

# Self-Determining Animals: Human Nature and Relational Autonomy in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*

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## Abstract

The concept of autonomy, once central to modern philosophy's self-understanding, is under attack from at least two sides: (1) on the one side, a re-awakened interest in naturalist philosophy questions the hubris of human self-understanding as being "above nature" and essentially free and rational; (2) on the other stands the feminist critique of autonomy as the wrongful generalization of a certain masculine/western understanding of the subject as an independent person. Both aim at the core of what the term "autonomy" normatively stands for: the capacity for rational self-determination. We inherit this concept of autonomy from Kant and encounter a variety of post-Kantian variations of it. In this paper, I will turn to Hegel to show that, although he conceptualizes autonomy as rational self-determination, he incorporates, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, elements of both naturalism and *relational autonomy*. Under revision, his concept of spirit provides us with a picture of the human as a self-conscious animal or as nature grasping itself. His notion of autonomy then turns out to be surprisingly fruitful for current debates, enabling us to understand our animalistic nature and our fundamental interdependency in a way that is not opposed to such concepts as rationality, freedom, and autonomy. As I will try to show, re-reading Hegel thus allows us to reconceptualize autonomy in a way that accords with its critics.

*Keywords:* relational autonomy, self-consciousness, naturalism, post-Kantianism, teleology, anthropology.

## 1. *Autonomy: A Flawed Concept?*

In daily life, most of the practices we engage in presuppose what we call "autonomy"—the idea that every mature individual has the capacity to "do something independently of external influence" or, as we may say, "on her

own terms". This is true of property rights, the right to vote, the ability to contract, the concept of bodily autonomy, and many more. Accordingly, it seems almost impossible to imagine modern life without it. The fact that we are autonomous beings appears to be almost self-evident, a given that makes social life possible. Where autonomy is not present, we detect a deficiency that calls for action. We fight against arbitrary state power, for the recognition of hitherto disadvantaged groups, and for national or regional sovereignty. Autonomy thus appears to be one of our most basic and almost unquestionable values. And yet, when we step back from the everyday and look into philosophy, the concept of autonomy suddenly seems anything but clear, let alone indubitable.

In philosophy, we originally inherit the modern concept of autonomy from classical German philosophy, where it was adopted from the works of Rousseau and received its most prominent formulation in Kant's practical philosophy. Here, we encounter the notion of autonomy as self-legislation or *self-determination*. I will call this the *post-Kantian* notion of autonomy, since it is further developed in the works of his immediate successors. In Kant, the notion of autonomy is closely related to his notion of a free will. He writes: "Every thing in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the [capacity] to act *in accordance with the representation of laws*, i.e., in accordance with principles, or a will." (Kant, 2002, Ak 4:412).<sup>1</sup> We are thus confronted with a fundamental distinction between the realm of natural laws on the one hand and, on the other, a rational will that is determined independent of those laws, constituting the realm of freedom. Autonomy then refers to rational beings actualizing their rationality by acting not according to any external law, but only in accordance with one they can consider as originating from rationality itself, i. e., a law that is self-legislated. The defining feature of a rational being thus is the *capacity for self-determination*. As humans are the only rational creatures we know, rational self-determination marks what we may call the *anthropological difference*, the fundamental distinction between humans and other living beings such as non-rational animals and plants.<sup>2</sup> In later applications, then, the notion of autonomy exceeds this basic definition: a truly free will determines itself not only independently of the laws of nature, but also independently of the free will of others. The autonomous individual presupposed in our social practices is thus already present in Kant: it is the rationally self-determining agent.

Although the post-Kantian notion of autonomy may be considered one of the most impactful concepts of modern philosophy, it has been subjected to extensive criticism with undeniably good arguments. Let me pick out and

<sup>1</sup> I altered the translation from "faculty" to "capacity", as it is the terminology I use throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, one could argue that, for Kant, rationality is essentially not reducible to being human but can also (in theory) be ascribed to other rational beings such as angels or 'Martians' (Thompson, 2013).

examine two such critiques that are particularly influential in contemporary philosophy – one from a naturalist (1) and one from a feminist (2) point of view.

(1) *The naturalist objection*: Within the Kantian framework, we encounter a fundamental problem. The two realms seem to form an incompatible dualism and humans seem somehow to belong to both at the same time. As corporeal beings, we move in the realm of laws and are thus subject to causal determination; as rational beings, we realize the capacity to act only in accordance with rational, self-legislated reasons. We may call this the problem of *compatibilism*.<sup>3</sup> Autonomy is then clearly located in opposition to the realm of nature or causality – it is freedom *from* nature and its determinations. Unlike non-human animals, humans thereby seem to be somehow ‘above’ nature. This is in stark contrast with the conception of a human being that we encounter in the natural sciences. With the increasing ability to explain more and more in causal terms, a human being appears to be first and foremost an animal and thus integrated in causal natural processes. The neurosciences, for example, tend to question the existence of a will, and evolutionary models seek to explain human behavior via instincts of self-preservation (Bickle, 2003, 2006; Churchland, 1981, 1984, 1992; Metzinger, 1993).<sup>4</sup> Following John McDowell, I call this position “bald naturalism” (McDowell, 2002), but one may just as well call it reductionist naturalism, physicalism or eliminative materialism. From the “bald” naturalist perspective, the concept of autonomy appears as hubris: humans consider themselves as standing above natural processes and as basing their action on free choice, while science reveals that this is nothing but an illusion and a causal explanation can be substituted for every so-called choice. For the naturalist, Kantian philosophy thus fails to conceptualize humans as the animals they fundamentally are: beings that execute natural necessities, driven by natural desires and needs. Accordingly, the concept of autonomy must be abandoned altogether, and the notion of a free will is nothing but an illusion. The “bald” naturalist thus seeks to resolve the dualism of nature and rationality by reinstating nature’s all-encompassing status. What is at stake, then, clearly is the existence of rationality as such.

(2) *The feminist objection*: The feminist critic has a somewhat more ambivalent stance towards the notion of autonomy, since most current feminist struggles appear as struggles *for* autonomy. An obvious example is the debate on “bodily autonomy” under the slogan “my body, my choice”. The concept itself, however, has been subjected to extensive criticism from a specifically feminist viewpoint (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, pp. 5–13). Its main

<sup>3</sup> Kant discusses this problem himself in his “third antinomy” (Kant, 1998, A444/B472–A452/B480).

<sup>4</sup> The cited “naturalist” positions serve here only as *some* examples, as there is not enough space to discuss them in detail. They certainly differ in their specific accounts of “nature,” but seem to agree on this basic argument.

target is the concept of a *rational self* that lies at the heart of the post-Kantian notion of autonomy. In short, it is criticized for being fundamentally biased, as it has been modelled on the masculine ideal of an independent legal person. The feminist objection is twofold: (1) Similarly to the naturalist, it questions the idea that we are *only* rational beings and not just as much motivated by feelings, drives and other non-rational inclinations. (2) In addition, it casts doubt on the notion that we are independent from others. As a response to both, the feminist critic seeks to show that what appears to be an independent rational self is in fact both determined by something non-rational and fundamentally dependent on other selves. This is most evident in the case of children and people who are sick, old or handicapped, but is basically true of all of us: no one can survive without others. Furthermore, we do not only rely on others, but are rather constituted *as selves* only in relation to others. For the feminist, we are dependent, needy, vulnerable and emotional beings, just as well as rational ones. The post-Kantian notion of autonomy therefore fails to understand us as the interrelated and interdependent beings we essentially are. For the feminist, this failure is no coincidence, since it has always been women who have been entangled in close social relations within caring practices. Yet the concept of autonomy has been modelled on the independent 'male' individual operating as a legal person that has only contractual relations with others and is basically indifferent to their fate. After all, within the Kantian framework, to be an interrelated and interdependent self counts as heteronomous. Well aware of its significance for their own struggles, the feminist critic therefore seeks to reconceptualize autonomy in terms of "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), rather than abandoning it altogether.

From the point of view of the two objections, the post-Kantian concept of autonomy as self-determination thus seems flawed, since it fails to conceptualize us as beings that are both (1) essentially *part of* and therefore *dependent on* nature, and (2) essentially vulnerable, emotional, desiring, *relational* beings and therefore *dependent on each other*. It is an impoverished form of human self-understanding. What is questioned in both, then, is the capacity for rational self-determination as such.

While these objections may hold true of the original Kantian framework, I will still try to defend the overall notion of autonomy as self-determination.<sup>5</sup> Below, I will argue that, in Hegel, we encounter a further developed but nonetheless post-Kantian version of it that integrates both naturalist and relational elements. This entails two main arguments that I will briefly elaborate on: (1) For Hegel, to be a rational or spirited being is to be an animal that has a specific form of self-relation that he calls *self-consciousness*. Instead

<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary Kantians would surely object to such readings of Kant. This, however, is not what I am concerned with in this paper. For a different interpretation of Kant, see: Korsgaard (1996); Rödl, (2011).

of placing us somewhere above nature, autonomy consists in the self-determination of a natural being. (2) This specific form of self-relation is established through what he calls the species-process (“Gattungsprozess”), i. e., the reproductive species activity of higher animals.<sup>6</sup> As such, relating to oneself is mediated through relating to another of the same species, it is *relational* from the very beginning.

## 2. Autonomy as Self-Conscious Life

Let me thus examine the first argument in order to refute the *naturalist* objection. From the Hegelian perspective, the conflict between the “bald” naturalist and the Kantian framework is based on a false opposition. Both assume that we are *either* rational and therefore free from natural determination *or* we are mere animals and therefore heteronomous. This assumption, however, has two implications: (1) it provides a very narrow definition of *nature* as mere facticity, thereby unduly limiting the meaning of naturalism; (2) it defines *rationality* in a sense that is overly opposed to nature.<sup>7</sup> Hegel, in contrast, provides us with a different kind of naturalism that does not entail any such dualism.<sup>8</sup> It is spelled out in two insightful definitions that we find in his mature work: (1) The ‘human’ is defined as a *self-conscious animal*.<sup>9</sup> Hegel writes: “Man is an animal” that “because he *knows that he is an animal*, [...] ceases to be an animal and attains *knowledge of himself as spirit*.” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 80).<sup>10</sup> (2) “Spirit” is defined as “the *truth of nature*”, while the process of its emergence is defined as “a return out of nature” (Hegel, 2010b, §381).<sup>11</sup> *Spirit* is Hegel’s overarching concept that encompasses reason, freedom, the will, and in this sense autonomy. In my reading, it is Hegel’s some-

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Khurana argues that “genus” is a more adequate translation of “Gattung” for Hegel’s argument, since he distinguishes “Art” and “Gattung” (Khurana, 2022). For merely pragmatic reasons I stick to the established translation.

<sup>7</sup> The attempt to develop broader definitions of naturalism to include rationality has been inspired to a great extent by John McDowell’s paper on “two sorts of naturalism” (McDowell, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> It may be surprising to refer to Hegel when speaking of *naturalism*, as he is known as the great *idealist* thinker. In recent years, however, there has been extensive research into Hegel’s naturalism and especially his *Philosophy of Nature* (Corti & Schüle, 2022; Furlotte, 2018; Houlgate, 1998; Illetterati, 2020; Lumsden, 2013; Pinkard, 2013; Stone, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> This thought resonates with Charles Taylor’s Hegelian definition of the human as a “self-interpreting animal” (Taylor, 1985), recently taken up in Terry Pinkard’s reconstruction of *Hegel’s Naturalism* (Pinkard, 2013): “In a nutshell, this is also Hegel’s view about the context of the final ends of life: We are natural creatures, self-interpreting animals, and our final ends have to do with how we are to give a rational account – or, to speak more colloquially, to make sense – of what, in general, it means to be a human [...]. Everything hangs on that.” (Pinkard, 2013, p. 5).

<sup>10</sup> Hegel’s *Lectures of Fine Art* have a rather difficult exegetical status, just as all his published lectures, as they are not originally written and published by him but compiled on the basis of notes taken by his students. As long as they provide a lucid formulation of thoughts that are consistent with his philosophical system, I will refer to them as primary sources.

<sup>11</sup> The English translation of Hegel’s *Philosophie des Geistes*, part three of his *Encyclopedia*, translates *Geist* as *mind*. This is not an adequate translation, in my view, as it misses the supra-individual status of *Geist* highlighted in the later parts following the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*. I will therefore translate *Geist* as *spirit*, similar to Terry Pinkard’s translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 2017).

what opaque conception of the *anthropological difference* (1), that enables us to make sense of his naturalist concept of spirit (2). The Kantian framework clearly assumes a fundamental difference between humans and non-human animals; the “bald” naturalist denies it altogether. Hegel, however, gives us a rather paradoxical definition that can be summed up as “the human is an animal *and* not an animal”: it is by knowing that he is an animal that the human ceases to be one.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this thought that I take as the key insight elucidating spirit’s relation to nature. Thus, I will try to shed some light on the self-transgression of the animal.

The concept of the animal (“the animal organism”, Hegel, 1970, §350) marks the endpoint of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*, in which he unfolds the concept of nature that distinguishes his naturalism from that of the “bald” naturalist.<sup>13</sup> Hegel defines nature as “the Idea in the form of otherness” – nature is “external to itself” and “externality constitutes the specific character in which Nature, as Nature, exists” (Hegel, 1970, §247).<sup>14</sup> I will try to outline very briefly what this could mean: For Hegel, everything is permeated by conceptual structures and so too is nature. Nature is not a random collection of indeterminate particulars, but exhibits an order, something general. We can grasp things of nature conceptually and relate them to one another.<sup>15</sup> For nature itself, however, there is no such conceptual order, since there is nothing that *thinks* or *grasps* those concepts. Hence, it is external to itself, as it bears no self-relation. The process in which nature overcomes its own externality and attains knowledge of itself, marks the transition into spirit. It is, however, preceded in basic forms of self-relation that Hegel traces in animals. An animal is, in Hegel’s terms, the highest expression of what he calls “life,” i. e., a living organism. Its *concept* is its principle of existence, or *form of life*. It tells us how it must be shaped in order to be what it is. Concepts are thus understood to be more than mere nominal definitions, they are *normatively* structured.<sup>16</sup> An organism is conceptually structured on an internal level as well, in that it divides itself into parts that do not exist independently of each other but are directed toward the whole, i. e., its organic unity.

<sup>12</sup> For an elucidating and original interpretation of this paradox, see Khurana (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* forms one of the three main parts of his philosophical system, which he unfolds in his work *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. The *Philosophy of Nature* is the middle part between his infamous *Logic* and his *Philosophy of Spirit*. In German, the *Encyclopedia* is published as one comprehensive work. In English, however, the different parts are only available as separate translations. Additionally, several volumes of Hegel’s *lectures* on the philosophy of nature are available in German, but not in English. For pragmatic reasons, I refer (here) only to the published main work, not to the lectures. For a helpful introduction to the *Philosophy of Nature*, situating it in the broader context of Hegel’s system, see Rand (2017).

<sup>14</sup> “Idea” is Hegel’s term for the concept in its actualization, i. e., conceptual reality as such.

<sup>15</sup> One may call this position “conceptual realism”, as Robert Brandom does (Brandom, 2019). For a critical re-evaluation of this thought, see Wolf (2018). This debate exceeds the range of this paper. For the current purpose, the relevant thought is only that concepts are not applied to the world/to nature *a posteriori* by us, but the world/nature itself is already conceptual and therefore intelligible.

<sup>16</sup> For a recent interpretation of Hegel’s *Logic* highlighting its Aristotelian underbelly, see Pippin (2018). It shows that Hegel does not subscribe to the fact-value distinction, although nature’s normativity is fundamentally different from spirit’s *free* normativity.

The whole constitutes its purpose or *telos*, determined by its concept (Hegel, 1970, §245). Unlike an artifact, such as a chair, the concept of a living being is not given from the outside, but is internal to the organism itself (Hegel, 1970, §337 Add.). Also, the concept of a living thing is something that is actualized not at once, but through a continuous process: a living thing realizes itself by living, by dividing itself into parts, forming itself into a unity and by maintaining itself in this unity (Hegel, 1970, §352). The organism's *life form*, however, is not something particular. We grasp it rather in "natural-historical judgments," i. e., in generic judgments that relate a particular to a general concept.<sup>17</sup> We say, for example, "the cat is a four-legged animal," saying nothing about a specific cat, but something about cats in general.<sup>18</sup> But we can identify the particular cat *as* a cat, as an instance of its general concept. It therefore takes a reflexive step, a judgment, to make the concept explicit. Yet, a judgment requires someone who performs it: *we* say "the cat has four legs," the cat itself has four legs and says nothing about it. In this sense, nature is external to itself: it is conceptually structured, but only *in-itself*, it does not yet exhibit any self-relation.

In order to transgress itself, the animal must grasp its own concept: the individual animal needs to develop a self-relation in which it relates itself to its *life form*. This becomes thematic in the section on the *species-process* ("Gattungsprozess", Hegel, 1970, §367). "Species" ("Gattung", Hegel, 1970, §367) is what Hegel refers to as the life form concept of a *specific* kind of animal. Now, Hegel ascribes to the animal a simple form of interiority or subjectivity that enables the animal to have a sense of itself ("Selbstgefühl", Hegel, 1970, §350).<sup>19</sup> The animal can locate itself in space, move itself, refer to something external, and distinguish itself from something else. This form of subjectivity, however, does not yet describe a conceptual self-consciousness, but exists in the form of feeling ("Gefühl", Hegel, 1970, §352). However, it already forms a self-relation. Within the species-process, the animal then relates to other animals. It relates to animals of other species as 'other' and to animals of its own species as "same." It thereby relates to itself as representing a broader conceptual generality, its species, since it recognizes both its other and itself as an actualization of the same concept: the cat relates to another cat *as* a cat and thereby treats itself *as* a cat. Treating something *as* something is an activity that has *conceptual* content. The animal, however, is still unable to retain its general concept *as* concept, because it is not yet represented in

<sup>17</sup> Michael Thompson has developed the concept of "natural-historical judgments" in his Neo-Aristotelian interpretation of human nature (Thompson, 2012). I read Hegel's notion of a concept in his *Philosophy of Nature* parallel to the Neo-Aristotelian understanding of a concept/life form that we find both in the works of Michael Thompson and in Philippa Foot (Foot, 2003). With the emergence of spirit, though, the meaning of the *life form* for human life activity fundamentally changes and is thus not adequately grasped by the Neo-Aristotelian model. For a similar argument, see Feige (2022, Ch. 2).

<sup>18</sup> I borrow this example from Thompson (2012, p. 28).

<sup>19</sup> This thought could possibly open up Hegel's text for a counter-reading of his treatment of animals as property.

thought, but only in feeling. The animal thus realizes its species, but relates to it only in an imperfect and temporally limited way (Hegel, 1970, §369).

Overcoming this limitation is what goes beyond the animal, turning it into a human, the moment in which spirit emerges. The human is an animal that develops a more complex form of self-relation. It brings forth conceptual capacities that enable it to relate to itself in a different manner, in thought. In other words, it refers to itself *by using concepts*. For Hegel, humans do in fact actualize a specific *life form*, just as animals do. Unlike animals, however, they *grasp* their life form *as* life form, thereby transforming the relation between individual and life form/species.<sup>20</sup> While the life form of an animal immediately determines its life activity, humans have *knowledge* of their own species and the activities involved in actualizing it. *Thinking* a concept opens it up for (re-)interpretation. For the human, its life form is no strict determinant but something to be interpreted. It becomes radically indeterminate and is consequently something that is *determined by* humans' self-conscious life activity itself. Humans therefore determine their own species' activity: what and how to eat, forms of sexual reproduction, ways of dealing with death, etc. Human self-relation is therefore one of *self-determination*, or autonomy. Being human consists in shaping what it is to be human. It consists in being a self-conscious *animal* grasping its own nature and thereby radically transforming it.<sup>21</sup> Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* thus describes the process in which nature attains knowledge of itself and as a result turns into spirit: spirit is *nature grasping itself* or, in his words, "the truth of nature." Hegel's understanding of autonomy as self-determination therefore cannot be understood as *freedom from nature*, but must be understood as *freely relating oneself to nature*. It is knowing oneself to be an animal and *thereby* transcending animality, i. e., having a self-conscious relation to one's own life form.<sup>22</sup> Hegel's concept of spirit then incorporates naturalism: we are self-conscious animals, but nonetheless animals. In conceiving of ourselves as being either somehow detached from nature (as the Kantian supposedly does) or identical with nature (as the "bald" naturalist does), we fail to understand ourselves, we fail in being human.

<sup>20</sup> It is thus not an essentialist understanding of life forms, such as the one we find in Aristotle. For the Hegelian approach, it is adequate in describing the animal and its life activity, but inadequate in describing human self-understanding. The way I see it, Hegel's account can be considered *anthropological*, not in the sense of an anthropological essentialism, but rather as an account of humans' self-constitution.

<sup>21</sup> The notion that "self-conscious life" radically transforms the self-relation of a living being is discussed in the debate on so-called "transformative theories of rationality," in which both Kantian and Hegelian scholars have taken part (Kern & Kietzmann, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> It goes without saying that, in order to fully grasp Hegel's concept of autonomy, one needs to include his concept of "free will" as set forth in the Introduction to his *Philosophy of Right*. Here, Hegel shows that the free will necessarily consists in the capacity to 'abstract' from natural inclination. He also argues, however, that mere abstraction is incapable of determination. A free will, thus, needs to determine itself in its other. See Hegel (2008, Introduction, esp. §5–7).



### 3. The Essential Relationality of a Living Being

Let me now examine the second argument in order to refute the *feminist* objection.<sup>23</sup> The feminist critic proposes reconceptualizing autonomy as *relational* autonomy, rather than as self-determination. They aim to implement a concept of self that is essentially *not* independent and indifferent, but constitutes itself only through being related to others, both physically and emotionally. I argue, however, that Hegel's account of autonomy already entails a basic form of relationality. It is again the concept of the human as a *self-conscious animal* that enables us to refute the objection, since it depicts us not only as natural but also as essentially relational beings.

This becomes clear when we examine the *species-process* in greater detail. I have described above the species-process as the point in nature in which a basic form of self-relation is established. It is the process in which the animal turns onto itself and grasps itself as an instance of a general concept, its species. Now, this process consists to a great extent in the *reproductive* activity of the animal (Hegel, 1970, §369). Briefly outlined, Hegel's description of reproduction goes as follows: the individual animal is only an incomplete realization of its species, since it is of a certain sex; it "feels" that it is lacking something and seeks to complete itself in another; by unifying with another animal of a different sex ("Begattung," Hegel, 1970, §369), it can achieve a higher level of generality; in bringing forth a third they realize this generality in a separate instance, i. e., their offspring.<sup>24</sup> In reproducing, the animal *feels* itself "in the other" and thereby realizes the species (Hegel, 1970, §369).<sup>25</sup> Immediately after copulating, though, the two animals separate and their unity collapses, while their offspring is again sexually specific. This is the temporally limited realization of the species, delineated above. It turns out that, in order to relate itself to its general concept, its species, the indi-

<sup>23</sup> Considering the Hegelian reply to this is somewhat more difficult, as everything I have unfolded above takes place on an abstract level that does not yet involve actual *social* relations. I locate the emergence of autonomy at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature* in which the human distinguishes itself from non-rational animals. However, Hegel's account of social life (or, in his words, *ethical life*) is examined in the later parts of his *Philosophy of Spirit*. Here, a Hegelian reply would most certainly refer to some sort of *Struggle for Recognition* in which human subjects constitute themselves reciprocally as social beings. The most prominent example is Honneth (1996), but more recent publications are also worth mentioning. See, for example Stewart (2021). What I propose here is only the beginning of an argument about how Hegel's philosophy relates to feminist thought. A full-fledged account of this would have to take into account the concept of *recognition* more fully, especially its most prominent formulation in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 2017, p. 102-116).

<sup>24</sup> Here, it is striking that Hegel's account of the actualization of the species is based on a binary conception of natural sexual differences. Within his work, this has wide ranging consequences, as it determines his heteronormative conception of the "Family" in his *Philosophy of Right*. It can be argued, though, that this is not coherent with his idea of a self-conscious animal. Being self-conscious radically transforms the relation one has to one's own nature. Sexual difference in humans is a matter of cultural interpretation, not of natural immediacy. This, however, is material for another paper.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, this is one of Hegel's definitions of freedom: "being-oneself-in-the-other" (Hegel, 2008, §7 Add.). Axel Honneth argues that the most basic form of this is the friendship-relation (Honneth, 2001, p. 28). Examining the *Philosophy of Nature* reveals, however, that this structure can already be found in the reproductive activity of animals. This may enable us to reconceptualize freedom as "species-realization" in more naturalist terms.

vidual animal relates to others of the same species in a reproductive manner. Self-relation is therefore mediated through other-relation. Only in relating to another can the individual recognize itself as more than a mere individual. For Hegel, reproduction is then not an individual activity but the actualization of the *life form* as such, it is *species activity*.

We can now say that the self-conscious self-relation of humans is preceded not only by the animal's self-relation, but also by its other- and species-relation. Spirit's emergence is then based on the reproductive life activity of animals, which is motivated by feelings ("Gefühl"). It is the relationality of living beings that allows for spirit to come about. No individual can sustain itself independently of others. We are all radically dependent on the mutual performance of reproductive species activity: on feeding each other, procreating, fostering offspring, and healing each other. These are all activities we can observe in animals. As Hegelians, we can understand them as primitive but prerequisite forms of our very own *self-conscious* life activity. When we speak of autonomy as rational self-determination, we therefore already presuppose a great range of life activity that precedes it. We fail ourselves as humans, as autonomous beings, when we neglect this presupposition or make it invisible. But again, with our being self-conscious, the relation we have to our own life activity changes. As self-conscious animals we cannot perform the process of reproduction as the immediate execution of a given/natural necessity. This means that we must establish a *free* way of relating to our own reproductive nature and thus cease to be *mere* animals. Lifting reproduction into a self-conscious and autonomous endeavor is then something we must do in order to actualize humanity as species.<sup>26</sup> Hegel's theory of autonomy then turns out to be surprisingly compatible with its feminist critics and their demand for a relational concept of autonomy.

To conclude: If we incorporate Hegel's version of it, the post-Kantian concept of *autonomy as self-determination* considers us as both rational and natural beings, as both free and relational beings. Hegel may teach us to not overemphasize one over the other, but understand ourselves as *self-conscious animals*, as nature grasping itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Hegel's naturalism could, in my reading, provide a great resource for current debates on ethics of care and reproductive freedom. There, we encounter the call for a democratic and collective responsibility for the reproductive activities we must perform as a species. This can be read as the demand for a political conception of our own reproductive nature. I argue that it is Hegel's philosophical system that enables us to conceive of nature that way. His own account of how freedom takes shape in social life nonetheless strikes us as problematic. His model of the actual species-relations is the bourgeois-nuclear-family and is thus inherently patriarchal. In order to fully adopt his model of reproduction for a feminist account of reproductive *freedom*, one would need to use his *Philosophy of Nature* for a counter-reading of his concept of family. Although this is my overall aim, it has to be postponed to another paper.

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