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Social Organisms. Hegel’s Organizational View of Social Functions

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Introduction

Analogies can be quite charming and, indeed, seductively so. Not only can they serve as powerful cognitive tools in exploring and explaining the nature of hitherto unfamiliar things in light of more familiar ones, as well as arguing for the working hypotheses we thus formulate about them. Moreover, they can serve as powerful rhetorical tools in making certain features of the thing in question more salient and, therefore, persuading others of the hypotheses and the arguments we formulate about them. However, to the extent that the cognitive and rhetorical effects of analogies can come apart, they can seduce us into accepting working hypotheses or arguments about things that are not founded by the relevant features they are taken to have in common. This seductiveness is what makes analogies, despite their undeniable charm, somewhat tricky.¹

When it comes to both the charm and trickiness of analogies, social scientists are about as seducible as anyone else. Case in point: *social functionalism*. Part of what has made Jon Elster such a killjoy for all those social scientists eager to make use of functional explanations for their theoretical endeavors is that he has made them look like they have been not just charmed but, indeed, tricked by an analogy: The analogy between social and biological phenomena that underpins the very idea of functional explanation in social science. He traces this idea back to the emergence of social science as an autonomous discipline in the 19th Century and distinguishes two versions of this analogy: First, the analogy between biological organisms and societies, both maintaining themselves; second, the analogy between biological organisms and firms, both struggling for survival (see [Elster 1989], 75). Elster is quick – too quick, in my opinion – to dismiss the former version because it suggested “pseudoexplanations,” which gave rise to “pseudoproblems,” in turn, ([Elster 1989], 75). However, it’s easy

¹For the terminological distinction between the ‘charm’ and ‘trick’ of analogies, see [Govier 1989].

to see why he'd be so quick to dismiss it. In the popular historical narrative, Darwin's revolutionary achievement has not only eclipsed but thoroughly discredited previous approaches for their theological or speculative underpinnings (see [Lenoir 1982], 3–4). With natural selection, so the story goes, Darwin had identified a mechanism that rendered the vitalistic and teleological notions on which these approaches relied obsolete. And, because these are the very approaches that, in turn, appear to underpin those versions of organismic analogy prominently advanced by the early sociologists Elster has in mind, it seems natural to consider it a non-starter.

In this paper, I will challenge Elster's dismissal of the organismic analogy. I will do so by examining a crucial episode in the history of the analogy he, in my view, rightly takes to underpin an influential account of functional explanation in social science. This is the very same episode within which he places the origin of the biological analogy, and which I consider to be a period of momentous conceptual innovation in social theory: the emergence of social functionalism in the 19th Century. More specifically, I want to investigate what I take to be a central character within the back story of social functionalism: G.W.F. Hegel. Thus, my investigation into his social theory will amount to a case study of the use made of the organismic analogy as a means of concept development. My central claim will be that Elster's dismissal was premature and was so for two reasons. First, to claim that the organismic analogy figured among the premises of an analogical argument and, thus, as explanans in an explanation misses the *point* of the analogy. Hegel did not make an argumentative use of the analogy. Instead, he uses the organismic analogy to model the apparent close cooperation among the parts of the state and, thus conceptualize its characteristic structure in terms of *organization*: the mutual dependence among distinct structures generated by the state as a whole. Thus it served as a means for the formation of the concept of social structure.² Second, the *organizational* understanding of social functions suggested by the organismic analogy has not obviously been made obsolete by the triumph of the Darwinian method. Instead, reconsidering the organismic analogy in light of contemporary philosophy of biology puts an account of social functions that has fallen from view (and from grace) in the contemporary discussion back in focus: the organizational account.

I will proceed as follows: first, I will outline Hegel's theory of organisms, with

²To avoid anachronism when approaching the use of the organismic analogy in 19th Century social theory, it is, thus, important to bear in mind how the term 'organism' was used at around this time. Crucially, the Latin term 'organismus' was, at the time of its introduction into the philosophical debate in the late 17th Century, not originally exclusively used to refer to *biological* organisms. Rather, it was used to designate a particular kind of *order*, which can be realized not just be plants or animals but also the entirety of the cosmos (see [Cheung 2010]). This generalized understanding of the term 'organism', in my view, also underpins the later use made of the organismic analogy.

a particular focus on his organizational understanding of functions. Second, I will spell out some of the metaphysical implications of this theory for both organisms as a whole and their parts. Third, I will reconstruct how he brings this understanding to bear on his account of the state. Fourth, I will discuss what I take to be the point of the organismic analogy. I will conclude my discussion by briefly considering its charm and trickiness for Hegel.

1 Organisms and their Functions

Hegel addresses the nature of organisms in two closely connected places within his system: First, in the context of his theory of “life” and, more specifically, of “the living individual” – that is, Hegel’s term for an organism –, presented both in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*; second, in the context of his philosophy of nature. However, these are not the only contexts within which the notion of an organism is relevant to Hegel. Although Hegel’s discussion of “the living individual” within the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic* in many respects echoes his theory of “the animal organism” within his philosophy of nature, he takes the “living individual” to realize a more general structure which he calls “logical life” ([SL] 12.180). Hegel takes “logical life” to be a structure of which some biological systems are but one realization and social systems another (see [PR] §§ 270-273, 279, 309). Thus, for Hegel, “natural life” as well as “life of spirit as spirit” ([SL] 12.181) are realizations of the same structure. As such, both kinds of systems share the general features he determines in his discussion of “logical life” (among which only those features characterizing the “living individual” will be relevant for my purposes).

According to Hegel, a “living individual” is distinguished from other kinds of systems by realizing a structure he calls ‘self-determination.’ As I will show in this section, self-determination is a structure characterized by two features. First, *organizational differentiation*, that is, the generation and maintenance of distinct structures which each contribute in a distinct way to the realization of a particular end – the organs or, as Hegel calls them, “members” [*Glieder*] of an organism – brought about by the organism as a whole; second, *organizational closure*, that is, the mutual constraint and, thereby, maintenance of an organism’s organs, such that it constrains and thereby maintains itself (see [Mossio, Saborido and Moreno 2009]).³ Thus, for an organism to deter-

³In contemporary theoretical biology, the notion of closure has, most prominently, been discussed by [Varela 1979] and since further refined by [Rosen 1991]. For recent philosophical discussions of organizational closure, see, for instance, [Moreno and Mossio 2015]; [Montévil and Mossio 2015]. As these authors point out, this notion traces back to Kant’s

mine itself is for it to maintain itself through generating distinct structures that mutually constrain and thereby maintain each other.

On Hegel’s account, organizational differentiation and closure jointly give rise to means-end relations between the organism as a whole and its organs, which we can identify with their respective *functions*. Thus, these two notions also underpin Hegel’s account of functions in general and social functions in particular. Although he does not explicitly develop a theory of functions, we can reconstruct such a theory based on his account of the kind of systems the parts of which can bear functions: self-maintaining, self-organizing systems.⁴ Therefore, to understand how Hegel conceives of functions, we must have a closer look at how the notions of organization and self-maintenance figure in his account of the structure of organisms. As I will show, Hegel’s theory of organisms implies that functions are teleological, explanatory, and normative, and accounts for each of these features in terms of the self-determination of the organisms.

To account for the nature of “the living individual” ([SL] 12.182-186; [E1] § 218), Hegel draws on Kant’s analysis of the concept of a “natural end” [*Naturzweck*] and on his understanding of the “intrinsic purposiveness” characteristic of such objects (see [KU] § 63-66). It is therefore instructive to begin by having a brief look into Kant’s account of these notions. In his *Critique of Judgment* ([KU]), Kant introduces the term ‘natural end’ to describe things that meet the conditions for a teleological judgment of the form ‘M serves E’ to be true about them (see [Kreines 2005], 275). He provisionally glosses this term by stating that “a thing exists as a natural end *if it is* (though in a double sense) both cause and effect of itself” (see [KU] § 64). Roughly, on Kant’s account, for a system to constitute a “natural end,” it must meet two conditions, which both concern the nature of the means-end relationship between the parts and the whole of a system claimed in teleological judgment (see [Kreines 2015], 101 ff.). First, the beneficial effects of the parts for the whole explain the existence, structure, and arrangement of the former (see [KU] § 63). Second, the existence, structure, and arrangement of each part is explained by all the other parts and thus by the system as a whole (see [KU] § 65). A “product of nature” ([KU] § 64 – cf. § 65) that meets both of these conditions would be “an *organized* and *self-organized being*” ([KU] § 65), or an “*an organized natural product [...] in which every part is reciprocally both end and means*” ([KU] § 66). On Kant’s account, these mutual instrumental relations among the parts of a “product of nature” amount to the “intrinsic purposiveness” characteristic of “natural ends.”

account of the ‘inner purposiveness’ characteristic of ‘natural ends’.

⁴Hegel only rarely uses the term ‘function’ explicitly – see [E1] §§ 156, add., 249 add., [E2] §§ 343, 245, remark, 346, add. 1, 354, add., 258 add., 368, remark, 371, add.

Hegel adopts these concepts from Kant to account for the characteristic structure of organisms (see [SL] 12.182-186). As he puts it explicitly, “the *purposiveness* of the living being is to be grasped as *inner*” ([SL] 12.184). Likewise, he draws on Kant’s concept of a *Naturzweck* when he characterizes living beings as objects in which “all members are reciprocally momentary *means* as much as momentary purposes” ([E1] § 216). For Hegel, as much as for Kant, such objects are distinguished from mere aggregates by the fact that the occurrence, nature, and arrangement – in a single word: the “*organization*” (see [E2] § 352 add. – cf. [E1] § 198 add.) – of their parts is explained in terms of their respective beneficial effects for one another and thus for the organism as a whole.

Taking his cue from Kant, Hegel first spells out his take on the “inner purposiveness” of an organism in terms of a particular kind of instrumental relation between the organism as a whole and its organs: an *explanatory* relation. As he puts it, the organism is “the *means and instrument* of purpose, fully purposive,” but he adds that “precisely for this reason this means, and instrument is itself the accomplished purpose in which the subjective purpose thus immediately closes in upon itself [*unmittelbar mit sich selbst zusammengeschlossen ist*]” ([SL] 12.184).

In light of Kant’s concept of the *Naturzweck* discussed above, I tentatively interpret Hegel’s redescription of the inner purposiveness of organisms as follows. An organism is “fully purposive” in the sense that each of its organs, in virtue of their respective structure and their arrangement, brings about distinct beneficial effects for the organism as a whole, such that they jointly serve as a “*means and instrument*” for the purpose in question. When Hegel furthermore characterizes the arrangement of such organs “the accomplished purpose,” he suggests that it is the result or “product” ([SL] 12.165) of a goal-oriented “activity” [*Thätigkeit*] ([E1] § 218) or process brought about by the organism as a whole. Lastly, the fact that Hegel speaks of *the* (singular) purpose of an organism suggests that it is the same purpose which, on the one hand, each organ serves, and, on the other, the “product” of which they are insofar as they compose an organized whole.⁵ This means that, as its organs, the parts of an organism do not merely serve the purpose in question; instead, this purpose explains their organizational differentiation insofar as it is brought about by an “activity” ([E1] § 218) that is directed towards the realization of that very purpose. To anticipate my discus-

⁵On the teleological view Hegel assumes in his theory of organisms, processes are generally characterized and individuated by the *end* towards which they are directed. Thus, a collection of activities constitute an individual process just in case they are arranged such that they jointly bring about a particular end. This end, in turn, accounts for the *causal cohesion* of the activities in question, such that they constitute an individual in question. To put in a slogan, processes are, on this account, individuated by what they do, rather than by, say, where they are (for a similar view, see [Dupré and Nicholson 2018] – for the ‘causal cohesion’ account of process individuation underlying this view, see, for instance, [Collier 2004]).

sion below, the end in question is the *self-maintenance* of the organism as an individual whole of a particular kind. Therefore, what makes a composite system an organism is that its parts are, jointly, not only “means and instrument” in that they, by virtue of their organization, serve the end of its self-maintenance, but also “the accomplished purpose” in that their organization is directed towards the realization of that very end. Thus, Hegel takes the organization of “living individual” to be a particular kind of process that is brought about by the organism as a whole and directed at its self-maintenance.

At various places, Hegel refers to this process as “the self-determination of the living being” ([SL] 12.185 f., 12.182, 12.183, 12.187, [E2] § 355 add.). My central interpretative claim in this section will be that such a process constitutes self-determination by virtue of organizational differentiation and closure. To argue for this claim, I will first show how these notions each figure in his theory of organisms.

In his *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel describes the organizational differentiation of a system as “the process of the living within itself, in which it divides itself in itself and makes its corporal condition [*Leiblichkeit*] its object, its *inorganic* nature” ([E1] § 218). By the “*inorganic* nature” of an organism, he means the chemical and mechanical processes through which the distinct structures it generates and maintains – as he puts it, “this inorganic side, as the relatively external, enters into the difference and opposition of its moments” ([E1] § 218) – contribute to its self-maintenance. In his discussion of the animal organism, Hegel calls the process generating and maintaining such structures “structuring” [*Gestaltung*] or “articulation” [*Gliederung*]:

Structuring [*Gestaltung*], as alive, is essentially process, and it is, as such, *abstract process*, the *structural process* [*Gestaltungsproceß*] *within structure itself* in which the organism converts its own members into a non-organic nature, into *means* lives on itself and produces its own self, i.e. this same totality of articulated members [*Gegliedrung*], so that each member is reciprocally end and means, maintains itself through the other members and in opposition to them. ([E2] § 356 – translation altered)

As Hegel makes clear here, the organization of the parts of an organism into an individual whole of organs, which he here also calls a “totality of articulated members,” is a process of ‘articulation’ [*Gliederung*]. As he puts it in the *Science of Logic*, it is a process of “shaping itself inwardly” ([SL] 12.187), a process that is brought about by the organism itself. Here, Hegel moreover suggests that this process involves organizational closure. He claims that, within this

process, the “moments” or organs of an organism “reciprocally surrender themselves, the one assimilating the other to itself, and preserve themselves in the process of producing themselves” ([E1] § 218). This claim suggests that, in this process, each of the organs of an organism is subjected to constraints exerted by the others and that the characteristic activity of each organ is maintained through these mutual constraints. In this sense, the organs of a living being are subservient to each other and, thereby, to the living being as a whole. It is also the sense in which, as Hegel puts it in a deliberately Kantian turn of phrase, “all members are reciprocally momentary *means* as much as momentary purposes” ([E1] § 216). Thus, he characterizes the relations among the organs of a living being as relations of mutual dependence among distinct structures that mutually constrain and thereby maintain their activity. In his discussion of the “animal organism,” he states this characterization even more explicitly:

Each abstract system permeates, and is connected with, them all, each displays the entire structure [. . .]; and this gives interconnection to the organism, for each system is dominated by the others with which it is interlaced and at the same time maintains within itself the total connection. ([E2] § 355 add.)

Hegel describes both the organizational differentiation and closure among a living being’s organs as a process of “systems uniting to produce a general, concrete interpenetration of one another so that each part (Gebilde) of the structure contains these systems linked together in it” ([E2] § 355). He illustrates this idea by way of the example of the cardiovascular system’s capacity to circulate blood and thereby facilitate the transport of nutrients to and waste away from cells. For, on his account, the cardiovascular system only has this capacity because of its *interaction* with the other organ systems, for instance, because it is controlled by the (vegetative) nervous system. He generalizes this idea when he claims that “the other systems actually exist in each: blood and nerves are everywhere present, and everywhere, too, here is a glandular, lymphatic substance, that which constitutes reproduction.” ([E2] § 354 add. – cf. Stern 1990, 101–102)

In describing the process through which a living being brings about the organizational differentiation and closure of its organs as one in which “the subjective purpose [. . .] immediately closes in upon itself”, Hegel introduces a second condition for the “inner purposiveness” of organisms, which accounts for how the organization of its parts to a whole of organs or “members” is explained in terms of their beneficial effects for the organism as a whole. This characterization suggests that the goal-directed process, which explains this

organization must, in some way, relate to *itself*. I take Hegel here to point to a particular kind of circular causal regime, in which the effects brought about by the organization of a system contribute to the maintenance of that very system itself, understood as an individual whole of a particular kind. In other words, he here points to the *self-maintenance* of an organism, the end state of equilibrium resulting from the characteristic activity of its organs. Along these lines, he states in the *Science of Logic* that in the “*process* of the living individuality” ([SL] 12.185) of an organism – its self-maintenance – through the constraint and thus maintenance of its organs’ activity –, “the product, being its essence, is itself the producing factor” ([SL] 12.185). In the corresponding section of his *Encyclopedia Logic*, he states in the same spirit that the “activity of the members [...] is only one activity of the subject, the activity into which its productions go back, so that through that activity only the subject is produced, i.e. it merely reproduces itself” ([E1] § 218). These statements suggest that, through organizational differentiation and closure, an organism continually produces or maintains *itself*. This is, in my view, what Hegel has mind when he speaks of “the self-determination of the living being.”

What crucially distinguishes self-determination from other kinds of circular causal regime is that this process is, as Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic*, a “purpose unto itself [*Selbstzweck*]” ([SL] 12.187, 12.176 f.). He thus distinguishes this causal regime in teleological terms. In his discussion of the “animal organism,” he echoes this characterization when he claims that “[a]s its own product, as self-end [*Selbstzweck*], animal life is End and Means at the same time” ([E2] § 352 add.). Thus, for a self-maintaining system to be self-determining, it must stand in an *instrumental* relation to itself (see [McLaughlin 2000], 211): Its activity must contribute to generating and maintaining the very conditions of its own ongoing existence. Hegel spells out this relation as follows:

End is an ideal determination which is already existent beforehand; so that, in the process of realization which must fit in with what exists determinately beforehand, nothing new is developed. The realization is equally a return-into-self. The accomplished End has the same content as that which is already present in the agent; the living creature, therefore, with all its activities does not add anything to it. As the organization [of life] is its own End, so too it is its own Means, it is nothing merely there. ([E2] § 352 add.)

Hegel here identifies the “End” of the organism’s activity with “an ideal determination which is already existent beforehand,” that is, with the state that is maintained through constraining and thereby maintaining the activity of each of its organs. Given that the organism thus contributes to maintaining

the conditions of its very own existence, the “realization” of this end is “equally a return-into-self,” in which “[t]he accomplished End has the same content as that which is already present in the agent.” In this sense, an organism is, for Hegel, “Ends and Means at the same time.” The basis for Hegel’s description of this kind of circular causal regime in teleological terms is its organizational closure, that is, the mutual constraint the distinct structures involved exert over each other, such that they mutually maintain their activity. Hegel takes this regime of *mutual* constraint among its organs to amount to the *self*-constraint of the organism as a whole.⁶ In other words, he takes the activity through which the organism as a whole constrains and thereby maintains the activity of its organs to be *directed* at constraining and thus maintaining itself. Self-determination is, therefore the goal-directed process through which an organism constrains and thereby maintains the activity of its organs, such that it constrains and thereby maintains itself as an individual whole of a particular kind. Hegel calls self-determination, thus understood, “the initiating self-moving *principle*” ([SL] 12.183) of life.

In light of this interpretation of how Hegel accounts for the self-determination of an organism, I can now explicate the understanding of functions implicit in this account. Broadly, functions are, on Hegel’s account, means-end relationships between the characteristic activity of each organ and the self-maintenance of the organism as a whole which obtain because of the self-determination of the organism (see [DeVries 1991] 1991). What, thus, distinguishes functions from any other effect for the organism as a whole (including beneficial ones) is that they are distinct contributions to its self-maintenance, which are themselves maintained through organizational closure. Thus, a part M of a living being has a function just in case it is subject to organizational closure in an organizationally differentiated self-maintaining system S . This definition implies that M meets the following three each necessary and jointly sufficient conditions:⁷

- C₁:** M contributes to the maintenance of the organization O of S ;
- C₂:** M is generated and maintained under some constraints exerted by O ;
- C₃:** S is organizationally differentiated.

⁶I have adopted this account of biological teleology in terms of self-determination from [Mossio and Bich 2017]. Crucially for my purposes, they take self-determination to ground teleology insofar as it involves the self-constraint of self-maintaining system (see [Mossio and Bich 2017], [Rosen 1991]).

⁷I have adopted both the definition of functions, as well as the statement of the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a part of system to bear a function from [Mossio, Saborido and Moreno 2009], 828.

This organizational view has three crucial implications concerning the nature of functions. *First*, it implies an objective teleology, meaning that each organ possesses its function independently of whether we ascribe it or not. What grounds this objective teleology is the self-determination of the organism, that is, the activity through which the organism as a whole constrains and thereby maintains the activity of its organs that is *directed* at constraining and thereby maintaining itself. *Second*, like many contemporary theorists of functions in biology and sociology, Hegel takes functions to be *explanatory* in that they explain why the function bearer’s characteristic activity is maintained (see [Wright 1973], 155–157). *Third*, Hegel’s view of functions also involves a *normative* dimension in the sense that he takes its bearer’s distinct contribution to the self-maintenance of the organism as a whole to be an effect it ought to produce. According to this view, the normativity of any given function just is what is required for a self-maintaining system to persist. Insofar an organism depends on its own activity – the constraint and thereby maintenance of its organs’ activity, such that they each contribute to its self-maintenance – for its persistence, each of its organs is, given this “self-end” of the activity of the organism as a whole, required to act such that it contributes to its realization. Hegel’s account of organisms and the functions of their organs in terms of self-determination has metaphysical implications for the nature of both organisms as a whole and their organs. Discussing these implications in any detail is beyond the scope of this paper – but let me at least gesture at three such implications that will become relevant when I discuss Hegel’s account of the structure of the state below.⁸

First, that organisms are, by their very nature, not things but, rather processes or, more specifically, hierarchies of mutually constraining and thereby maintaining processes.⁹ On Hegel’s account, part of what it is for a composite system to be an organism, as opposed to a mere aggregate, is for it to continually constrain and thereby maintain the activity of its organs and, thus, itself as an individual of a particular kind. Therefore, he partially identifies the organism with the very process of, through constraint, continually maintaining the activity of its organs that is directed at its self-maintenance. More precisely, he identifies this process of self-determination, with the characteristic “form” or, to use a contemporary term, the *structure* of an organism (see [E2] § 350 add.). Hegel’s talk of “form,” in my view, suggests that he here relies on some version of *hylomorphism*, that is, the view that the natures of entities are composites of *matter* and *form*. On this view, to account for the nature of any given object – that is, to explain why and how it possesses its characteristic features –, one

⁸I develop and defend this interpretation of Hegel’s metaphysics of organisms in [James ms.].

⁹For a similar view, see, for instance, [Dupré and Nicholson 2018].

must appeal to both their material and formal components (see [Austin 2018], 311 – cf. [Oderberg 2011]).

With regard to organisms, the process of self-determination is a part of the nature of an organism that is distinct from its material components insofar as this process persists through replacing the matter out of which an organism is, at any given time, made up. Instead, this part consists of the entire hierarchy of mutually constraining and thereby maintaining processes these material components are subjected to, and that is directed at maintaining the organism as a whole. The mutual dependence among the organs of a living being, in turn, gives rise to instrumental relations of each of them to the others and of the entire organism to itself. It is, therefore, this teleological structure – the structure of self-determination – that makes an organism the kind of entity that it is.

Second, that what makes a part of an organism its organ is that it is *essentially dependent* on it as a whole. For Hegel identifies the organs of a living being with those mutually constraining and thereby maintaining processes that compose the organism as a whole. However, other than the hierarchy of processes they compose, they do not maintain themselves. Instead, they depend for their persistence on the constraint and maintenance by the organism of which they are each part, such that they contribute to its self-maintenance. Thus, they could not persist as the processes they are if they did not possess this function (see [Stern 1990], 104–106, [DeVries 1991], 58). As such, organs have, to adopt an apt phrase from David Oderberg, “no life of their own” but only insofar as they have a particular function for – or are *subservient* to – the organism of which they are a part (see [Oderberg 2018], 363). On Hegel’s account, this function thus makes each organ the kind of entity it is. Indeed, this is part of what it is for a part of an organism to be its *organ*. As such, he identifies the organs of a living being with the “moments” – or the subservient parts – of its “form,” the nature of which is each determined by their respective functions. In turn, it is the “form” or structure of self-determination that explains why an organism has its characteristic morphological features.

Given that the nature of each of the processes that constitute an organism is determined by its function, we can thus account for its structure – the ‘formal’ component of its nature – in terms of instrumental relations in which its organs stand to each other and the organism as a whole stands to itself. Insofar as Hegel takes the political state to be characterized by self-determination as well, he will bring this processual and teleological understanding of structure to bear on the nature of the political state. Indeed, thus conceptualizing the structure of the political state is part of the point of the use he makes of the organismic analogy.

2 The Organism of the State

As I suggested above, Hegel believes that there are both biological and social ('spiritual') systems which are likewise characterized by self-determination. As such, they will also likewise display organizational differentiation and closure. To the extent that any given social system displays these processes, they will likewise jointly give rise to the instrumental relations between the system in question and some of its parts I identified with the respective *functions* of these parts. Therefore, Hegel's account of the nature of organisms in terms of self-determination will also underpin his view of *social* functions. His theory of social functions thus rests on an analogy between biological and social systems of a particular kind, namely self-determining systems. For Hegel, there is one social system in particular that manifests self-determination as outlined in this section: the *state*. As such, the state is, for Hegel, the paradigmatic bearer of social functions. Thus, Hegel commits himself to an organizational view of social functions. Crucially for my purposes in this paper, Hegel brings the metaphysical implications of this view to bear on how he accounts for the structure of the state as a particular process of self-determination, the parts of which, in turn, are characterized in terms of different functions. Hegel thus suggests two hypotheses about the nature of the state: first, that the state, too, *just is* a particular kind of process of self-maintenance through self-constraint; second, that the organs of the state are also essentially dependent on it. Hegel will bring both metaphysical conclusions to bear on how he conceptualizes the characteristic structure of the state. Thus, he accounts for the social structure of the state in terms of his organizational view of functions. To reconstruct this view, we must understand what it means to regard the state as a self-determining system.

In both the *Philosophy of Right* and the corresponding passages of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel emphasizes, in line with his general characterization of the "living individual," that "the individual state" is (at least under certain conditions) "a self-relating organism" ([PR] § 259, §§ 267, 269 f.), "the universal which has the universal as such as for its purpose," "organized in itself" (Griesheim: 635 – my translation), and, indeed "a living unity" ([PR] § 272, remark), "a living spirit pure and simple" ([E3] § 359) or, simply, "alive" (Griesheim: 638 – my translation). As such, the state is, much like the "animal organism," distinguished from a mere aggregate insofar as its identity depends on its self-determination: Its activity of continually constraining and thereby maintaining the activity of its organs such that it constrains and thus maintains itself (see [Wolff 1985]; [Sedgwick 2001]).

The notion of the "*organism* of the state" ([PR] § 267) has its systematic

place in Hegel’s discussion of the “properly *political* state and its *constitution*” ([PR] § 267), that is, in the section on the *constitution* or “*right within the state*” ([PR] §§ 267-269). I will, therefore, focus my discussion on this section. Here, Hegel discusses the circular causal regime of social processes through which the “political state” constitutes a social organism, that is, a social system that is characterized by organizational differentiation and closure among its parts. This regime comprises the aptly labeled *constitutional organs* of a constitutional monarchy: “the Legislative Power” ([PR] §§ 298-320), “the Executive Power” ([PR] §§ 287-297), and “the Crown” ([PR] §§ 275-286) As I will show in what follows, the constitution of the political state involves both the organizational differentiation and closure among the constitutional organs, such that they each make a distinct contribution to the self-maintenance of the political state. As such, the political state is, on Hegel’s account thereof, a self-determining system in the sense discussed above. Therefore, we can identify the distinct contributions its constitutional organs make to the self-maintenance of the political state of which they are part (by virtue of the organizational differentiation and closure among them) with their respective social functions.

In his discussion of the “political state,” Hegel explicitly identifies its constitution with the “organism of the state” ([PR] § 267 – cf. § 269, 270, add.), and its powers with its organs. In doing so, he suggests that the “political constitution” ([PR] § 269) *just is* the particular way in which any given state is *organized*. In the same vein, he introduces the notion of the “constitution” in section 539 of the *Encyclopedia* as the “overall *articulation* of state-power [*Staatsmacht*].” ([E3] § 359 - emphasis mine). In thus identifying the constitution of the state with its organization, he exploits an ambiguity in the German term for ‘constitution’: ‘*Verfassung*.’ For, while this term typically stands for the political constitution of a state (as it may be codified in constitutional law), it can – particularly in its adjectival form “(auf eine bestimmte Weise) verfasst sein” – also stand for the particular way something is *structured*. Thus, in adopting the notion of an organism to account for the nature of the state, Hegel draws on the organismic analogy to conceptualize its peculiar structure, a *structure* he calls *self-determination*. I, therefore, take conceptualizing the structure of the state to be the point of the organismic analogy in his theory of the state. He presents the outlines of this analogy in sections 269 to 271 of the *Philosophy of Right*, in which he discusses the “organism of the state” as well as its “political constitution.” Thus, in section 269, he states:

This organism [of the state] is the development of the Idea to its differences and their objective actuality. Hence these different aspects are the *various powers* of the state with their functions

and spheres of action [*Geschäfte und Wirksamkeiten*], by means of which the universal continually engenders itself [...]. Throughout this process, the universal maintains its identity since it is itself the presupposition of its own production. This organism is the *political constitution*. ([PR] § 269)

As Hegel first makes clear here, he understands the political constitution of a given state not as a set of legal norms codified in constitutional law, but rather as a particular kind of goal-directed process, which he here also calls “development” [*Entwicklung*] (see [PR] §§ 270 add., 271). But what kind of process is the “development of the Idea to its differences and their objective actuality” to which these constitutional norms are subjected and with which Hegel here identifies the “political constitution”?¹⁰ In the passage cited above, Hegel drops two hints concerning the nature of this “development”: whereas the first concerns the organizational differentiation and closure among the constitutional organs of the political state, the latter concerns the self-maintenance of the political state as a whole. Jointly, these features amount to the self-determination of the political state.

We can find the first hint in his claim that it results in “[the Idea’s] differences and their objective actuality,” which he, in turn, identifies with “the *various powers* of the state with their functions and spheres of action.” In a later section, he reiterates this description when he characterizes the political constitution as “the organization of the state and the self-related process of its organic life, a process whereby it differentiates its moments within itself and develops them to self-subsistence” ([PR] § 271). Both descriptions echo Hegel’s account of what I have above called ‘organizational differentiation’: the process through which an organism generates and maintains distinct structures which each contribute in a distinct way to the self-maintenance of the system of which these structures are each part. In case of the state, the structures generated and maintained by its political constitution are “the *various powers* of the state” or, in other words, the *constitutional organs*.

As Hegel moreover makes explicit in his later discussion of the “*division of powers within the state*” ([PR] § 272), this process results not only in organizational differentiation but, indeed, in the organizational closure among the constitutional organs that constitute the political state. He brings out this point by way of a contrast with what he takes to be a fundamental misconception of the

¹⁰Although I cannot defend this interpretation here, I think that the “idea” Hegel here speaks of is tantamount to “idea of freedom” ([PR] § 142), which he identifies with “ethical life” as a whole. As he puts it in the introduction to his discussion of the state in the broad sense of the term (encompassing the more narrowly “political” state, as well as the family and civil society, this “ethical idea” [*sittliche Idee*] has its “actuality” [*Wirklichkeit*] ([PR] § 257) in the state insofar as its organization is directed at affording its citizens freedom.

division of powers on the part of what he calls “the abstract understanding.” He characterizes this misconception in terms of three, in his view, mistaken assumptions (with the latter two being implications of the first). The first assumption concerns the nature of the constitutional organs themselves, the second the nature of their relation to each other, and the third the attitudes of the individual agents involved in the activity of the constitutional organs towards each other. For my purposes, only the first two of these assumptions are relevant. The first assumption amounts to “the false doctrine of the *absolute self-subsistence* of each of the powers against the others” ([PR] § 272). In the corresponding section of the *Encyclopedia*, he states this conception of the division of powers in terms of “their independence of each other in existence” ([E3] § 541, remark). This statement suggests that, according to this doctrine, the constitutional organs exist and act independently of each other. Along the same lines, Hegel, in the addition to section 272 of the *Philosophy of Right*, speaks of “the monstrous error of so interpreting their [the powers of the state] distinction as to suppose that each power should subsist independently [*für sich*] in abstraction from the others.” ([PR] § 272 add.). Thus, on this view on the division of powers, the political state is merely an aggregate of constitutional bodies that exercise their respectively characteristic activities independently of each other.

Moreover, this view implies the second assumption, which concerns the nature of the constitutional organs’ relation to each other. As Hegel puts it, the “abstract understanding” of the division of powers “interprets their relation to each other as negative, as a mutual *restriction*” ([PR] § 272, remark). This interpretation amounts to the view that the causal interaction among independently existing constitutional bodies is such that they mutually inhibit the manifestation of their respective powers. According to Hegel’s portrayal of this conception, “their function is to oppose one another” ([PR] § 272, remark). In other words, the causal interaction among the constitutional powers is – as he puts it metaphorically, echoing the characterization thereof as ‘checks and balances’ – a “strife” ([PR] § 272, remark), in which they act as “counterpoise [*Gegengewichte*]” and “dikes [*Dämme*]” ([PR] § 272, remark) for each other. As such, their interaction is an aggregative, mechanical process (cf. [SL].12 140–142) among antagonistic powers – in Hegel’s expression: “the mechanism of a balance of powers external to each other” ([E3] § 544) which, at best, can merely “bring about a general equilibrium, but not a living unity” ([E3] § 544).

By contrast, part of why the constitutional bodies constitute “a living unity” on Hegel’s account is that they are mutually dependent. As he puts it, echoing his account of the mutual dependence among the organs of a living being, “each of these powers is in itself the totality, because each contains the other moments and has them effective in itself” ([PR] § 272). In light of his general theory

of organisms, I take this statement to imply that the constitutional organs constrain and thereby maintain, rather than inhibit each other's activity. This causal regime of mutual constraint amounts to the organizational closure among the constitutional organs. In light of Hegel's general claim that such a regime of *mutual* constraint among its organs is tantamount to the *self*-constraint of the organism as a whole, we can, moreover, take the individual whole they constitute – the political state – to constrain *itself*. Thus, the process of “development” that maintains the characteristic activity of the constitutional organs is brought about by the political state as a whole.

This claim leads directly to Hegel's second hint concerning the nature of the process of “development” with which he identifies the political constitution. For his characterization of the organizational differentiation of the constitutional bodies as a process “by means of which the universal continually engenders itself” suggests that it is directed at constraining and thereby maintaining the political state as a whole. In light of my interpretation of Hegel's theory of organisms, I take him to here describe the process through which the political state maintains itself through the characteristic activity of its organs or “the *various powers* of the state.” He states this understanding of the political constitution more explicitly in the Griesheim lecture transcript when he claims that “[t]he constitution is [...] alive, active in this manner [*auf diese Weise thätig*]” insofar as it must “always be produced [*hervorgebracht*]” (Griesheim: 697) as the particular kind of process it is. This claim is again echoed in the addition to section 270 of the Philosophy of Right, where he reiterates that the “political constitution [...] is produced perpetually by the state, while it is through it that the state maintains itself” ([PR] 270, add.). Thus, through the organizational differentiation and closure of its constitutional organs, the political state contributes to generating and maintaining the very conditions of its own ongoing existence.

For this reason, Hegel also describes the political constitution as “the self-related process of its [the state's] organic life” ([PR] § 271.). As I have shown in the previous section, Hegel generally characterizes this kind of self-relation in teleological terms: as he puts it, it is a “purpose unto itself” ([SL] 12.187) or a “self-end” ([E3] § 252 add.), insofar as it is brought about through organizational differentiation and closure among its organs. Indeed, this general teleological characterization is echoed in Hegel's discussion of the state when he claims that its self-maintenance is “an absolute unmoved end in itself” ([PR] § 258 – I will return to this claim below). In line with his general view of organisms, Hegel regards this “self-related process” as the self-*determination* of the political state. Indeed, he explicitly characterizes this process in precisely these terms when claims that “[i]t is only the inner self-determination of the concept [...]”

that is the absolute source of the division of powers” ([PR] § 272 – cf. §§ 275, 278, 279).

Hegel thus identifies the “organism of the state” ([PR] § 267) or its political constitution with a process of organizational differentiation and closure among its constitutional organs such that each makes a distinct contribution to the self-maintenance of the state of which they are part. In a single expression: It is the self-determination of the political state. In his lecture transcriptions on the Philosophy of Right, Hegel also calls the process through which the political state determines itself and which he identifies as the “main activity within the state [*die Hauptthätigkeit im Staate*],” to which each of its constitutional organs makes a distinct contribution, “governing [*Regieren*]” (Griesheim: 698 f.). Thus, “governing” is tantamount to what we might call ‘political life’ or ‘the life of the state.’

In the addition to section 274 of the Philosophy of Right, Hegel infers from the processual understanding of the state’s “political constitution” that “[a] constitution is not just something manufactured” and that “[n]o constitution [. . .] is just the creation of its subjects” ([PR] § 274 add.). Instead, “it is the work of centuries, it is the Idea, the consciousness of rationality so far as that consciousness is developed in a particular people” ([PR] § 274 add.). Along the same lines, he claims in the corresponding section of the Encyclopaedia that “[i]t is history and the indwelling spirit [. . .] by which constitutions have been and are made” ([E3] § 540). To understand these claims, it is, in my view, helpful to distinguish two senses in which Hegel uses the term “constitution” in these passages. On the one hand, it stands for the body of constitutional norms that are in effect in any given state at any given time. On the other, it stands for the very organization or structure of the political state of which these very norms and habits are part. Thus, although the latter, processual understanding of the political constitution does not preclude that, at any given time, any given body of constitutional norms will also, in some sense, be part of the political state, it does imply that its “political constitution” is distinct from it (see [Lagerspetz 2004], 229 f.).

In line with Hegel’s general view of organisms, I suggest we relate these two understandings of the constitution by identifying the former with (part of) the *matter* that is subject to the very process that Hegel identifies with the “political constitution” of the state, and the latter process itself with its corresponding *form*. This reading is, in my view, supported by Hegel’s claim that the process of “governing” underlying the division of powers “is spirit knowing and willing itself after passing through the forming process of *education* [*der durch die Form der Bildung hindurchgegangene, sich wissende und wollende Geist*]” ([PR] § 270). More clearly in the German original than in its English trans-

lation, he here identifies the process underlying the division of powers with a particular *processual form*, which we may, more aptly, call *formation* (that is my favored translation of ‘*Bildung*’). Therefore, I take Hegel to claim that it is the constitutional matter of a state which cannot be enacted by any candidate sovereign, be it the crown or the assembly of the estates (see [Lagerspetz 2004], 229 f.). Instead, it can only be enacted by the process of ‘governing’ itself, a process that is distinct from any particular governing act it may involve. Thus, it is this process that acts upon the body of constitutional norms in effect in any given state at any given time.

We can now turn to the centerpiece of this paper: Hegel’s organizational view of social functions. Although he rarely uses the term ‘function’ explicitly to describe the characteristic activities of social entities (see, for instance, [PR] § 302, remark), I take a particular account of social functions to be implicit in his discussion of the division of powers. For he understands the division of powers in terms of their organizational differentiation and closure such that their activity is constrained and thereby maintained by the political state as a whole. In other words, he understands the division of powers in terms of the self-determination of the political state. Given my reconstruction of his general theory of organisms, this understanding implies that each of the constitutional organs bears a particular function for the political state, and is distinguished from the others by that function. But what is it for a part of the political state to bear a function? Recall that, in the previous section, I identified functions, on Hegel’s general account, with means-end relationships between the characteristic activity of each organ and the self-maintenance of the organism as a whole which obtain because of the self-determination of the organism. According to the definition Hegel’s account amounts to, a part of a living being has a function just in case it is subject to organizational closure in an organizationally differentiated self-maintaining system. In the here relevant case, the organizationally differentiated self-maintaining system in question is the political state, and the relevant parts are its constitutional organs.

Given that the constitutional organs of the state meet the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions involved in my statement of the definition above, I take their functions to consist in the activities through which they each characteristically contribute to the self-maintenance of the political state as a whole. More specifically, given that the system to whose self-maintenance the constitutional organs each contribute – the political state – is social in nature, the same will be true of their functions. Thus, the constitutional organs each bear a particular *social* function: They are subject to organizational closure in an organizationally differentiated self-maintaining social system such that they contribute to the maintenance of its organization.

So far, I have merely assumed that each of the constitutional organs makes a distinct contribution to the social process of ‘governing,’ without further specifying what this process and the distinct contributions to it are. To do so, we must first determine what is distinctive of “political life” or the “life of the state,” as opposed to “logical life” more broadly. As noted above, Hegel calls the process through which the activity of the constitutional organs is constrained and thereby maintained, such that it makes a distinct contribution to the self-maintenance of the political state, a process of “education” or formation that results in “spirit knowing and willing itself” ([PR] § 270). Both where he discusses the division of powers and the nature of the state more broadly, he claims that it is the bearer of “the universal or substantial will” (PR § 258, remark – cf. §§ 257, 258) or, simply, “the will of the state” ([PR] § 261, add.). Crucially, he identifies “willing” as the characteristic activity of the state, which he takes to be “an absolute unmoved end in itself” ([PR] § 258). This identification suggests that willing is the very end at which the activity of its organs is directed. Hegel makes this suggestion explicit in his discussion of the political constitution when he claims that the “very substantiality of the state is spirit knowing and willing itself after passing through the forming process of *education*” ([PR] § 270). Thus, he takes the process of formation through which the activity of the constitutional organs is constrained and thereby maintained to be directed at maintaining a particular both epistemic and volitional relation of the political state to itself. It is this relation that Hegel takes to be an end in itself. Addressing the nature of this relation would require an inquiry of its own – suffice it to say here that I think Hegel here identifies “governing” (or the political constitution of the state) with a process of collective *will formation, determination, and implementation*. In other words, the self-determination of the political state just is the process of forming, determining and implementing its will. By virtue of the (both epistemic and volitional) self-relation resulting from this process, the constitutional organs constitute a *corporate agent*: the political state (see [Steinberger 1988], 215–220; [Lagerspetz 2004], 234–236). Indeed, In the corresponding section of the *Encyclopedia*, he explicitly ties the organizational differentiation and closure of the constitutional bodies as well as the self-maintenance of the political state as a whole to its agency:

As a living spirit pure and simple, the state can only be an organized whole, differentiated into particular agencies, which, proceeding from the one concept (though not known as concept) of the rational will, continually produce it as their result. The constitution is this overall articulation of state-power [*Staatsmacht*]. ([E3] § 539)

As Hegel claims here, it is the same “concept [. . .] of the rational will” from

which the various powers, in their characteristic activity, are “proceeding” on the one hand and which they thereby “continually produce as their result,” on the other. In this claim, he again echoes his characterization of a self-determining system in terms of the instrumental relation in which it stands to itself: It is a “purpose unto itself [*Selbstzweck*]” ([SL] 12.187) or a “self-end, [...] End and Means at the same time”, insofar as it is “its own product” ([E2] § 352 add.). Recall that Hegel identified the “End” of the organism’s activity with “an ideal determination which is already existent beforehand,” to wit, the state that is maintained through constraining and thereby maintaining the activity of each of its organs. Through this activity, the organism contributes to maintaining the conditions of its very own existence. In other words, because of this activity, the activity of its organs is *directed* at maintaining the organism of which they are each part. In case of the political state, the “ideal determination” in question is “the one concept [...] of the rational will”. Thus, when Hegel claims that the “particular agencies” that are each part of the political state are, in their characteristic activity, “proceeding” from this “concept,” I take him to mean that their activity is directed at maintaining the political state as an individual of a particular kind, namely, as the bearer of a “rational will.” As such, the “rational will” both effects the organizational differentiation and closure of the constitutional organs and is effected by it. This is, in my view, the distinctively *volitional* manner in which the political state characteristically determines itself. To use a vitalistic metaphor: it is the will of the state that *animates* its organization.¹¹

When Hegel, against the background of this account of the political state’s self-determination, identifies its “constitution” with “this overall articulation of state-power [*Staatsmacht*],” I take him to mean the particular kind of power that is the agency of the political state. The maintenance of this “state-power” or agency of the political state is the end to which its constitutional organs, through their respectively characteristic activity, each serve as a means. In the corresponding section of the *Encyclopedia*, he makes explicit that the political state’s self-determination involves its constitutional organs each contributing to the formation and implementation of its will *in a distinct way*:

[The constitution] involves the determinations of the way in which the rational will [...] firstly, comes to consciousness and understanding of itself and is found, and is, secondly, posited in actuality, through the agency of the government and its particular branches, and maintained in actuality, and also protected against the contin-

¹¹I develop this reading in greater detail in an unpublished paper co-authored with Thomas Meyer – see [James and Meyer ms.]

gent subjectivity both of these governmental departments and of individuals. ([E3] § 539)

In this passage, Hegel distinguishes three distinct contributions to the process of forming and implementing the will of the state, which we can roughly map onto three *stages* of this process. In the *first* stage of *formation*, the legislative power weighs the state's aims or policies (with a view to the interests of certain relevant social groups within its citizenry, which Hegel calls the estates [*Stände*]). In the *second* stage of *determination*, the crown determines these aims or policies, such that their subsequent implementation is “protected against the contingent subjectivity both of these governmental departments and of individuals.” In the *third* stage of *implementation*, the executive power applies the thereby determined aims and policies of the state to specific situations and cases. In the closing section of the introduction to his theory of the political constitution, Hegel identifies these three distinct contributions with what I have called the respective *function* of the constitutional organs. These are, first, the legislative branch's “power to determine and establish the universal”; second, the executive branch's “subsumption of individual cases and the spheres of particularity under the universal”; and, third, the *crown's* “subjectivity, as the will with the power of ultimate decision—the crown” ([PR] § 273).

I take the distinct contribution each of the constitutional organs makes to the process of forming and implementing the will of the state through its characteristic activity to constitute its respective function because this activity is constrained and thereby maintained by the political state of which they are each part. Indeed, it is the idea that each of the constitutional organs is the bearer of a function for the political state that underpins Hegel's understanding of the division of powers. The notion of organizational closure, that is, the mutual dependence among their parts, is particularly relevant to how he understands the division of powers. By drawing on this notion, he aims to model what he takes to be the non-aggregative, non-mechanistic causal interplay among the constitutional organs. It is this model of the political state that involves the functional explanation of its parts' respective activity, an explanation he spells out in terms of the distinct contribution they each make to the self-maintenance of the political state of which it is a part.

On Hegel's account, it is the respective *function* of each constitutional organ that determines their nature. Indeed, bearing particular functions for the political state is part of why they are its constitutional *organs*. In other words: Part of what it is for a part of the political state to be its organ is for it to be subservient to the self-maintenance of the political state, meaning that its activity is constrained and thereby maintained by the political state as a whole. As

such, the constitutional organs are, in accordance with Hegel's general theory of organisms, essentially dependent on the political state as a whole.

I think that Hegel has this essential dependence of the constitutional organs on the political state as a whole in mind in his claim cited above, according to which "each of these powers is in itself the *totality*" ([PR] § 272). For, in addition to the mutual dependence among the constitutional organs of the political state mentioned above, he explains ("because" [*dadurch, dass*]) their nature by appealing the fact that they "remain utterly within its ideality and constitute nothing but a *single individual whole*" ([PR] § 272). Roughly, I take this to mean that the constitutional organs are each the kind of entities that they are – doing what they characteristically do – *because* their activity is constrained and thereby maintained by the political state of which they are each part. Thus, they remain "within its [the political state's] ideality" insofar as they essentially depend on it. In this sense, Hegel also refers to them as mere "moments" ([PR] § 272) of the political state. This idea is reflected in Hegel's introduction of the powers of the political state. As he puts it, through the process in which the state "divides itself into the distinct spheres of its activity," they are "actually fixed determinations of the state, i.e. its powers" ([PR] § 270). Later, he restates this claim when he identifies the political constitution with "a process whereby it differentiates its moments within itself and develops them to self-subsistence" ([PR] § 271). As Hegel suggests in both statements, it is because of this constraint and maintenance brought about the political state, such that they each make a distinct contribution to its self-maintenance, that they constitute its constitutional organs.

Hegel thus makes use of the organismic analogy to account for the nature of the constitutional bodies themselves as well as their relations to each other. Crucial to this analogy is the notion of *self-determination*: a peculiar kind of circular causal regime, in which a system continually generates and maintains the conditions of its own ongoing existence through generating and maintaining distinct structures whose activity is mutually dependent, such that they each contribute to the maintenance of the system of which they are each part. Self-determination is, therefore, the general structure common to certain biological and social systems Hegel, through his use of the organismic analogy, aims to make salient. He draws on the notion of self-determination to conceptualize what he takes to be the characteristic structure of a particular kind of social system: the *constitution* of the political state. To understand the account of social structure to which the organismic analogy commits him, we must consider how the metaphysical implications of his general theory of organisms bear on this theory of the political state. As I will show in what follows, they amount to an *organizational* view of social structure as a particular kind of process the parts

of which are distinguished in terms of different functions. Thus conceptualizing the structure of the state is, in my view, the point of the use he makes of the organismic analogy.

3 So, What's the Point?

Recall my brief discussion of the metaphysical implications of Hegel's account of organisms and the functions of their organs in terms of self-determination for the nature of both organisms as a whole and their organs in the first section of this paper. As I claimed above, the self-determination of organisms bears on their very identity: to be an organism is to be a hierarchy of mutually constraining and thereby maintaining processes. The same is also true of the state. This implication is particularly relevant for my purposes because it directly concerns Hegel's account of the social structure of the political state. For it suggests that the structure of the state is a particular process the parts of which are distinguished in terms of different functions. To cite another analogy, its structure is more akin to that of a piece of music than a piece of architecture.

To see that Hegel, in accordance with this general theory of organisms, identifies the political state with a process, rather than a thing, recall the role that the notion of *form* plays in accounting for the nature of the political state. As I argued in the previous section, Hegel implicitly identifies the body of constitutional norms that are in effect as well as the corresponding shared habits that bring them into effect in any given state at any given time with (part of) the *matter* that is subject to the process of forming, determining and implementing the will of the state. Correspondingly, he identifies this process itself with its *form* (to more adequately reflect his characterization of this form in processual terms, I will speak of 'formation').

Above, I took Hegel's talk of 'form' to suggest that his general theory of organisms relies on some version of *hylomorphism*, that is, the view that to account for the nature of an object one must appeal to both their material and formal components. This view is also reflected in Hegel's account of the political state. For he takes the process of forming, determining and implementing the will of the state – or, as he puts it: “the forming process of *education*” ([PR] § 270) – to explain why and how the political state possesses its characteristic properties. These properties include, above all, having particular constitutional organs which each have the capacity for specific activities. Indeed, the view that we must account for the nature of the political state in terms of a particular processual form – its *constitution* – is reflected in his identification of “the organism of the state” with a specific “process,” namely, “the development of the

Idea to its differences and their objective actuality” ([PR] § 269).

Similarly, his understanding of organisms as hierarchies of mutually constraining and thereby maintaining processes is reflected in his identification of the political constitution with “the organization of the state and the self-related process of its organic life” ([PR] § 271). These passages suggest that, as an organism, the political state is, by its very nature, a social system that is structured in a particular manner, namely as a process of forming, determining, and implementing the will of the state. Thus, on Hegel’s account, these three stages, to which each of the constitutional organs makes a distinct contribution, are each part of the social structure or the organization of the political state. I take this account of social structure to be a crucial part of the point of the use Hegel makes of the organismic analogy. For it suggests an account of the structure of the state as a particular kind of process, the parts of which are distinguished in terms of different functions. As I showed in the previous section, these functions are the formation, determination and implementation of the will of the state. In a nutshell: through the organismic analogy, Hegel identifies the structure of the political state with its organization as a self-determining system.

Conclusion

Let’s return to the theme with which I opened this paper: the charm and trickiness of analogies. The charm of the organismic analogy for Hegel’s purposes stems from the use he can make of it to account for the nature and inner workings of a phenomenon which, at a time in which the social sciences were yet to emerge as an autonomous domain of inquiry, was not well understood: the state. What, in my view, motivates him to draw on the putatively better-understood domain of biology is that both the source and the target phenomena – living beings and states – appear to share certain characteristics, such as high degree of cooperation among some of their parts and maintenance of their identity through continuous change. The notion of self-determination is, in my view, meant to capture these shared features. It involves representing biological and social organisms more abstractly as systems that maintain themselves through maintaining the activity of their parts. The result of this abstraction – in which we include only those factors required to give rise to the phenomenon in question: self-determination – is the generic theoretical representation of “logical life” we encounter in the *Science of Logic*.¹² Thus representing both biological and social organisms as systems of the same kind in terms of the generic theoretical

¹²I am here drawing on ideas developed in [Nersessian 2008].

representation of “logical life” suggests certain hypotheses about the features they are thus taken to have in common. These hypotheses guide Hegel’s inquiry into whether certain features of the source phenomenon – namely, all those that give rise to self-determination – can also be encountered in the target phenomenon. As such, Hegel’s generic theoretical representation of “logical life” acts as a *model* of “political life,” which highlights certain features of the target phenomenon while disregarding from others. In case of the organismic analogy, these aspects include organizational differentiation and closure, as well as the self-maintenance they facilitate. The central task Hegel thereby sets himself in his account of the political state is to identify both organizational differentiation and closure in the political state. Accordingly, much of his discussion of the political constitution does, indeed, aim to fulfil this task by identifying various social processes that contribute to the self-maintenance of the political state.

Where does this leave us with the organismic analogy? The kind of circular causal regime Hegel models using this analogy does not involve the social selection mechanism Elster misses in social-functional explanation. Therefore, Hegel’s organizational view of social functions is not vulnerable to the central objections Elster raises against the evolutionary view. But what about Elster’s complaint that the organismic analogy gives rise to “pseudo-explanations” and “pseudo-problems”? Whether and to which degree this is true depends on whether social systems do, in fact, display organizational differentiation and closure – and this is, in my view, an open, empirical question. Indeed, Hegel himself seems to be very much aware of this constraint on the organismic analogy and, therefore, on functional explanation in the social domain since he acknowledges that there are token states which do not display the self-determination required for some of their parts to be function bearers and, thus, support functional explanation. This suggests that Hegel’s account of the political state in terms of self-determination and the organismic analogy it rests upon is not merely an abstraction but also an idealization: a model of the state that disregards such inconvenient features of token states to show how the causal interaction among their constitutional bodies can give rise to state agency.¹³ Thus, this “purpose unto itself” ([SL] 12.187) or “self-end, [. . .]” ([E2] § 352 add.) towards which the activity of the political state is directed can be actualized to a greater or lesser degree.

What lesson can we draw from my discussion of the use Hegel makes of the organismic analogy for our contemporary concerns? On the one hand, I think Elster’s dismissal of the organismic analogy rests on a misconception of what I take to be its point; on the other, I think his preference for the evolutionary

¹³I am here drawing on Nancy Cartwright’s distinction between ‘abstraction’ and ‘idealisation’ (see, for instance, [Cartwright 1989], 352–355).

analogy rest on an overly narrow understanding of functional explanation in general. For a look into the back story of social functionalism yields an organizational understanding of social functions that, particularly given the recent revival of the kind of biological theory that informed it, strikes me as an underappreciated contender in the contemporary debate. However, whether such an understanding, indeed, fares better than its alternatives, remains yet to be shown.

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Notes

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