

Nature in Spirit: A New Direction for Hegel-studies and Hegelian Philosophy

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There may be no theme that has a more consistent presence in Hegel's writings than that of overcoming rigid conceptual dichotomies inimical for grasping the dynamic unity of what there is. One of the central dichotomies Hegel struggled with in his own thinking was the one between "nature and spirit". As to posterity, mentioning this dichotomy for an English speaking audience in these terms for a long time either bordered on the incomprehensible or aroused associations of pompous and irresponsible metaphysical adventure. Associations of "spirit" with transcendent theological entities or something ethereal floating around overhead largely blocked even attempts to thematize the question of what for Hegel might have been involved in this dichotomy and its overcoming.

Much has changed in this regard during the last 20 years: new readings of Hegel by leading contemporary Hegelians writing in English (Robert Brandom, Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard among the most prominent ones) now understand the word "spirit" as standing for the realm of "the normative". Instead of being suspect of metaphysical recklessness the new "non-metaphysical" Hegelianism mostly only suffers from the plights of being in the minority in the contemporary philosophical landscape. Whereas contemporary philosophy in the English speaking world is largely dominated by the quest to "naturalize" all there is, the non-metaphysical Hegelians namely conceive of the normative realm as *sui generis*, as irreducible to and unexplainable from nature understood as the realm of causality. Whatever virtues being in the minority may involve or encourage, it often involves the temptation to overstate one's case in the desire not to surrender any further ground to the reigning majority.

Arguably, this difficulty has shown in recent Hegelianism in a number of interrelated ways. Not only has there been a strong tendency to reject

anything in Hegel that might smack of “metaphysics”, a tendency which some other Hegelians or Hegel-scholars such as Rolf-Peter Horstmann, Stephen Houlgate or Frederick Beiser have thought has led to a somewhat one-sided if not distorted picture of Hegel’s philosophical enterprise as a whole.¹ The zeal to defend the purity of the normative realm has also led to a widespread tendency to downplay the importance of nature for Hegel – in particular the natural or animal aspects in us. Both tendencies can be seen as part of a general “return to Kant” within non-metaphysical Hegelianism: the wish has been to show that Hegel’s philosophy is by and large compatible with Kant’s critical philosophy, but the price of fulfilling this wish has been an optics in which Hegel tends to be seen through Kantian dualisms. The main problem for addressing Hegel’s attempts to overcome the dualism of “nature and spirit” may thus today not so much be presented by non-Hegelians’ misled associations of Hegelian Geist with Gods and ghosts, but by a Kant-influenced mistrust among the most influential strands of Hegelianism itself of any concessions to the natural aspects of existence as threatening the purity of moral normativity especially, but also of “spirit” at large understood as the realm of the normative. In short, there is, or has recently been, a strong tendency among Hegelians towards a Kantian fixation rather than a Hegelian sublation of the divide between nature and spirit.

A related feature of the non-metaphysical, or Kantian, Hegelianism is a rather selective encounter with Hegel’s texts. Most notably this can be seen in a general lack of attention to two of arguably the most important parts of Hegel’s work for understanding the basic structures of the realm of spirit and its relation to nature: Philosophy of Subjective Spirit (the first part of Philosophy of Spirit) and Philosophy of Nature in Hegel’s mature system of the *Encyclopaedia*. The standard reference of the non-metaphysical Hegelianism, the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* – which Hegel himself did not even think of as part of the system proper but rather as an introduction to it – is not centrally engaged in “realphilosophical” questions such as that of overcoming a rigid conceptual dichotomy between nature and spirit. In contrast, this is an unsurpassable theme in reading the important sections at the end of the Philosophy of Nature on the animal and the closely related sections in Philosophy of Subjective Spirit on the “anthropological” determinations, determinations which humans, on the one hand, partly share with non-human animals, and that in them, on the other hand, are

1. For alternative readings, see for example, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, “What is Hegel’s Legacy and What Should We Do With It?”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 275–87, or Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

intermingled with spiritual or not-merely-animal functions. These themes are not discussed at any length either in the other central reference of non-metaphysical Hegelianism, namely the 1821 *Philosophy of Right* – an expanded version of the Philosophy of Objective Spirit following Subjective Spirit in the *Encyclopaedia*. Rather, the *Philosophy of Right* largely presupposes what has been said in this regard in Philosophy of Subjective Spirit.

The general result of this lack of attention to what Hegel actually writes about human beings, their relation to animality and more generally their bodily, emotional and psychological constitution, in the part of his mature system where these are his explicit theme, has been a rather abstract picture of the Hegelian subject. Much has been written about the *sociality* of humans as spiritual or normative beings, but very little about their *corporeality*.

The concept of *recognition* has become a (if not the) central concept in the recent non-metaphysical readings of Hegel emphasizing the connection of sociality and spirit. Although the exact content of this concept varies from one author to the next, recognition is mostly understood as some kind of attribution of normative status to other humans, and perhaps most centrally as attribution of the status of an authority (or co-authority) on the various kinds of norms whereby humans collectively organize and administer their life, or of reasons on which they act, believe and commit themselves to something. Recognition *as attribution of status* is thus thought of as a central phenomenon distinctive of humans as spiritual or normative beings and constitutive of spirit understood as the realm of the normative.

Much less attention has been paid to the pre-requisites of anything like recognition taking place and more specifically to the bodily, emotional and psychological constitution of beings that are possible subjects and objects of attribution of relevant kinds of normative statuses. What indeed is it in humans that makes them appropriate objects of Hegelian recognition, or in other words, what is it in them that recognition *responds to*?² And what is it in humans that makes them capable recognizers? This is not to suggest that the right conception either of reality or of Hegel's view of reality were one in which humans first developed their distinctive psychological and other features and then started recognizing each other. It is only to say that to have the full picture of humans as spiritual, i.e. not merely animal beings, attention needs to be paid as much to the distinctive constitution of the human

2. On whether recognition is best conceived of as responding to something in its objects, or bringing about something about them, or both, see for example, Arto Laitinen, "Interpersonal Recognition: A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood?", *Inquiry* 45(4) (2002): 463–78, and Axel Honneth, "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions", *Inquiry* 45(4) (2002): 499–520.

organism (partly preceding recognition, partly coming about and developing by virtue of it) as to their mutually attributed normative statuses. Put in other words, on the Hegelian picture human persons are not distinct from simpler animals merely as bearers of statuses, but also as having a very distinct structure of embodied emotions, intentionality and psychological processes, all of which Hegel discusses in painstaking detail in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*.³ Arguably, it is only when neo-Hegelian discourses of spirit give up their Kantian purism and start taking a closer look at how psychological and other “inner” or subjective structures and processes on the one hand and “outer” or intersubjective attributions and relations on the other hand are interdependent, internally connected and mutually transformative of each other, that they start representing the full depth and extent of what Hegel was after in the relevant parts of his work.

The relevance of such a refocusing is not only antiquarian – of getting the full picture of whatever it was that one dead German philosopher two centuries ago had in mind – but also philosophical and scientific. Hegel himself was highly erudite in the sciences of his day and many of his insights about the structure of “subjective spirit”, i.e. the human person, also look highly relevant and topical in light of contemporary human sciences. Not only is Hegel a pioneer of what today goes by the name of “extended mind” theories, which, put in Hegel’s terminology, emphasize the constitutive significance of “objective spirit” (that is of language and other social institutions, symbolic and material culture, and other human inventions) for “subjective spirit” (both its theoretical aspects like thinking, remembering, knowing and so on, and its practical aspects like motivations, intentions, the will and so on).⁴

As the contributions to this special issue show, Hegel is also a pioneer in theories of embodied mind, which, instead of the brain only, emphasize the significance of the whole body to cognitive, emotional and volitional

3. Another way of saying this is that the concept of *personhood* should *not* be understood *merely* in terms of normative statuses, but *as much* in terms of psychological structures and capacities. In my view Robert Pippin’s highly original treatment of the concept of recognition in his *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapter 7, tends towards reducing recognition to attribution and personhood to status, adding up to what one could characterize as a kind of “pure ascriptivism” or “pure attributivism” on recognition and personhood. On recognition, personhood, and closely related questions of social ontology, see the contributions to Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen (eds), *Recognition and Social Ontology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011); on personhood, see the contributions to Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen (eds), *Dimensions of Personhood*, special issue of *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14(5-6) (2007).

4. See especially Anthony Crisafi and Shaun Gallagher, “Hegel and the Extended Mind”, *AI and Society* 25 (2010): 123–29.

processes, the importance of habitualization for coordinated perception and action, the corporeality and animal foundations of sociality, and so on.

Some of the most interesting strands of Hegel-scholarship and Hegelian philosophy are, in fact, already engaged in such refocusing, amending the prevailing picture of “spirit according to Hegel” where sociality, attribution and normative statuses are highlighted. They shed more light and add detail also on the corporeality and subjective structures distinctive of human persons and their form of life, and on the prerequisites of these in animality.⁵ The articles in this special issue all in their different ways contribute to this new movement in Hegel-studies and Hegelian philosophy.

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5. Terry Pinkard, a central American author in non-metaphysical Hegelianism takes important corrective steps in his *Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature and the Final Ends of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), reviewed in this volume. See also Robert Brandom, “The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution”, in H. Ikäheimo, and L. Laitinen, *Recognition and Social Ontology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011), 25–51. From one point of view what is at stake is focusing on what makes Hegel an Aristotelian (thinking of *De Anima* especially), in addition to what makes him a Kantian or Fichtean. Important groundwork on the Aristotle-Hegel-connection has been made especially by Alfredo Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).