of romantic art. It brings about considerable changes in the topic of love in newer art. By placing the prose of ordinary life into the center, those spheres and phenomena, in which the motives of romantic art (honor, love, loyalty) stand in focus, are now put aside. Marginalizing love and honor, as well as introducing new motives – e.g., the extreme subjectivity of characters or formalism – run parallel with what can later lead to the “end of art”. Hegel, however, does not follow this direction; he seeks how art integrates in itself the ordinary lifeworld, and how it can profit from it. He is much more interested in the prosaic side of life, and not its end.

### III.3.2. *Love in Religion*

The existential experience of “each and every” person, that I have a vacillating attitude towards the world and myself, and therefore “cannot help myself” (Hegel 1993-1995, II, 80) motivates me to recognise a higher entity. This basic motive in human existence leads to the alternative, which preserves, or rather, which can and should preserve love in Christendom before the background of the modern world, understood in the Hegelian sense as a post-enlightenment, disenchanted one. The need for religion and the demand for something firm create an extreme degree of tension in Christian religion, which, precisely in and through love, promises the satisfaction of these existential needs. This contextualisation of love before the background of the concept of modernity is Hegel’s focus in the third volume on consummate religion, which he then attaches to the central topic of objective spirit.

Hegel has focused on three aspects of the topic of love in religion. The first point is, where and how he introduces love as a *motive of religion*. In this respect, it is very interesting that he treats love in and through religion in an action-theoretical framework as well. Second, the question arises, where and how love achieves its *highest systematic place value and its particular meaning* in the domain of religion. In this context, he reviews critically the young Hegel’s dogmas on Christendom, among them the dogma of universal human love. He also criticises the romantic position of “sentimentality,” which conjoins “endless love” and contingent “being in love” in an immediate manner. In a brief excursion it is also asked how – through the absolute as divine – *love can obtain and preserve a meaning which is not to be underestimated even in a religiously critical, post-enlightenment,*

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<sup>30</sup> Hegel makes the following ironic remark on the process of becoming prosaic and its consequences for the topic of love in art: the individual “struggles with hard actuality, and the end can only be that the individual sows its wild oats, and resigns to objectivity. The end will be that he enters the great chain of the world, gets a family, a position, and a wife, who – so highly idealised before – is now just a woman, no better than the rest”. This ‘prosaic stuff’ contributes to the end of art, passing over to humor (Hegel 1998, 197–198).

*skeptic, and agnostic world.*

The exposition of love as a religious motive is found first of all in the *historical context of the ancient Greeks*: love as a religious motive first emerges with Aphrodite (Hegel 1993–1995, II, 76). As Hegel asserts: “Aphrodite, who is worshipped, is the love of the individual itself” (Hegel 1993–1995, II, 78). The Greek, however, possess this motive in an undeveloped form. Love is understood by them as *pathos and sheer misery*. “Hippolytus in *Phaedra* becomes hapless, because he only worships Diana and neglects love, which brings its own punishment; the hunt is his *pathos*, he does not know love” (Hegel cf., 78). Love as a relation to the divine remains unevolved here: the Greek do not actually know love in and through the divine as the absolute highest. Neither *pathos*, nor misery in love can express this highness.

Hegel introduces love as a religious motive in close connection with the cult” – “He understands the cult as follows: “Cult in its determinate concept is the motion of the individual to posit itself from its separation to identity with the Absolute, to give itself the certainty of unity with it – the feeling, that it elevates itself to the love of it” (Hegel cf., 16). Cult is understood as a practical act of overcoming separation and as an act of positing the identity of the individual and the absolute. This practical act as a specific kind of action also unfolds the feeling of the individual to elevate itself to the love of the absolute. The movement of the individual who is divided in its existence, to posit itself as identical with the absolute, and to give itself certainty of this unity, first appears in the *feeling of love*. Love posits the *identity* of the divided individual with the absolute, and thereby with itself in feeling. This identity is thus *felt* and not *thought*. The divided individual is dependent on feeling, for thinking only appears in a yet inappropriate form.

Love as a distinguished relation to God is to be assessed in the foreground of Hegel's anthropology. In this connection, Hegel emphasises “actual human being,” who, among others, is a loving being. This also refers to the dimension of lifeworld. The ‘unity with universal powers’ is to be understood through the motives and actions of ethical individuals with particular motivations (Hegel cf., 76). This can provide the general ground for the stability of their respective *lifeworld*, although not, or not necessarily for the *existence* of the individuals. In the lifeworld, the person always finds solutions and has always enough space for its actions and activities. On existential grounds, however, it is *dependent on something higher, and thus needs the infinite as love of and for the divine*. This existential dependence on God as love is discussed by Hegel in the 1821 philosophy of religion in the broad and multi-level *context of his practical philosophy*. He explains before this systematic background that – in the context of ethical life – individuals are not just thinking and willing beings, but also loving ones. They unfold themselves in all spheres of their universal-ethical and at the same time particular-active life. This consideration is tightly connected to his conception of modernity. Greek religion was theoretic and poetic, that of the Romans was practical and prosaic. Christian religion as the religion of modernity, even in its post-religious phase after the enlightenment creates a new

synthesis, in which “infinite love” occupies central position.

What constitutes this religiosity, which has its roots – in principle – in infinite subjective freedom? To interpret and to determine oneself in love is the *union* of one’s theoretical and practical attitude to oneself, to others, to the world, to God. In fact, God means exactly this synthesizing love. “God is love, and as such, remains One” (Hegel cf., 17). Love, however, is more than unity and One: it is also immediate identity. Human being is the immediate subject of this love as it becomes more complex. Hegel thereby has included subjective freedom in the religion of modernity. “God as love is both infinite subjectivity and immediate identity” (Hegel cf., 17). These infinite and finite, immediate aspects of love are conjoined and mediated with each other. That is the speculative side to eternal love, which, however, is no longer pure, in so far as it contains motives and aspects of the modern, finite kind of love as well.

Hegel introduces three aspects of love here. First, he speaks of the *natural aspect of love*, in which a first unity is accomplished. He has already referred to it as sexual love in subjective spirit, and also in the philosophy of art. Then he treats “love as ethical unity in the family,” which he presents in his *Philosophy of Right* as an institution of objective spirit. Hegel also refers to a further aspect of love in spirit, namely that it is available for *everyone as an example for self-consciousness*. This provides “the eternal example for self-consciousness”, which can later be iterated in the particular history of each and every individual. This manifests the meaning of *love as a behavioural model for everyone*, which Hegel discusses subsequently at length.

The way to “veritable”, speculative-complex, ideal and actual love leads from the natural human being through the ethical to the self-conscious spiritual one. The inner acquires a particular meaning for the individual, in so far as it conceives itself as an elevation in an inner world, the access to which is open for everyone: “This universal divine heaven of the inner” as subjective-substantial is conducted by Christ to moral and other commandments, “the particular forms of which are in particular relations and situations” (Hegel cf., 52–53). It is in this context that love is pronounced as a moral commandment in Christendom (Hegel cf., 51).

Hegel distinguishes between three sides of Jesus’ teaching. First, he speaks critically of the Mosaic lawgiving. This is an “outward act”, which has no value, since it is only the disposition which gives the act its “infinite value”. Second, he makes the mentioned remark on the “elevation in an inner world, the access to which is open for everyone” (Hegel cf., 51). Third, he writes the following: “He conducts this universal divine heaven of the inner, this substantial, in a more determinate reflection, to moral and other commandments, which are nothing else than particular forms in determinate relations and situations” (Hegel cf., 52–53). He regards critically not only the Mosaic law, but also the dogma of universal human love in Christendom. This critique states that “in an abstract, extended sense of its scope as human love in general”, it becomes the “love of all human beings,” that is “a lame abstraction”. His argument is as follows: “the human being and the human

beings that one can love are single and particular; a heart that seeks to enclose whole humankind is an empty straddle to sheer fantasy – the opposite of what love is” (Hegel cf., 53). Against the separation of love from the actual lifeworld, Hegel refers emphatically to the meaning of particular relations: “Love in Christ’s sense is moral love of one’s neighbor in a particular relation, in which one stands to him” (Hegel cf., 53).

The change of perspective, which is characteristic of religion in modernity is motivated by the *fear of death*. It is the finite human being of modernity that fears death. God as infinite, eternal love can overcome this fear of finiteness, without, however, taking away the meaning of the modern individual’s own life. *Binding finite life to the problem of death not only through God’s eternal love, but also through everyone’s own determination of life is one of the most decisive points of Christian religion*. This point in Hegel’s account is not a dogma, but the *highest meaning constituent* of life and death for the particular individuals of modernity. At the same time, one can also observe the marginalisation of love in modernity. The reformed churches and the modern world are internally related. In both, “everything becomes profaned” (Hegel 1993–1995, III, 91). “The rational absconded in the form of private law and weal” (Hegel cf., 95). “The search for private weal and pleasure” is “on the agenda only because I subjectively think, I only recognise so much. – Pleasure: love without pain” (Hegel cf., 95). Private law and private weal become central elements in the modern world, which radically transforms the Christian tradition of love. Nevertheless, Hegel was sober enough to describe these changes in an objective manner. One outcome of these developments is “love without pain,” which is thus not an infinite one: this sort of love is based on the present, or rather the present as an instant. Its content comes from pleasure as private weal. This loss of perspective leads to a contentual impoverishment in the world of ideas and in the emotional world of modernity. The marginalisation of infinite love stands in close correlation with the marginalisation or even elimination of the problem of death from the modern world of ideas, as well as with the marginalisation and elimination of moral commandments; which has far-reaching significance for the individuals’ life conduct. Hegel foresaw these tendencies of modernity, which started to unfold only decades after his death. He knew that infinite love as the highest horizon for a meaningful human existence was about to vanish from our culture still grounded in Christendom. Thereby the constitutive elements of love, as well as the problematic of suffering and death would be marginalised. Love in the field of tension between life and death would lose its significance not only as the higher horizon of life, but also as a conscious, reflected experience and interpersonal relationship, based on mutual recognition and responsibility. Without seeking to revive the past of the entire Christian culture of love, Hegel diagnoses those phenomena, which mark the emergence of these novel tendencies; and all this in a sober tone and a realistic way. These tendencies still influence our own concept of love and our practices in love-relationships. Without even knowing it. That is another reason why Hegel’s understanding of love is worth reinvigorating.

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