

BOOK REVIEW

Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; hardcover, 336 pp., 9780190947613

The contemporary scholarship on Hegel's theoretical philosophy is marked by the opposition between metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings. The former tendency, though still associated with the works of contemporary figures like Stephen Houlgate and James Kreines, evokes the now outdated image of Hegel as a logical totalitarian, who attempts to reduce existence to a thought process. In general, the metaphysical approach is to take Hegel to be somewhat reviving the pre-Kantian idea that conceptual structures have a mind-independent status as the substantial form of actuality and thus cannot be reduced to self-conscious activity,¹ whereas the non-metaphysical readings situate Hegel in the Kantian tradition of investigating the concepts that are necessary for cognition, through an analysis of self-conscious and autonomous thinking activity.²

Ng's work on Hegel's concept of life can be read as a radical intervention in this debate that implicates nothing less than a revision of the fundamental terms that sustain this distinction. She situates Hegel as a follower of Kant, although through the third *Critique*, and claims that concepts make up the structure of Being, although constituted by and as the material process' of organic nature. Her reading of the small section on the 'idea' of Life towards the end of the *Science of Logic* makes two monumental but intertwined arguments, (i) that Hegel's category of life must be read as the transcendental ground and speculative counterpart of the Kantian-Fichtean self-consciousness, and (ii) that life *itself* is the center of Hegel's idealism as the immediate form of truth, understood as the complete identity between concept and object. In Ng's reading, the formal structure of life is the ground of the validity of logical judgments in general, including the Kantian principle of the unity of self-consciousness. In this way, the self-actualizing form of life *is already the system of logic itself*, albeit in an unconscious and implicit way.

What is equally striking is that her argument almost entirely sidelines the internal development of the concept of life in *Science of Logic* or *Phenomenology of Spirit* and provides an independent genealogy through Kant and Schelling. The book begins with a thorough examination of the notion of 'internal purposiveness' that Kant introduces in the third *Critique*, which she reads as the culmination of the epistemological argument of the first *Critique's* deductions. In her reading, Kant's notion of internal purposiveness deals with the problem of judgment that was left over from the first *Critique*, most notably concerning the applicability of categories to nature in empirical judgments. She points out that Kant's Metaphysical and Transcendental Deductions reveal the necessary logical form of 'nature in general' but 'underdetermine' empirical experience to a degree that leaves open the question

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as to whether and how categories might be applied to concrete cases (35). For instance, the first *Critique* might have proven that causal accounts are necessary to establish the objectivity of temporally extended events, but it fails to account for the possibility of ‘empirical chaos,’ which refers to the counterfactual situation where nature might appear so irreducibly complex that we cannot even expect to find any regularity or generality in it. Since, however, the transcendental deduction shows that any representation with an objective referent necessarily presupposes a categorial form, Kant has to postulate a heuristic principle of *internal purposiveness* that bridges the gap between the empirical and transcendental.

What is interesting about the idea of internal purposiveness for the German idealists is that it offers a new model to conceive of the relationship between particularity and universality as a better alternative than the standard ‘subsumption’ model, which cannot resist skeptical challenges. Here, the universal or, the concept qua *purpose*, is treated as the ‘ground for the object’s actuality’ (48), thus making it inseparable from the immanent composition of the particular. As Ng often quotes from Hegel, this notion is ‘Kant’s great service to philosophy’ (6), as it allows an outlook on actuality as the ‘self-actualization of the Concept.’ With this interpretive move, Ng argues for a revision in the way we think of Hegel’s alleged Kantianism, which suddenly reveals the uncanny proximity of Kant’s mature position to Hegel’s most ambitious speculative claims. Their greatest difference, of course, is that Hegel takes the Kantian ideas as constitutive, whereas for Kant, the principle of purposiveness functions merely as the *regulative* principle of all acts of judgment. It does not objectively determine an object but prescribes the manner in which we *ought* to judge, namely, *as if*, generally, the subjective and objective are correlated in a lawlike manner.

The distinction becomes prominent in their respective treatment of organic nature. In the third *Critique*, Kant also applies the notion of purposiveness to grapple with the curious case living beings present to the totalizing tendency of the understanding to explain reality as a unified mechanism. For Kant, the form of living beings resists explanations in terms of a blind attraction and repulsion of material forces, because living beings appear to be the causes of their own particular states in relative independence from the laws of inorganic nature. They appear to be the concepts of themselves in their very particularity, thus being an *analogue* of reason within nature. For Kant, living beings are causes and effects of themselves in three different ways, (i) in their internal composition as functionally interdependent totality of their parts, (ii) self-regeneration through the assimilation of the materials in their environment, and (iii) capacity to generate a new member of their species (53). For Kant, however, our ascription of the form of reason to a natural object is a symptom of our failure to explain it, rather than indicating the presence of a non-material life-substance constitutive of their being.

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The third chapter mostly deals with how Schelling appropriates Kant's quasi-objective correlate of purposiveness in organic nature as the 'most visible proof of transcendental idealism' (104) since its form is identical with transcendental subjectivity. Ng claims that here Hegel 'entirely agrees with Schelling' (68) and provides a convincing analysis of Hegel's *Difference* essay, where he lauds Schelling's organicist rendering of the transcendental subject as the objective counterpart of self-consciousness in nature and the antidote to Fichte's extremely subjective idealism. For Ng, what Schelling and Hegel are interested in in living beings is how they exhibit the speculative principle of the identity of subject and object in their very existence. She takes them to be in agreement with Aristotle's thesis in *De Anima* that for living beings, to be is to be alive, meaning that life is defined by self-purposiveness and the subjective concern of a living being to maintain its objective state. For this reason, the very existence of an organism is speculative, a *subject-object* (77). Pace Kant, both Schelling and Hegel argue that transcendental self-consciousness encounters its objective analogue in life and recognizes its own form as an actual force in reality. For that reason, the knowledge of life is not a conceptual achievement, but an *immediate* self-recognition of the subject in the object (94).

So far everything is uncontroversial. Ng's ambitious thesis, however, is that life is not simply a domain within the domains of actuality that only *demand*s to be understood in these or other speculative terms. In Ng's reading, life assumes the transcendental function of being itself a logical activity, constitutive of both itself and objectivity as well as the ground of their unity. It is not only a schema for the overcoming of the gulf between concepts and intuitions, but also the immediate actuality of logical forms. In other words, the empirically observable life processes are themselves logical and implicitly perform the very transcendental functions that Kant ascribed to self-consciousness in the first *Critique*. As she repeats frequently, 'Life opens up the space of reasons' (165). The remainder of the book is an exegesis of *Science of Logic's* Doctrine of Concept as almost a new metaphysical and transcendental deduction from the standpoint of life, meaning that the discipline of logic is nothing but life coming to know itself as such.

The process of life is itself the self-actualizing concept that simultaneously produces and overcomes the subject-object distinctions through what Hegel calls the original judgment of life [*das ursprüngliche Urteil des Lebens*] (261), which accompanies all life activities as the speculative ground of the 'I think.' In Ng's presentation, the ways in which the self-purposive organic subject posits itself 'in relation and opposition' to objectivity become the new design of Kant's table of judgments. For example, the constitution of life in its individual corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*], through which it is at once distinct from and in relation to objectivity becomes the singular life-judgment. Externality [*Äußerlichkeit*] refers to the production of an external environ-

ment according to the needs of the organism to maintain itself as a distinct individual, associated by Ng with particular judgments (261). Species [*Gattung*] is the moment of universality in the judgment of life, that determines the structure of the intrinsic constitution of the organism and the way in which it purposively projects an external world.

More striking is her rendering of Hegel's modal categories. Hegel holds that actuality is prior to and determines the domain of possibility. In Ng's naturalized idealism, life as the self-actualizing concept becomes the primary meaning of actuality, meaning that the inorganic nature becomes actual only to a second degree, depending on the activity of life. In her reading, inorganic individuals, as particular instances of a concept, say, a piece of rock, depend upon a living being actively relating to them as a '*this* piece of rock' (225–26). This means that individuality, as a category, is intelligible either as a self-individualizing entity (life) or in relation to one. It is also worth mentioning in this context how teleological judgments are rehabilitated in Logic as the crown of the logical category of relation as the ground of the judgments of necessity (156). The idea is that, ultimately, what defines a particular entity is not its material configuration in the general context of space and time, but what it is *good for*. For example, what defines a house is its capacity 'to provide shelter from the elements, to provide space for gathering, rest, storage, solitude, etc.' (198). This implies that, in almost a Heideggerian fashion, tools that are purposive for self-actualizing entities have a transcendental priority to the things considered in abstraction from their instrumental 'life-context'—though, in Ng's account, the very category of exteriority becomes problematic, since 'externality' is a function of the original judgment of life.

The thin part of Ng's argument is that the speculative identity that she draws between life and self-consciousness keeps the idea of the latter's freedom intact, which she ambiguously defends in two distinct ways. First, freedom is possible because Hegel's bio-logic allows the actuality of self-purposiveness in nature (58), albeit delimited by the constraints of corporeality, externality and species-characteristics. In this context, she criticizes the Kantian notion of strict autonomy from nature as 'false and one-sided' (115). For her, freedom is a double relation of 'negation and acknowledgment' with respect to life, that our relative independence from life in acting on the basis of reasons rather than instinctively is another form of its dependence on it (280). Secondly, she mentions freedom in the context of the logical insufficiency of the category of life for Hegel and the necessary transition to the category of cognition. However, for Ng, this is not a step of 'leaving nature behind' (as Pippin would put it), but, following Hegel, she describes it strangely as a "bending around and turning back on the reciprocity of substance" (161), which I take to be a retrospective realization that the constraints posed by life is actually a form of freedom.

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Ng's overall argument has some crucial gaps that might threaten the success of the book. Most importantly, the book has very few things to say on the bulk of Hegel's *Science of Logic* preceding the category of Life. Similarly, her biologistic framework ignores Hegel's notion of Spirit that can be read to mediate this antinomy between life and self-consciousness. This creates the impression that living nature and self-consciousness can be smoothly reconciled in an immediate recognition, which downplays the tension that is evident in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. But treated programmatically, Ng's book is a highly ambitious and insightful achievement that might be regarded as the most original research on Hegel in the last decades. It is likely to define the further course of Hegel scholarship for many years to come and a must read for all students and scholars of Hegel's theoretical philosophy, metaphysical or non-metaphysical alike.

Berker Basmaci
New School for Social Research

Notes

1. See, for instance, Kreines' discussion in Kreines, James. 2006. "Hegel's Metaphysics: Changing the Debate," in *Philosophy Compass* 1(5): 466–80
2. The most notable instances of this approach are Pippin, Robert. 2018. *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic*. Chicago: Chicago University Press and Brandom, Robert. 2019. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press