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The unhappy category of nature: sexuality and Hegel

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ABSTRACT

Hegel insists that the category 'nature', expressed in relation to the ideal of aesthetic beauty, is not nature as such but a supplementary deviation coloured by the subjective position from which this 'nature' is posited. We cannot distinguish nature 'in itself' from the ideological-artistic conditions of the distorted 'use' of nature. Nature exists to us only by reference to what is subjectively treated as non-natural. A similar relation is posited by Lacan in his famous assertion that 'there is no sexual relation'. For Freud and Lacan, the 'all too human' sexual drive derives from a deviated/distorted enjoyment of the initial failure to enjoy a purely natural sexual relation: an inevitably castrated enjoyment, where 'natural' sexuality is revealed as impossible. In other words, sexuality is for Lacan and Freud its own distortion of the category of 'natural'. Sexuality is a perpetually distorted and abnormal form of enjoyment, for which the alternative is not 'normal/natural enjoyment', but rather the negative state of a fundamental lack of any relation. Through Hegel and sexuality, this paper argues that the unavoidable misuse of nature is not caused by improper application/categorisation, but instead reflects an internal incompleteness or indeterminacy in nature as a category.

KEYWORDS

Sexuality; Hegel; psychoanalysis; aesthetics; nature

Introduction: the volatility of a cultured nature

A scientific, economic, and political appeal to the order of nature has been a persistently defining moment of culture. Culture often defines itself by what it has left behind in nature, and in so doing it must necessarily posit nature as something other than itself. At the same time, cultures often, whether secular or spiritual, pride themselves in embracing 'natural' ways, in living in accordance with what is determinately natural. But where the natural so frequently recurs in contemporary and classical discourse – where the necessity to recognise a doctrine of the 'natural', an order to which culture inevitably yields, often leads the way in religious, political, and scientific debates – is it safe to say that nature is hence a stable reference-point for the discourse that articulates it? Nature as a reference-point to reason (as an external formation demanding recognition) is undoubtedly an inevitable necessity in the formations of culture. Nature brutally imposes a demand to be considered as a sociological, political, psychological, historic agent. However the necessity to

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discuss nature appears, by closer approach, to be inextricably bound with a perpetual misconception of *which* phenomena it is that fall under the category of nature.

In his appropriately named book, *Culture*, Terry Eagleton points out this internal mutability of our cultural and natural categories, painting a picture of a nature immanently prepared to be framed as cultural, and a cultural category steadily toeing the line of being other than itself.

Culture is a functionally variable term, in the sense that what may be cultural in one context may not be so in another. This is particularly true if one thinks of culture as what makes life worth living rather than what keeps it going. Exchanging gifts may be a cultural practice for us moderns, but in some premodern social orders it may be bound up with economic necessity. Drinking alcohol is a cultural affair, but it would cease to be so if it was the only way of quenching an intolerable thirst. Survivors of an air crash in some remote terrain who break open the drinks locker are not having a party. An activity may be both cultural in the sense of decorative or non-functional, and non-cultural in the sense of fulfilling some biological need. You may wear a head-dress in Qatar as a badge of your cultural identity, but also to avoid getting sunstroke. (Eagleton 2018, 53)

Culture ‘adds something’ to an object to infuse it with a value foreign to the object itself. It imposes upon the object an excess signification, makes it ‘more than itself’, whilst nevertheless leaving this surplus cultural kernel in an indeterminate obscurity. We will see an almost identical difficulty with the category of nature where aesthetic value judgements are made. Not only is culture variable: that which is cultural is, with a parallax shift, at the same time radically opposed to culture. Eagleton occasionally touches on this internal inconsistency of nature and culture, however he principally maintains that there is after all an autonomy of each respective category. Eagleton’s insistence is not upon an internal instability, but an external mutability, where two respectively autonomous categories can ‘switch places’: nature may become culture, but when it is nature, or when it has morphed into culture, we can nevertheless relatively coherently describe it as such.

There is nothing incorrect in this insistence that nature *does* exist independently, yet for Eagleton nature is marked rather by its fluidity in relation to culture, and ease of interchangeable positions between the two, than by the internal difficulty of defining nature for itself (the book is after all called *Culture*, not *Nature*). The issue at present for this paper is partially that of an often-confused use of the category of nature. The misuse of nature (unjustly describing things as ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’) is not caused by an incomplete understanding of what nature means, but rather reflects the internal volatility, instability, or non-autonomy of nature as a category.

What is argued here, with a perspective provided by psychoanalysis and Hegel, is not that nature does not ‘exist’ – there are biological processes, for example, that are undeniably natural; physical and chemical laws that are independent of human culture. What is argued is in fact that the delimitation between nature and culture, as categorical distinctions, is *internally* volatile. Specifically, what is revealed with the help of psychoanalysis and Hegel is that a confused use of nature in cultural contexts reflects not a failed distinction between the two, but an internal confusion or discrepancy in the category of nature itself. The discovery of epigenetics showed that those same biological processes are not immune to culturally explainable influences; language and exclusively cultural processes can re-arrange brain structures according to cultural necessities; quantum particles appear to act differently under observation,

and as Chesterton himself argued, reality in the form of the ‘natural world’ is not complete, but rather contains logical contradictions and inconsistencies, which disturb a collective understanding and require our performative engagement with the world in order to construct it according to the meaning we see in it. In other words, the ‘natural’ is not as stable and self-explanatory as we presume it to be.

The cultural appears to ‘disseminate’ into the natural (according to our *epistemes* as Foucault would say: the discursive conditions which determine the presuppositions for scientific investigation and in turn posit the mutability of objects of discourse according to historical ‘modes of knowledge’), which allows the cultural to ‘construct’ its vision of the natural. More than a case of switching places, the difficulty with the category of nature is that discourse on nature is *culture’s* discourse on nature – an asymmetrical (solipsistic) relation depicting an always-incomplete nature. Hegel’s aesthetic system, grounded in (and explained through) his phenomenology, allied with the lack of a ‘natural’ relation which constitutes sexuality for Lacan and Freud, will in this article allow a reframing of the category of nature as reflecting its own internal inconsistency conditioned by the unavailability of a ‘pure discourse’ on nature, instead being a category coloured by the aesthetic, sexual, cultural, and all too human perspective.

The ‘labour of the human’ in the positing of nature

Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents a breakthrough with undoubtedly Freudian affinities; the logical forms which Freud shares with Hegel depict a method of dialectical framing of contradiction. Where two terms present themselves as irreconcilable, or where a single formation reflectively inscribes its own kernel of self-discrepant disparity (where something appears to be ‘irrational’, to contradict itself), we never find a ‘middle-ground’ type synthesis – neither the psychoanalytic nor the Hegelian logic is one of compromised mutual limitations¹ – but a reversal, or re-positing, of the ground for contradiction as such. It comes, in other words, to presuppose its own inconsistency to itself, to posit a formal disparity between itself and itself which reformulates the preconceptual knowledge that allows for its articulation. This is, in formal language, an operation found in Hegel and psychoanalysis.

One of the most notable examples of this logic is to be found in the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, on the capacity of Spirit to eventually, and at first only negatively, know itself. Hegel speaks of Spirit’s successive knowledge of itself as a method to both subjectivise and to conceptualise the rational process of a historical development of thought. Spirit (*Geist*) thus refers to the implicit universalised knowledge of an abstracted, self-positing agent, a collective subject of self-consciousness, or ‘a genuinely universal, impersonal subject of thought that has priority over the plurality of personal or individual “self-consciousnesses” and an intimate relation with man’s social existence’ (Gardner 1999, 336). Spirit is the ‘impersonal subject’, the general self-consciousness of the social, which discovers itself in the development of art, world-history, religion, and

¹Freud speaks only of compromises where he describes the paradox of a symptom that enables a subjective functioning only through an unavoidable malfunctioning (a symptom allows the subject to have *something* articulable to frame as its disfunction – speech, although only in a negative determination, is possible as a method of framing the subject in a certain situation. Remove the symptom, and the very coordinates for disfunction are dissolved, subjecthood’s basic ground is made inconsistent).

philosophy. The movement from ‘sense certainty’, to a perceptive consciousness, self-consciousness (both in its individuality and its function in social bonds), reason, culture, religion, and philosophical absolute knowledge is an indefinite and successive self-alienation and self-recognition of Spirit, whereby its auto-development presents a series of contradictions resolved by a reframing of the presuppositions for this development. As Hegel insists, a series of reversals, universalisations, and particularisations, including of the artificial and inconsistent division of positions between nature and culture (culture attempts to define itself as such by delimiting itself against its own construction of nature), characterise this process.

One of Hegel’s formulations here is key: it is necessary, in order for Truth to be articulated for Spirit, that it reveals itself not only as substance but also as subject. Substance is not reconciled ontologically and phenomenologically (in being and in appearance) initially or by a gradual ‘totalisation’ (truth is not simply in the Whole, in everything there is), but rather through its internal disparity by appearing as subject, as a part of its whole which reflexively negates and disrupts the continuity of its own totality (truth lies where the whole disrupts itself). It is through the internally disjunctive moment of the truth of Spirit ‘not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*’, where substance *appears* concretely as a singular moment reflecting upon itself, that Spirit can see itself in its cultural products. The whole, by becoming its part and negating itself in so doing, can be considered a fundamental moment in Hegel’s dialectical process. From that moment at which it looks upon itself as subject looks upon object, substance is not identical to itself. For Hegel, the moment of *substance as subject* implies a complete reconstruction of the very interiority of substance itself. The dialectical reversal Hegel proposes in many of his works is precisely such a paradox: substance as given in a determined moment must find itself negated in an internal contradiction of which this moment is itself a part. An existence is composed of itself as internally self-negated. The ‘reversal’ is the reformulation of existence as implying its for-otherness, or its disharmony to itself in the form of the other, by which it is capable of positing its negation as internally conditioned.

Subjectivity does not merely form an addendum, a footnote, an extension to the substance that already *is*, but radically reconstructs the nature of substance. Substance cannot reveal itself as ‘not having been itself’ until it negates itself by subjectively reflecting back upon its indifferent natural objectivity. We find truth not in the empty naturalisation of substance, but in a disparity installed by an un-natural subjective reflection, appropriating the empty naturalness of substance as a piece of knowledge *for itself*. *External* contradictions therefore reflect an *internal* disparity or incompleteness. A part negates the whole to which it belongs, and precisely in this mechanism reveals the whole as constructing itself out of its contradictory self-relation. We see this most clearly articulated in the auto-positing of the Concept from an initially (and permanently) incomplete determination of being and nothing in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

The *Phenomenology* is, in simple terms, this very attempt of Spirit to mediate the substantial naturalness of the world by its contingency to its capacity for subjective articulation and speculation. An interesting quality of this dialectic, one which is formally reproduced in the distorted relation that psychoanalysis posits between sexuality and nature, is the dissatisfaction consciousness and reason finds as it attempts to establish a primacy of the natural world. At two key moments of the *Phenomenology*, that of ‘sense certainty’

(part 1 of division A (Consciousness)) and of 'observing reason' (section A, part 5, of division C (Reason)) an attempt to ground reason in claims to a stable position of nature (of its immediately accessible presence or its definitive underlying laws) reveals itself as culminating in impasses, from which consciousness retreats into the subjective conditions of such claims.

For Hegel, the first hypothetical (philosophical) experience of the world, or of things in general, is an immediate 'certainty' of the apparent present in which consciousness is situated – a certainty of the sense impressions which consciousness receives (which will be focused on presently). The consciousness of sense certainty posits truth as located in the unmediated, concept-less experience of what *is*, what exists and is justified explicitly in the fact that it appears as it is:

The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply *is*. Our approach to the object must also be *immediate* or *receptive*; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself. In *apprehending* it, we must refrain from trying to *comprehend* it. (1807 (1979), 58)

We have in sense certainty a belief in the truth of *apprehension*. Consciousness here refuses any conceptualised *comprehension*, refusing to mediate its knowledge with conceptual/universal forms.

Importantly, it is the *Here and Now* of the *This* which reveals the immediacy of knowledge at this stage. The Here and Now constitute for consciousness at this stage the certainty of the truth of its knowledge, since the Here and Now are always implicated in what *is*, in that which sensuously presents itself in appearance, and thus remain free from universal concepts, free from a cognitive mediation of knowledge, and form the mark of a knowledge immediately faithful to a natural world. Hegel however exposes the inconsistency of this position: the immediacy of the knowledge of sense certainty reveals itself to be a false immediacy, and instead a temporal or metaphysical misunderstanding of what is conceptually implied when the terms Here and Now are employed. Here and Now present anything *but* the simple apprehension that they are employed for the sake of. We will take the following example of the conceptual indeterminacy of the Here, its capacity to deny or affirm that which is posited as being Here, to describe the universality mediating the (at first seemingly unmediated) knowledge of sense certainty:

'Here' is, e.g., the tree. If I turn round, this truth has vanished and is converted into its opposite: 'No tree is here, but a house instead'. 'Here' itself does not vanish; on the contrary, it abides constant in the vanishing of the house, the tree, etc., and is indifferently house or tree. Again, therefore, the 'This' shows itself to be a *mediated simplicity*, or a *universality*. (1807 (1979), 60–61)

The supposedly 'pure being' of the natural This composed of a Here and Now, initially claimed to be immediate and non-conceptual, is in fact a mediated construction, one which depends on the negating and conceptual use of a Here and Now which must be *comprehended* where we truly want to understand how an impression is known (the 'Here' is used to negate a series of possible presentations in order to grasp one as present, and the 'Now' is similarly a conceptual mechanism used to ascribe certainty to a series of mutable presentations).

Pure being remains, therefore, as the essence of this sense certainty, since sense-certainty has demonstrated in its own self that the truth of its object is the universal. But this pure being is not an immediacy, but something to which negation and mediation are essential. (1807 (1979), 61)

‘Here’ is not immanent to or inseparable from an object which we describe as ‘Here’ simply because it is present to our consciousness. ‘Now’ is not identical to the imperceptible instance of time which we claimed to be determined within our sense certainty, the ‘Now’ is by the very conceptual nature it employs not identical to the perception we ascribe to the disappearing Now. Interpretations of the ‘consciousness’ that Hegel is criticising here range from developmental understandings to empirical philosophy, including being neither of these but instead a hypostatisation of the speculative constitutive moments of a knowledge that eventually articulates its own becoming (cf. Stern 2001).

Hegel’s intention is, nevertheless, to establish a paradoxical frailty to the certainty of a consciousness that claims to be receptive to the natural world ‘as it is’. The immediacy of any knowledge of the natural world reveals itself to be conceptually mediated, coloured by a series of malleable universals which infuse the thing being determined (its apperception) with the subjective moment of its construction (its comprehension). The section on observing reason, which seeks objective laws to nature, similarly stumbles over the indis-sociable (determining) role of self-consciousness within a reasonably observed nature.

Hegel’s insistence in the *Phenomenology* is the paradox of a consciousness that exclaims its unmediated and direct receptivity to nature, or its capacity to observe nature’s laws as they exist *for themselves*. Where the category of nature is posited by consciousness – independent of consciousness itself – a distortion is introduced whereby the conceptual mediation of an inconsistent *presence* of nature is absolutely necessary for consciousness in order to establish a relation towards it. There is, in other words, a certain ‘labour of the human’,² a dissemination of the conscious-conceptual, even in the purest attempts to articulate an independent conception of nature. This ‘independence of nature’ is an independence mediated by the universals and the categories of human knowledge – a thoroughly dependent independence.

‘Nature’, or ‘the natural’, presents a series of difficulties in our articulation of it, even in our basic experience of it. The poet and critic Jonathan Skinner comes across a similar proto-Hegelian paradox in his formulation of ‘Ecopoetics’: ecology and the natural images of poetry are entangled with the methods used to articulate them. Ecopoetics does not merely see a ‘bird in a nest’ (Skinner builds on Juliana Spahr’s definition here), but also recognises the ineluctable dimension of the ‘human’ lodged in this image, such as the combine threatening to destroy the nest in its very conception. The imprint of a cultural discrepancy is central to our basic expression of nature, whereby the language through which nature is presented inevitably warps this nature. With his category of the ‘ecology of language’, Skinner recognises the tension in which language is ‘part of the systems it purports to examine’ (2017, 323). The aesthetics of nature are perpetually bound to the symbolic structures which express them. A ‘neutrality’ of ecology, much like the immediacy of the ‘Here’ and ‘Now’ for Hegel, cannot subsist without the mediated colour of the methods used to posit them. When is nature

²Hegel uses the term ‘labour of the negative’ in expressing the necessary non-truths constitutive of Truth, a labour of articulating a negation in order for the negation of said negation to make a more consistent knowledge possible.

experienced *as it is*? When do we perceive a nature untainted by the perspective of Spirit or consciousness out of which nature is posited? When is nature nothing more than itself? For a host of thinkers and academic traditions, for Kant and the Enlightenment and their inverse in Jacobi, for anthropologists and sociologists, for both cultural absolutists and cultural relativists, for developmental, biological, and evolutionary psychologists, and even for the most ill-conceived tradition of psychoanalytic thought, ego psychology, an autonomous formulation of nature is seemingly found in one category: *sexuality*. Sexuality has often been conceived as an independent vestige of what is truly natural, that which is ‘overcome’ by the self-mastery of a sophisticated consciousness, that which is ‘left behind’ by cultural formations (thus the ethical ‘regimes of sexuality’ in early political and moral thought; cf. Foucault 1984). In fact, psychoanalytic thought reverses this conception: for psychoanalysis, the ‘natural’ essence of sexuality is intimately cultural. Sexuality is not a recurring natural spectre of the pre-cultural/animistic, but an excess of always-distorted enjoyment grounded in the impossibility of any natural relation. An inevitably culturally mediated enjoyment, in other words, for which the obverse is not ‘natural enjoyment’, but a fundamental erasure of any form of enjoyment whatsoever. With its understanding of sexuality as a negation of the category of nature, we see in psychoanalysis an ally to Hegel’s insistence upon the non-autonomy, the radical contingency, of a subjective knowledge of the natural.

Sexuality: the love of a failed relation

Freud and Lacan both ascribe a certain structural necessity to symptoms. The symptom is not simply ‘removed’ to get at the core of a problem. The problem, and the problematic pathology of the subject, is rather inscribed at the level of the symptom. The mediating necessity of the symptom is that it allows a subject to function precisely *through* its dysfunction. Across his case studies, Freud insists upon recognising this necessity of neurotic symptoms – the symptom materialises a certain complaint – it makes the basic coordinates upon which complaints are articulated possible. Remove the symptom, and the imperfect speech of the patient is not in consequence made perfect, but the basic shared intersubjective knowledge which makes speech possible is lost.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud speaks of the paradox of a phobia which covers a more general lack, an emptiness which threatens the basic functionality of the subject. The example Freud gives is of a phobia of crossing the street. A naïve analyst may wish to remove this symptom, believing that if this symptom disappears, we will return to, or unearth, the possibility of a functioning subject. Freud instead insists that, remove the symptom and you remove the capacity of the subject even to articulate a problem, even if this problem is not ‘the real thing’. The phobia is an illusory problematic with a necessary function, allowing *something* to be articulated as dysfunctional. A useful allusion is found in Freud’s Dora case, where a dependence upon one’s pathology becomes unavoidable, or where we cannot simply wish to extract and neutralise a dysfunction. A bricklayer who earns his living by using his physical labour may, one day, suffer some accident where he becomes physically disabled, and finds himself unable to work and earn a living. At first, this is a condition which he would likely wish to immediately reverse, so that he can work again. After some time, he would no longer be capable of providing for himself, finding himself dependent on other people (or in

Freud's example, earning his living as a beggar). He trades a life of work for one of leisure, depending on the care and support of friends, family, or strangers. With some luck, the man would eventually find all of his needs met by others, without the requirement of his earning any of his means of existence. If, after several years, a magical cure came, which offered a return to full physical health and to once again work with his hands, Freud insists that we should not be surprised if this cure is rejected. 'The very thing which in the first instance threw him out of employment has become his source of income: he lives by his disablement. If that is taken from him he may become totally helpless' (1905a, 44). The man has found a functional existence in his incapacity – a return to physical health would not be a neutral return to his initial state of independence, but the arrival of a new state of insecurity and lack of provision by others. The man would not be his 'old self', but would face a new destructive emptiness, in this removal of his condition.³

The symptom is a necessary compromise formation – its obverse is not psychological health or structural stability, but non-compromise. The step from symptom to non-symptom is a step from irrationality or, as Sebastian Gardner isolates as the key of psychoanalysis (1993), self-deceit towards absolute catastrophe, to an inarticulate *Real* (as Lacan calls it) rupture in the internal stability of subjecthood – a step from a mediated compromise-structure to de-structuration. Sexuality is, for Freud and Lacan, precisely such a paradox, it is its own compromise formation, it distorts a fundamental lack, enabling function precisely by functioning ineffectively and indirectly. Sexuality is, and this is the key to Laplanche and Lacan's understanding, already its own distortion, a reactive sublimation 'in itself'.

To understand this position, it is necessary to see sexuality as emerging from the impossibility of a 'natural relation'; it is an enjoyment of a failed relation, a deformed enjoyment derived from an impossible natural enjoyment – there is no 'natural sexuality', but sexuality as such is a reactive compromise against an impasse in the formation of subjecthood. Lacan famously insists that *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (there is no sexual relation). This can be framed according to the absolute impasse (what Freud termed the Oedipus complex) out of which the sexual drive is installed, in order to understand the false category of nature in psychoanalysis.

In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905b), Freud describes the eventual *achievement* of genital sexuality (adult sexual drive). We do not begin our lives with a fully constituted sexual drive or libido, but are rather exposed to contingencies and limitations according to which sexuality is eventually articulated. Prior to the sexual drive,

³It would perhaps be reasonable to accuse Freud of an overt classism here: his hypothesised avatar of a beggar who thrives on welfare instead of choosing to work when it is offered to him. Unfortunately, Freud's insights were often conjoined with contradictions, chauvinism, and various reactionary digressions. Much like Laplanche argued that there is a rigorously meaningful 'latent material' to the often-imperfect manifest content of Freud's writings, it is worth recognising the attempt by Freud at expressing a certain subjective truth which is conceived (such as in this case) with classist allegories. A useful interpretation of the bricklayer story (whatever prejudices Freud may have been expressing) is not that beggars are freeloading tax-drainers. It is rather the expression of the same paradox that is constitutive of sexuality as such: that the obverse of imperfect functioning is not normal functioning, but no functioning at all. Sexuality is built upon the impossibility of a natural relation, forced to enjoy the paradoxical fact that there is no direct, natural relation to enjoy. Sexuality finds the coordinates of its dynamic object relations through the fact that it can only do so by embodying a certain mediated distortion. The bricklayer analogy should be remembered not for its latent denigration of the homeless, but for the general psychoanalytic discovery that a relation is possible only insofar as that same relation is distorted.

there is a diffuse, fragmented multiplicity of partial sexual ‘intensities’, incomplete and ephemeral excess excitations which are coupled to the pleasure of feeding, drinking, being taken care of, etc. In its pre-genital phase, sexuality is a non-autonomous addendum, an excess of enigmatic enjoyment lodged in the shadow of alimentary satisfaction. What maintains this proto-sexual excitation – of desire in its purely imaginary register (as Lacan would say), unmediated by the social structures – is the mother. Whilst the child depends upon the mother for survival, it also depends upon her for ‘something else’, an obscure imaginary *x* of enjoyment, that is not wholly reducible to a need for survival. For Freud, the relationship of unstructured, immediate enjoyment between mother and child eventually collapses. This collapse is conditioned by the disruption of the Father (for Lacan, the Father is a metaphorical position, a representative of the symbolic-social structures which the child must submit to). For Lacan, this collapse is even more radical: this ‘imaginary’ register of mother-oriented sexuality is in fact a retrospective, simulacral fiction. There is no developmental move from maternal enjoyment to the paternal structuration of sexuality: this paternal distortion is in fact the first moment, which posits the fiction of an initial natural relation only as a secondary construction. The coordinates in which the child may entertain an apparently unmediated relation to their mother are furnished by the mediation of the Symbolic (by the Law and the Father). As Lacan (1973) states in the *Four Fundamental Concepts*, the imaginary position is always in itself a Symbolic repetition. In other words, even the trace of a direct affinity with the mother is made possible only by the cultural-mediated structures which frame this immediacy. Any sexual relation in its un-mediated, ‘pure’ state is exposed as in itself impossible. The ‘direct’ relation is itself the impossible retrospective product of an always-present Symbolic mediation. The task of the sexual drive is therefore to enjoy precisely this constitutive lack of enjoyment.

The Father ‘codes’ sexuality, formulates it according to the possible social relations according to which it necessarily expresses itself. The castration complex is precisely this: the construction of sexuality into *one drive* is in itself its limitation, or its mediation by *symbolic* (structured, limited, incomplete) forms of communication. More precisely, the castration complex is the formulation of sexuality as such: sexuality as a deviated method of enjoyment which only fictively reconstructs its initial (impossible) point of prior natural enjoyment. As Lacan insists in *Formations de l’Inconscient* (1998), there can be no sexuality without prohibition; the human sexual drive is installed as a reactive formation to the discursive-linguistic customs and laws which made a ‘pure sexual relation’, a natural, closed enjoyment, always-already impossible. Sexuality is *distorted-in-itself*, it is constituted out of a fundamental impossibility, or impasse, in pre-genital sexual excitation. Sexuality emerges first from a non-enjoyment, a prohibited relation, and adopts a form of mediated enjoyment through a cultural menagerie of perversions, fetishes, fantasies, masochisms, etc. Behind these derangements there is no pure sexuality, but a failed relation. Laplanche’s insistence is that sexuality is the *loss* of a ‘natural relation’, implying something like an abandonment of fictive demands for natural reproduction. In a Lacanian sense, there is no ‘loss’ properly speaking (this ‘loss’ would regard something that never existed), but rather this ‘natural relation’ is retroactively posited from the fact that sexuality is always-already a reactive formation against a non-existent point (the sincerely *cultural* category of a ‘natural relation’). The category of natural reproduction is its own fetishised position, articulated by the cultural-sexual perspective which is only asymmetrically oriented

towards the natural. Sexuality is an all too human construction of modes of enjoyment, one which therefore lends itself to the qualitatively human death drive (Laplanche 2008), away from any deceptions of a 'natural order' to adult object relations. Sexuality is thus a testament to a *failed articulation of the natural*. To further understand the 'failed relation', or the dismissal of the category of 'the natural' underlying sexuality, we can turn to a breakthrough text by Freud, *Fetishism*.

Fetishism, the central 'colour' of the sexual drive, is a consequence of that moment where the impossibility of a natural, immediate sexual relation 'hits home' (for Freud, this is, perhaps in a metaphorised way, where the child realises that the mother has no phallus of her own, and where the precarious and partially symbolically constructed, by implication impotent, quality of its own phallus emerges). The fetish is a moment frozen in time, a sexual preference, or choice, for that which precedes the infant's recognition of castration. Freud terms the fetishist preference/choice *Verleugnung* (disavowal), locating it between *Verdrängung* (repression) and complete conscious avowal. Mannoni's (1982) famous phrase characterises *Verleugnung* according to the logic of *je sais bien mais quand même...* ('I know very well but nevertheless...'), whereby, on the one hand, the inherent failure of a certain imagined sexual relation (that the mother can be a natural and unopposed object of sexual exchange) is acknowledged, but sexual behaviour itself betrays a disavowal of this fact. Sexuality chooses as its object that which does not need to be reconciled with a failed sexual relation, something with no inherent sexual 'use-value'. A foot fetish, for Freud, derives from the fact that the foot is the last thing the infant sees before looking up and seeing the non-existence of the maternal phallus.

'The horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute [the fetish]' (Freud 1927, 154), and the fetish, as a determinate (inherently non-sexualised) object and the constituent of mature sexuality, works to 'crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic' (155). For Freud, the fetish thus emerges as a reaction formation, a mediated sexual constitution, to the impossible existence of a natural, un-human and incestuous, relation to the mother. The maternal relation is always and already deferred, glimpsed as an impossible moment through a series of social structures and norms that construct the avenues according to which the subject may desire. Mannoni insists that the fetishist *Verleugnung* is constitutive of everyday life, we avow by the mechanism of simultaneous disavowal, and a form of perverse/fetishising distortion (the negation of a sexual relation) is the only method for sexuality to function.

Through Freud, and with the help of Lacan, the 'deviated' fetishist object relation is located as central to sexuality. Sexuality emerges from the fact that its enjoyment is reactive, disrupted, perverse, in the face of an originary failed enjoyment. Behind a deviated sexuality lies not sexuality 'as it really is', but the simple lack of any natural sexual relation. For Lacan, as seen most clearly in his essay on the Freudian *Trieb* (drive or, in French, *pulsion*; 1966), sexuality is quite simply a mode of enjoying the fact itself of an inherently impossible enjoyment, finding reconstructed and perverse pleasure, through a parallax, indirect approach to an indefinitely displaced lack or nothingness. The 'non-enjoyment' out of which sexual enjoyment is capable of emerging, is in its essence the category of 'the natural' applied to sexual relations. A natural sexual relation is inherently oxymoronic, a self-contradictory concept where the natural is speculated

upon from the perspective of its impossibility, or from the perspective of a sexuality that constitutively rejects such a category of nature.

Lacan's poignant (and controversial) statement regarding the falsity of nature in the domain of sexuality is that *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (there is no sexual relation). At its ground, sexuality is a deviation from an ideal that does not exist, structured not by the immanence of unity between man and woman, but by the deferring and self-contradictory pathways of desire carved out by the imperfect symbolic register in which sexuality is unavoidably articulated. We should be cautious of doctrines, whether Reichian, Deleuzian, or those at home in various postmodern narratives, stressing the revolutionary, anti-repressive quality of a 'pure' sexuality (an uncoded, de-territorialising sexuality, acting against the signifying structures of the State or of repressive apparatuses, as Deleuze and Guattari would characterise it in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) – these stress a certain immanent, liberating, rhizomatic sexuality as 'pure', and a counterpoint to a historically conditioned repressed sexuality. A command is felt from these corners to 'liberate sexuality'. However to 'liberate' sexuality, to open it up to a multiplicity of forms of enjoyment, is in fact to further alienate it from the paradox that lies at its ground (that of a fundamental failed enjoyment, an impasse constitutive of the *symptomatic excess enjoyment* of sexuality). We are not 'freed' in our discourse on sexuality by pretending to be more tolerant of it, but more lost in how it is that the sexual relation is both a means to and barrier against enjoyment. Even biomedical and psychopathological studies stumble across the unusual finding that (despite our liberated attitude) sexual dysfunction and impotence is a pervasive (and even increasingly common) problem (Rastrelli and Maggi 2017). We have not liberated *sexuality*; one deviation is reformatted as a multiplicity of deviations, through which we have indefinitely postponed any recognition of the impossible relation from which sexuality in itself is constituted.

The Lacanian-Freudian argument is that sexuality is already 'coded' (to recycle Deleuzian terminology) in itself, already structured according to the modes of articulation furnished by social life. Sexuality is its own deviation, it is a distorted, perverted insistence upon enjoying a failed enjoyment – it finds pleasure only in crystallising itself in temporary, contingent formations that betray the fiction of a 'pure' sexual relation. It is therefore no overstatement that sexuality is its own enemy, and by 'freeing it' against repressive external apparatuses, we only reveal its internal limitations, its auto-oppressing, self-contradictory ontology. The sexual drive is posited from the structured modes of expression which the symbolic (language and discourse) furnishes. Without the inherent un-freedom of language, there is no sexuality, and the fiction of sexuality's purity veils the *Real* (the inarticulable inconsistency) of sexual relations: that there is no sexual relation.

What psychoanalysis does, in summary, is reject the category of the natural as nothing more than a speculative ideal. The 'natural' sexual relation (an unflawed, pure sex-drive) is posited by a sexuality that is always-already (and in itself) a distortion without a prior stability. The 'natural' is coloured by the *all-too-human* quality of sexuality's unnatural ground. Psychoanalysis appears therefore to reveal the instability in the category of the natural, its insufficiency in contextual application. We are at times told that a behaviour or an idea is natural or unnatural: *it is unnatural to be homosexual, it is unnatural for races and peoples to mix, it is natural to love each other, etc.* Such misuse of the category of nature does not merely derive from a mis-categorisation of something as natural or

cultural. Such confused use of the category of nature instead reflects this category's internal confusion, its instability or historical mutability, or even its construction from a distorting, idealising (in short, human) perspective.

The perverted nature of the aesthetic ideal

Hegel's most explicit attack on the autonomy of the use of the category of nature is found in his treatise on aesthetics (for which a familiarity with his *Phenomenology* is necessary). With similar avenues of contradictions, oppositions, reversals, universalisations and particularisations, Hegel's *Aesthetics* demonstrate the moments in which an *Idea* (the Idea of beauty) returns to formal and determinate unity with the Spirit (*Geist*) that articulates it, thus furnishing the *ideal of artistic beauty*, with its possible forms of expression according to the adequacy of the particularisation (i.e. the making-concrete by artistic talent) for understanding the universal from which it derives. The moments of the articulation of the aesthetic Idea are conceptually embodied in a dialectically thematised presentation of different modes of artistic expression (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry) across different artistic periods (Greco-Roman, Christian, Romantic, etc.).

The work of art, for Hegel, plays on and exploits appearances – but in its reflection of the artistic Idea it employs that specific logic of appearance which is posited in the *Science of Logic*, namely that appearance is not to be sharply distinguished from essence, but rather that essence is deduced as determined through the functioning of appearances ((1812) 2014). It is necessary, in the constitution of essence (or in essence's 'positing of its own presuppositions'), that it remains not simply an abstract universality but that it is formulated as the essence of what appears, in other words as a concrete, existing essence. It is 'essential for essence that it *is*'.

It must not be forgotten that essence, all truth, must *appear* so as not to remain a pure abstraction. [...] Appearance is far from inessential, it constitutes on the contrary an essential moment of essence. The true exists for itself in spirit, appears in itself and is there for others. (Hegel (1835) 1979, 29, own translation)

The aesthetic truth is the concrete form of its essence. In this we find its being *for-otherness* which necessarily posits itself as completed or constructed only in relation to the others to which it appears. The Idea of beauty is therefore an essence that must appear in accordance with its abstract universal. It is in its sensible and intellectual reception (as particularised universal) in the other, in other words as essence which presupposes its mediated constitution in the existence of observers, that the truth of the work of art emerges. To exist for itself, to have an internal relation between itself as appearance and itself as essence, the Idea must *appear as something* for the other. The artistic work therefore eventually exists for itself only insofar as this for-itself is a mediated formulation existing for the other.

In the case of the aesthetic Idea, Hegel summarises the free and spontaneous reciprocally determining moments which constitute the work of art in rivalling the capacities of religion and philosophy: 'The content of art is constituted by the idea, represented in concrete and sensible form. The task of art consists in reconciling these two sides (the idea and its sensible representation) by creating out of them a free totality' ((1835)

1979, 105, own translation). Interestingly, the same ‘part-whole’ tension present in the *Phenomenology* returns here in a new form. The concrete articulation of the idea is simultaneously a necessary negation and reformulation of this idea (recollect substance entering into a disparity with itself in the form of subject). Yet it is precisely this contradictory instance of the idea, as a ‘totality’ necessarily yet antagonistically expressed as sensible representation, which the idea must embody in the work of art, and it is also for this reason that, for Hegel, art culminates in the constitutive necessity of philosophy to reflect upon it. Three conditions are necessary for this free totality of art whereby a universal expresses itself as its own embodiment in a particular. First, the content (idea) to be represented must lend itself precisely to the type of artistic representation in which it is embodied. Second, the content to be sensibly expressed should not be an empty abstraction incapable of self-positing in a determinate moment. Third, the truthfulness of the idea expressed as content can be done so (truthfully) because the content is itself individual, in essence concrete. In brief, universality is aesthetically represented as *truthful particular* by the fact that, according to its universal essence, it presupposes its appearance as concrete particular.

The universal-particular logic of the *Phenomenology*, in which substance necessarily negates itself as subject, appears to recur here, to which the first condition appears therefore as a corollary (of which the second condition is itself a corollary, and so forth with the third condition). It is the capacity of an abstract idea to posit itself as a concrete particularisation (negation) that determines its presupposing within itself of a suitability for aesthetic representation.

Where an idea does *not* lend itself to such particularisation, by the obscurity and incompleteness of its essential and universal ‘ideality’, its artistic representation appears as little more than nonsense. An imperfect essence/idea leads only to an inappropriate artistic representation. The inconsistency of artistic representation would in such a case reflect the constitutive discrepancy internal to the idea/universal being represented. An idea must presuppose its expression for the other, it must have in itself the coordinates of its concrete, aesthetic presentation. If an artistic idea does not presuppose its artistic demonstration, any concretisation of it will produce an unhappy particularisation of an incomplete universal. It is in the light of this logic that we understand Hegel’s recurring aesthetic and discursive dismissal of the category of nature. Nature is precisely that category of the idea which cannot maintain itself as a truthful sensible representation. It is a category in which the *idea* of it is not internally predisposed to any aesthetic particularisation – it is, in a Hegelian sense, a false or perverted aesthetic, the attempt to artistically concretise an idea with no internal particular-universal presupposition which would lend it to art.

Historically, early artistic representations of nature are, Hegel insists, a naïve exploration of beauty *before* this idea becomes available to reflecting consciousness or to Spirit. In the section devoted to the ‘objective conception of art’, Hegel describes the art of nature as a purely formal, often superfluous, study. Initially, such a narrow and unfree artistic form could be equated to the historical moments (from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*) which precede the dawn of Spirit, where Spirit has yet to venture outside of itself and reflect upon itself. Spirit has not begun to recognise its self-positing in the artistic creation, and is yet to see in the disparity between itself and itself the spontaneous zone for artistic creativity.

At best, the artistic imitation of nature frames the disparity between nature and human reflection *upon* nature – it is a formal pursuit without creative content. Upon considering the motivation for such an empty artistic pursuit, Hegel nevertheless admits the inverted value of the imitation of nature: mankind affirms his skill (only) to himself, formal rigour is compared only to its own method, and less to the internal *idea* of the nature being reproduced. The imitation of nature is a relation only of man to himself, not a relation of reproduction between man and nature, since its ‘results always remain inferior to that which is offered by nature’ ((1835) 1979, 37, own translation). Thus the motivation is rarely a ‘naturalistic’ one, but immediately reframed as man’s competition with himself. Hegel references the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, who challenged each other to paint the most realistic picture: Zeuxis tricked a flock of doves into attempting to eat the grapes he had painted, but Parrhasius fooled Zeuxis into thinking that the curtain he had painted was in fact a real curtain hiding Parrhasius’ painting. At the very instance in which it appears, the aesthetic imitation of nature has thus already lost any ‘natural’ motivation. In the development of the ideal of beauty, Hegel insists that such imitation ‘deprives art of its liberty, of its powers to express the beautiful’ (37, own translation). The artistic category of nature thus begins to, in its infancy, reveal itself as a non-category, and to always-already be an anthropocentric question.

Later on, where Hegel directly considers the highest moment of artistic beauty, the *ideal*, he returns to the category of nature, this time to ultimately dismiss its immanent perversion of Spirit’s relation to itself via art, a perversion bound to the cultural position, or the perspective of Spirit, from which nature is always-already posited. As touched on, the ideality of artistic beauty directly presupposes that its productions are defined by their theoretical contemplation in an observing subject. As much as the truth of artistic objects is located in their essence, this essence is disseminated into their capacity to be observed *by appearing*. The ideal of beauty has its *being-for-otherness*, or being-for-contemplation, inscribed as necessary for its own constitution. This is what Hegel means by the fact that artistic content *lends itself* to artistic representation: it is co-constructed by the otherness to which concrete representation is referred. This impulse towards artistic contemplation in the actualisation of the ideal means that objects of artistic representation are coloured by an artistic intention only by their consideration as such – they are reformulated according to the intention of the artistic consciousness.

Thanks to this ideality, art imprints a value to objects that are insignificant in themselves and which, despite their insignificance, it fixes for itself in making them its goal and in attracting our attention towards things which, without art, are entirely lost on us. (221, own translation)

Thus the value of artistic objects is a value installed by Spirit. It formulates the objects as other than themselves, as internally presupposing a certain aesthetic reception. The relation between Spirit and what lies ‘outside’ of it – nature – is coloured by an interesting asymmetry: the ‘outside’ is perturbed by the value Spirit seeks to find in it. We would fail, therefore, to separate the object as it is for itself, from that variation of the object posited by an interested artistic ideal. The category of nature adopts a problematic distinction by this logic, being entirely dismissed when it is employed as a value judgement, or as opposed to the use of words for example in poetry. It may be objected that it is

‘natural’ to use some words, and ‘unnatural’ to use others, where the poet experiments with the representative capacity of language, but such an opposition proves entirely ineffective: ‘We can ask ourselves what this version of nature is that is opposed to poetics, since talking about nature in general, is to employ a vague and empty word’ (225, own translation).

Hegel ultimately dismisses the indeterminacy and obscurity characterising an employment of the category of nature. As has been suggested, this ‘impossibility’ of the natural, or its disjunctive ambiguity in discursive use, is located as an incompleteness in the category itself. Where the natural is used as critique against artistic creations, its outcome appears to be a confusion. Such confused or inconsistent use is not derived from the faulty use of the category of nature, but rather reflects the *internal* inconsistency of this category – a nature that can only be posited or articulated by deviating from it, from the perspective of aesthetic contexts to which it cannot logically accord.

In Hegel’s aesthetics, the use of the category of nature reveals only a failed autonomy of the natural from the perspective of the artistic. Similarly, for psychoanalysis, ‘natural’ sexuality is an oxymoron: sexuality is already in itself a distortion, a reaction to an impossible natural scene, the ‘lack of a sexual relation’ as Lacan calls it. In a multitude of contexts, the term ‘natural’ may be employed, yet marked only by its persistent mutability. This volatility of our discussions of nature, their pervasive inconsistency, reflects not our as-yet imperfect understanding of the natural, but rather the incompleteness of a category of nature ‘in itself’, an incomplete category supplemented by being unsatisfactorily posited from ‘the other side’, from a cultural, all too human perspective.

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