Naturalness and Mindedness: Hegel’s Compatibilism

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The problem of freedom in modern philosophy has three basic components: (i) what is freedom, or what would it be to act freely? (ii) Is it possible so to act? (iii) And how important is leading a free life? Hegel proposed unprecedented and highly controversial answers to these questions.

(i) What we want to be able to explain when we ask ‘what is freedom?’ are the conditions that must be fulfilled such that my various deeds and projects could be, and could be experienced by me as being, my deeds and projects, as happening at all in some way because of me, spontan, sua sponte, etc. If they are ‘mine’, they shouldn’t seem or be alien, as if belonging to or produced by someone or something else or as if fated or coerced or practically unavoidable, and so forth. How exactly to say this, how to link such deeds and projects with me such that they count as due to me or count as mine and are thereby instances of freedom is the great problem.

In answer to this question, and unlike many philosophers influenced by the Christian tradition, Hegel does not defend a voluntarist position on the nature of freedom, but instead, let us say, a ‘state’ theory. He does not understand the possibility of freedom to depend on the possession of a causal power of some kind by an individual, the power to initiate action by an act of will in some way independent of antecedent causal conditions. Contrary to many compatibilists, being free does not involve any sort of causality at all. In his Science of Logic, the ‘application’ of the causal relation to organic and mental life in general is unequivocally said to be simply inappropriate (unstatthaft). Instead, freedom is understood by Hegel to involve a certain sort of self-relation and a certain sort of relation to others; it is constituted by being in a certain self-regarding and a certain sort of ‘mutually recognizing’ state. This state of self-consciousness and socially mediated self-reflection, defined in a highly elaborate systematic way as a ‘rational’ self- and other-relation, counts as being free. This is an active state, a state of doing, a way of being that involves activities and practices that are distinguished as free by all being undertaken in a certain way, not by having a special causal origin.

(ii) Hegel defends the possibility of freedom, but in what we would call (initially if a bit misleadingly) a compatibilist, not an incompatibilist form. Since I do not need to be able to think of myself as an uncaused cause in order to qualify as a free subject, I do not need to establish, either metaphysically or as a practical condition,
any realm exempt from strict determination according to the laws of nature (whether or not subsumption under causal law is the \textit{Ur-Prinzip} of nature). This means that the ‘inappropriateness’ of the principles of nature for explaining certain processes and alterations will have to be sought elsewhere in Hegel, not by appeal to and defense of this strong or voluntarist notion of spontaneity.\footnote{This is one of the key points of Hegel’s anti-dualism.}

Now it is not surprising that Hegel, a famous and thoroughgoing enemy of all dualisms, would be consistent on this issue too. But the key to his anti-dualism is not any immaterialist monism, ‘a position which interprets the material world as somehow dependent on Mind,’\footnote{An example of such a position would be Haeckel’s evolutionism.} but the more radical thesis that spirit is not a thing at all, neither material nor immaterial.\footnote{This thesis is closely related to Hegel’s notion of the \textit{Absolute}.} Once this is established, it might then be possible to understand why for Hegel references to such attributes as consciousness, intention, freedom, belief and goal are not merely permissible or possible (as in standard compatibilism), or pragmatically useful, they are somehow required, indispensable, in any attempt to render the world intelligible.\footnote{Hegel’s philosophy is often criticized for its lack of empirical evidence.}

(iii) Finally, it is easy to summarize in Hegel’s own term his answer to the ‘How important is freedom?’ question: ‘absolutely’ important. Everything Hegel writes about, from the history of religions to the relation between universal and particular, has to do in one way or another with the ‘realization’ of freedom problem, and his entire philosophy could be summarized in one phrase, however initially opaque: that the Absolute is freedom.

(This means of course that Hegel is interested in defending freedom as a ‘norm’ and that he evaluates institutions and historical progress by appeal to degrees of the realization of this ideal. But such an evaluation also clearly rests on a view about the sense in which some alterations and changes are to count as actions or as freely undertaken, and others not, and why. In this link between systematic and normative issues, he is no different from many others – it is no accident that various compatibilist and naturalist programmes are tied to libertarian politics and so-called negative notions of freedom. Hegel by contrast has a social theory of freedom:\footnote{Hegel’s social theory of freedom is based on the idea that freedom is not an individual property but a social relation.} a strong claim that one cannot \textit{be} a free being – not just cannot realize the practical conditions for freedom – alone. But his reasons for that position do not stem just from dissatisfaction with the politics of atomistic individualism; they rest on a general view of what could count as a freely undertaken action at all, and his social theory of freedom is not well understood without such systematic concerns in view.)

\section*{II}

The most important of the issues, the one on which all other claims depend, and the one I want to discuss here, is the second, or the nature of Hegel’s denial of dualism and incompatibilism. In his terms the problem is the nature-spirit relation; in our terms, the mind- or soul-body problem as that bears on the so-called ‘free will’ issue.

There have always been two serious obstacles to understanding (at least with any sympathy) what Hegel might be trying to say about nature-spirit, and we...
should probably discuss those right away. The first involves the sorts of claims he makes about nature, remarks that seem to claim that nature is a manifestation or developing realization of a world or cosmic spirit, and second, the fact that his manner of discussing mental and practical life is presented in an ‘encyclopaedic form,’ by means of a methodology that is somehow ‘developmental’, not strictly analytic or deductive.\textsuperscript{12}

Since it is unlikely that the natural world is a finite manifestation of a divine mind or that being reflects a hierarchical order of such self-manifests, any compatibilism that relied on such claims would appear only of historical interest. However, there is a great deal that is unsatisfying about the directions of such immaterialist-monist and teleological-realist interpretations. The former suggests an eventual ‘immaterialist reductionism’ (to use C. D. Broad’s old phrase) that cannot be Hegel’s position since it is clear that he regards natural (including causal) explanation as an irreducible constituent of any adequate explanation of the world, as irreducible and in the proper domain autonomous. Nature is not an appearance or illusion; it is nature. The teleological dimension of Hegel’s account of nature and spirit is both ambitious and complicated, but there is little evidence that he understands teleology in any intentional or realist way, as if nature must be understood as the product of divine design, or as if there were some sort of efficient causal force in the world, pulling the universe forward towards full self-development, as if some eventual end-state drew everything toward it and needed to be invoked to explain what happens.\textsuperscript{13}

Suspicions and dissatisfactions are the one thing, however, and the mysteries of Hegel’s unusual formulations are another. If the basis for the claim that reference to ‘spiritual’ properties is unavoidable and irreducible is not that there is some immaterial substance (or that we ‘have to act as if there were’), whether distinct, or underlying everything and unitary (perhaps neither natural nor spiritual), what could the Hegelian basis for this necessity be?

\textbf{III}

Here is one of the most concentrated statements of Hegel’s position on the Nature-Spirit relation.

For us spirit has nature as its presupposition, for which [i.e., nature] it [i.e., spirit] is the truth and accordingly it [i.e., spirit] is the absolute first (\textit{absolut Erstes}) for nature. Nature has vanished (\textit{verschwunden}) in this truth, and spirit has come to be the idea (\textit{Idee}) which has attained its being-for-self, the object for which, just as much as the subject for which, is the notion (\textit{der Begriff}). This identity is absolute negativity, because the notion has its complete external objectivity in nature, but this, its externalization, has been sublated (\textit{aufgehoben}), and it has become [in this sublation] identical with itself. At the same time therefore, it is only as

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This return out of nature that the notion constitutes this identity. (HPSS, 24, 25)

This passage has no contemporary or even historical resonance, as Hegel is clearly inventing the terms with which to state the problem as well as suggesting his solution, but a few conclusions can be drawn immediately.

(i) Anti-dualism. All aspects of human mentality and practices (Geist) always ‘presuppose’ nature. With that assumed, the relation between nature and spirit is posed in an extremely unusual way: as one of ‘truth’, not substance or property. In §388 too, the claim is that spirit ‘has come to be as the truth of nature’, or is some sort of outcome of nature’s own capacities. The suggestion Hegel appears to be making is simply that at a certain level of complexity and organization, natural organisms come to be occupied with themselves and eventually to understand themselves in ways no longer appropriately characterized within the boundaries of ‘nature’. As we shall see, what makes this position so perplexing is that the ‘untruth’ that would result from continued allegiance to the ‘external’ categories of nature is not because of ontological or ‘substance’ inappropriateness, not because we just assume such a categorial novelty in order to make sense of our moral lives, and not because we just wouldn’t get far in anticipating or predicting each other’s conduct with the language of biology and chemistry. Natural beings begin to be able to hold each other to a different sort of account and it is that achievement that would not be rightly accounted for if that sort of ‘fact’ were falsely taken to be a ‘natural fact’ (to invoke Sellars again).14

In §389, the whole question of the separate existence of the soul is rejected, and instead of talking about immateriality in any traditional sense, Hegel refers instead to the immateriality issue as a problem of nature’s realization of ‘the truth’ and that whatever immateriality might be ascribed to the soul, it involves only nature’s own ‘ideal life’ or its own ‘immateriality’ and not any non-natural locationless substance.15 And in his long gloss on this claim, in the Addition, Hegel insists explicitly that the ‘transition’ (Übergang) from nature to spirit is ‘not a transition to something completely other, but simply a return into self (Zusichselberkommen) of spirit external to itself in nature’ (HPSS, 46/47).16

Thus, the remark about ‘vanishing’ would have to do with the inappropriateness of natural accounts of spirit, the ultimate unsuitability of such notions for what spirit is ‘in its truth’, even though spirit is still always somewhere and some when. (The mode of life appropriate to beings who understand themselves as continuous with and subject to nature ‘vanishes’, ceases to be a possible mode of life.) Even though this final independence is only achieved in ‘objective’ spirit, and in various other manifestations, as soul, consciousness and even thought, it is never to be understood as something non-natural and it is still the case that a link with and partial determination by nature is always stressed by Hegel. In the Addition to §382, Hegel makes just this point, claiming that ‘independence’ from and ‘overcoming’ nature (which is what spirit is) has nothing to do with any ‘flight’ or ‘withdrawal’ from nature, but achieves this ‘in a relation to its other [nature].’
Spirit as a self-relation. So what marks off a ‘spirit’ state, and, again, if it is not non-natural, why must it be ‘marked off’ from nature like this at all? In the Encyclopedia passages that describe the ‘transition’, Hegel’s position is that some sentient creatures do not merely embody their natures, in the way a stone or planet or an insect might be said simply to be what it is. Some come to be in some sort of relation to their immediately felt or experienced dispositions, sensations and inclinations. What we must come to terms with is not something that can be accounted for as a ‘being in itself’ but a being which can be said to have 'attained' its being-for-self, the object for which, just as much as the subject for which, is the notion.’ Beings which can be said to have established such a relation require a different sort of account from those applicable to nature itself, or require a different way of rendering intelligible the (still) naturally-embodied states and relations achieved.

This differentiation from something that might be described as wholly or purely natural is made in extremely abstract terms as Hegel tries to capture as generally as he can some sort of capacity for a ‘negative’ relation to, rather than immediate embodiment of, the natural conditions and states of a being. ‘Taking up’ rather than just ‘being in’ a relation to the conditions and dispensations of the natural world, has nothing to do yet with consciousness or intentionality or even a subjective interiority as such, but initially only with the basic mark of a living being, self-movement of a sort, or a general purposiveness or directedness. Beings that must take up in some way, respond to and build upon their exchanges with the natural world are said to be ‘en-souled’, and this very broad category – ‘overcoming the immediacy of nature’ – is, somewhat remarkably, the first and basic manifestation of spirit in ‘soul’, or in all animal life. It is so remarkable because it remains the term within which Hegel discusses even the higher manifestations of spirituality like sensation, feeling, habits and eventually consciousness and thought and sociality. All require a different conceptual classification because all involve not only natural processes but taking nature as an object in making their own life an issue for themselves, in acting for their own sake. Appreciating the greater degrees of such possible ‘overcoming’ gives one a way of appreciating how Hegel is trying to introduce the category of spirit. Again, what is striking is that there is no suggestion that ‘overcoming the immediacy of nature’ reflects anything non-natural. Natural beings accomplish this new position towards and relation to nature, and soul just is that accomplishment. The conceptual claim is that, while representing no new ontological type, such relations do introduce a sort of capacity for which the explanatory norms at home in the natural world of immediacy, externality and particularity are now incomplete if also still in some sense appropriate.

His own language here reflects his systematic logic. This is somewhat unfortunate. What we will still want here is some manageable account of the categorial (if not ontological) necessity for spirit-concepts in making sense of what these organisms are doing, and it turns out that Hegel’s case for that will also involve his whole account of account-giving, of intelligibility, his ‘logic’. This is clear by his appeal to claims about how some natural beings can be said to come to stand

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in a ‘negative’ as well as wholly positive relation to the immediate presentations of nature. Nature’s immediacy is ‘negated’ or ‘idealized’ if an entity can establish a certain relation to such immediacy, a capacity that cannot be properly understood as a developmental possibility that should, ‘again’ as it were, be understood as itself the *embodiment* of a natural process; it is some sort of taking up of a position, an attitude, a stance, *towards* all such processes, something that begins to happen in feeling, sensation, rituals and habits. And an awful lot of work in such formulations is being done by the notion of negativity appealed to, the ‘denial’ of immediacy: the heart of the heartland in Hegelianism.

The examples are also quite striking. Such creatures do not, say, just register threatening stimuli; they experience what is taken to be a threat, take up the threat ‘in a way’, fearfully, feelingly. Feelings thus in Hegel’s language are said to be ‘modes of negativity’ – or non-identity: a mode of self-relation within an experience, not merely (although certainly also) being in a state. It is thus not, say, the ‘subjective’ character of such an experience – what it is like to be in terror – that makes it simply inappropriate to treat it as a manifestation of nature, say as a brain state. It would be wrongly analyzed from the start as a ‘state one is in’; that would be an inappropriate category. Such a state already reflects a kind of achievement in a comportment towards the world that would be neglected if treated as a natural manifestation or causal result. Such a reaction must already involve a way of *taking up* and understanding the world, with several presuppositions and so already a distinct mode of orientation and direction. Soul is said by Hegel to be what it is in its ‘sublation’ of (cancelling the independence of while yet preserving) nature, not in ‘being’ other than nature. The identity of an en-souled or living being as such a being always involves its ‘return to itself out of nature’, a highly metaphorical but clearly non-dualist and non-substantial account of soul and eventually spirit. It is the achievement of the sublating relation to nature that constitutes spirit; natural beings which by virtue of their natural capacities can achieve it are spiritual; having achieved it and maintaining it is being spiritual; those which cannot are not.

Moreover, Hegel is not treating such self-regarding states as beliefs or intentions which then can be said to cause actions or other states. Spirit is said to be such ways of construing oneself and accomplishing such ‘overcomings’, and he recommends that such modes are to be understood as essentially ‘self-manifestations’, not causes of anything else.

The self-revelation [Sichselbstoffenbaren] is therefore itself the content of spirit, and not in some way merely a form in which spirit derives its content from without. Consequently, spirit reveals in its revelation not a content different from a form, but the form in which its entire content is expressed: i.e., its self-revelation. (HPSS, 54/55)

Or, more succinctly and remarkably in the Addition to §385, ‘Spirit is essentially only what it knows of itself’ (HPSS, 68/69). 17

As noted, formulated this way, this spiritual peculiarity can be said to have
degrees of realization. Something like the degree of ‘distance’ attained, the range of responsiveness in such taking up of possible attitudes, or the range not simply set by the initial natural condition, represents the basis for the gradualist or developmental account presented by Hegel.

(iii) Spirit as Freedom as Achievement. There is still much here that Hegel must explain, but the striking direction, at least, on ‘mind-body’ issues opened up by this position should be stressed immediately. For Hegel has begun to treat forms of human mentality as something like achievements, modes of self-relation and so ways of making sense of, taking a stance with regard to, nature and one’s own nature that can be reached, or not, and these are of course achievements actually reached by nothing other than creatures otherwise describable as bits of matter in space and time. Thus the unique capacity of spirit, its freedom, ‘does not occur as an immediate characteristic of spirit [nicht etwas unmittelbar im Geiste Seiendes], but is something to be brought about through its own activity’ (PPSS, 52/53).

In the first place, Hegel’s anti-romanticism is on view as he claims that if spirit is to be considered (as it should be) some sort of independence from nature, then this capacity should be considered historically, not metaphysically; and in some sense ‘practically’, not ontologically. Modernity has reached some sort of ‘higher standpoint’ than the Greeks because of the achievement of some greater independence from nature, not because of any realization or knowledge about such putative independence. (And the passage nowhere suggests that this is because of some metaphysical alteration in what it is to be a human being, because of substance-change.) Said another way, when Hegel makes his famous claim that moderns are ‘freer’ than Greeks, he does not just mean politically freer; that we better realize a capacity that they also had. He means we have ‘become’ freer, and the question about his systematic philosophy is what notion of freedom, and what defence of such a notion, will allow him to say that. Here are some of the relevant passages where this claim is spelled out. First,

One frequently hears it deplored, in writings on aesthetics, that we should differ from the Greeks in lacking the beauty of being at one with nature. It is for sentimentality (Empfindsamkeit) to regret this however, not for reason, for it is of the essence of spirit to be free, and so to be free for itself, not to remain (stehen bleibe) within the immediacy of what is natural.

This notion of either ‘remaining’ (with the Greeks) or ‘departing’ already suggests the notion of mindedness in general as a result, but that stress becomes more pronounced as the passage goes on.

Spirit has its beginnings in nature in general. One must not think merely of external nature, but also of the sensuous nature of man himself, his sensuous, bodily being, being in relation with other general objects; mere
sensing is confined solely to animals. The extreme to which spirit tends is its freedom, its infinity, its being in and for itself. These are the two aspects, but if we ask what spirit is, the immediate answer is that it is this motion (Bewegung), this process of proceeding forth from, of freeing itself from nature; this is the being, the substance of spirit itself.

Hegel is well aware that this is quite a different, non-standard way of putting the issue and the Natur-Geist duality.

Spirit is usually spoken of as subject, as doing something, and apart from what it does, as this motion, this process, as still something particular, its activity being more or less contingent …

And Hegel’s contrary view is now clearly stated:

… it is of the very nature of spirit to be this absolute liveliness (Lebendigkeit), this process, to proceed forth from naturality (Natürlichkeit), immediacy, to sublate, to quit its naturality, and to come to itself, and to free itself; it being itself only as it comes to itself as such a product of itself; its actuality being merely that it has made itself into what it is.

And even, finally: ‘… it is only as a result of itself that it is Geist.’ (All on HPSS 6/7, my emphasis.)

These formulations, especially the last, logically opaque claim (how could spirit be the result of itself?) are both remarkable for the uniqueness of the position Hegel is trying to defend, and remarkably unnoticed in standard commentaries. We ought to allow ourselves to be sufficiently confused by them, as well as convinced that no immaterialist monism will do them justice.

This way of framing the problem also begins to explain why, in his discussions throughout the Philosophy of Spirit, the issues that dominate so much of the modern post-Cartesian, post-Kantian discussion about nature and mentality do not ever arise for Hegel: subjective self-certainty, raw feels, intentional states, mental objects and their possible or not possible reducibility, and the problem of ‘spontaneous’ causation in action, or ‘could have done otherwise’ issues. Instead, a wholly different series of topics is presented, without much concern with whether the capacities, shared in a great degree by non-human animals, require a defense of any non-natural properties. Instead, that is, a developmental discussion of such things as sensation, nourishment, sexuality and even death is presented, all with attention to the sort of negative relation to or independence of nature such naturally occurring states and activities can be said to make possible. There is little or no attention to the Cartesian and Kantian issues. (For example, the ‘overcoming of death as a natural event’, the not ‘natural’ status of human death as opposed to animal death, is discussed in terms of the establishment of forms of memory and ritual which prevent the ‘submergence’ of the individual
into the abstract universality of death. The ‘naturalness’ of death is ‘overcome’, and so becomes distinctly spiritual, not by means of any postulate or even concern with ‘immortality’ but by the ‘preserving sublation’ (erhaltende Aufhebung) of human practices. This is one of Hegel’s best examples of how he wants to understand the way the soul creates a kind of distinctness from the body, a difference within which a kind of identity is easy to acknowledge at the same time.)

Or, as Hegel summarizes his position, again in the Addition to §381,

Even in animal life therefore, which is the most perfect shape to which nature raises itself, the notion fails to attain to an actuality equal to the soul-like nature of its essence, to completely overcome the externality and finitude of its determinate being. This is first accomplished in spirit, which distinguishes itself from nature precisely on account of the occurrence within it of this triumph over determinate being. The distinction is not, therefore, simply the act or reflecting externally upon the essence of spirit. (HPSS, 34/35)

Again, the contrast is clear. The question of spirit is not one that can be settled by ‘external reflection’ on its substantial nature. The achievement of a certain form of collective mindedness, a way of living out a certain form of self-understanding, a living out made possible at all by what we collectively do, determines whether we are spiritual beings or not, and so whether or not we can ‘realize’ (verwirklichen) what it is to be spiritual, to be free.

IV

The general direction of this reading is clearly neo-Aristotelian (Geist as energeia, the being-at-work of the body, although that sort of formulation just follows Hegel’s explicit and insistent advice) and left Hegelian (agency itself is understood as a kind of historical and social achievement). My intention has been mostly to show how the texts support a version of such non-dualist, but not immaterialist readings. Philosophically though, we still haven’t gotten very far. We still need to be able to make several distinctions (the ones Hegel makes, between different forms or stages of Geist, different stages in what we now understand as the ‘overcoming of natural immediacy’, soul, consciousness and spirit especially), and also between cognitive and practical realizations of Geist, when the latter is understood this way. As noted earlier, the notion of spirit – including all forms of ‘thinking’, philosophy, art, religion, all considered as essentially historical achievements, as ‘negations of nature’ – introduces a book length topic, a crucial one since the case for the logical (and not ontological) distinctness of Geist and for the essentially historical nature of the normative force of such a notion, rests on such themes. And we are still far away from the ultimate picture.
of agency that results from this notion of Geist as a historical achievement; the
claim that being a subject is itself a historical or social achievement, or in more
familiar Hegelian terms, that it amounts to being recognized as one; that we
cannot be free beings alone, but must achieve such freedom in common. (To put
the problem another way: our natural tendency is always to think that if there is
such a distinct capacity to shape or construct or mediate our relation to the
natural world, it either must be a metaphysically distinctive capacity, or we must
be appealing to some form of weak or anomalous monism, or other sort of dual
aspect, supervenience, emergent property thesis etc. Hegel’s constructivist
account of Geist is neither of these and it is hard to see what that leaves us with.)

However, something of the general direction suggested by this interpretation
can be indicated in a few concluding remarks. 23

I have taken my bearings from passages like the following one in Hegel’s late
Encyclopaedia. In distinguishing his approach from all empirical and philosophical
‘psychologies’, Hegel insists again that the former are misleading because they
try to say what ‘spirit or soul is, what happens to it, what it does, presupposing
it to be a ready-made subject within which such determinations appear only as
expressions.’ The contrasting view which Hegel wishes to defend is that spirit
‘posits for itself the expression of what it is …’, that all ‘expressions’ (Äusserun-
gen) of itself are ‘moments of its bringing itself forth to itself, of its agreement with
itself whereby it first becomes actual Geist.’24 As we have seen so often: Geist is a
product of itself, only what it takes itself to be.

We have been asking: what makes this self-producing process so distinctive,
requiring so unavoidably a mode of self-understanding somehow other than
‘nature’. (If we were Hegelian anthropologists, we would be asking: what would
be going wrong if the nature-culture distinction were understood as falling
within a comprehensive account of nature?) Some hints in answer to this question
have already emerged, but the decisive issue appears as Hegel begins to summa-
rize the stages whereby Geist can be understood to ‘realize itself’ more
adequately, to mark itself off more and more from nature.

That issue is ‘reason’, Geist’s becoming, or self-fashioning itself as more and
more directed by and collectively responsive to, reasons. That is what the final
overcoming of nature’s immediacy (the realization of Geist) amounts to. (Here, of
course, is the difference between Hegel and that left-Hegelian tradition, with its
emphasis on socially organized labor as the vehicle of overcoming and negation.)
Spirit is supposed to become spirit by virtue of the efforts of some organisms over
time to ‘make’, let us say, an effective ‘space of reasons’. ‘Reason constitutes the
substantial nature of spirit, and is merely another expression for the truth or the
idea which constitutes the essence of it.’25

When this claim is brought together with the constructivist or Spirit-as-
achievement position we have seen from the Encyclopaedia, the distinct desiderata
Hegel is after begin appearing.

That is, to use again a vaguely Sellarsean formulation: (i) the question at the
heart of the basic spirit-nature dualism at issue is eventually treated as one
between the applicability of normative notions and assessments versus natural or

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law-like explanations, all within a radically constructivist account of norms; and (ii) the Hegelian approach does not involve treating the possibility of such a distinction as being based on any ontological fact of the matter, as, say, between immaterial, causally exempt, and material, causally determined beings. The distinction is itself a normative and historical one, not an ontological one; it depends on a social norm we have collectively formulated over time and bound ourselves to and it is thereby also flexible, historically malleable (as in: whether parts of nature can be responded to normatively, as if they are acting intentionally (e.g., trees as also persons, oracles), or whether certain forms of conduct would be better responded to as natural events causally determined and causally manipulable (e.g., neurotic depression or some forms of criminal conduct))26. (As in Sellars, so, I think, in Hegel. The core idea: To think of someone as a person is not to ‘classify or explain, but to rehearse an intention’. Hegel has a different story about the content of this intention, the nature of its claim on us, and what historical story we have to tell in what detail about how such an intention came to be as it is, with what sort of normative authority.)27

There is thus no ‘missing ontology’ in such a position. The argument is that the issue itself is miscategorized if we begin searching for an ontologically distinct being as an answer to the question: why is it appropriate here to respond to this being as having acted because of his reasons and so as subject to the responses and punishments and arguments suitable under such assumptions? The answer to such a question has to do with what we have established as a norm in such discriminations; something that exists as a norm only because we have established it and have committed ourselves to it, not because we have seen something about immateriality or because of a faith in uncaused causes. Viewing these institutings and establishings as natural events and searching for their causal conditions would also be (somewhat inconsistently) to hold ourselves to certain norms, to have come to adopt them, itself already an ‘epistemic fact’ for which an appropriate justification (and so spirit talk) would be necessary. And this all naturally leads us to larger normative questions, above all, the question of the legitimacy of such establishings; in what way criticisms and revisions are possible if not by appeal to what we ‘know’ about what we are or must be or by appeal to some claim about the practical necessity and unavoidability of acting ‘under the idea of freedom’.

That is, Hegel’s talk of reason as ‘the essence’ of spirit must, as we have seen in detail, be read in a very careful way. He is in effect treating Geist itself as a kind of norm; a collective institution whereby we (remaining the natural organisms we ontologically are) hold each other to a responsiveness to and directedness by reason, and thereby realize spirit as ‘freedom’. But he clearly is not treating such a form of life as the ‘natural’ realization of a slumbering potential, long frustrated by the irrationality and contingency of existence. The vocabulary is everywhere about positing, producing and making; is everywhere Fichtean, not Schellingean nor, on this issue, Aristotelian. This means that the basis for his claims about ‘realization’, fulfilment, return to itself and truth cannot either be some sort of essentialism, nor, again, a practical argument like Kant’s, claiming a practical
necessity to act under the idea of freedom. We are such ‘beings’ because we hold each other to that norm; we make it, we maintain it; it ‘expresses who we are’ only in so far as we collectively intend to be that.

This direction clearly begins to build a good deal of pressure on something like the historical story, and the developmental logic of that story, whereby we can understand the original hold on our self-understanding that the notions of soul, mind, self, consciousness and, eventually, to use Hegel’s frequent shorthand for Geist, ‘I,’ came to have and then lose. This sort of account of the kind of normative hold on us that the notion of rational being or ‘overcoming-nature-being’ has, as well as the normative force that the idealization of that self-conception, ‘autonomy’, has, manifests itself in several ways in Hegel’s texts and in each manifestation raises scores of problems on its own. (In the Encyclopaedia version we are considering, the issue concerns the mixed, natural and geistig, category of ‘soul’, (the standpoint of ‘anthropology’) and the nature of the inadequacy, both phenomenological and ‘logical’, of this way of counting oneself as subject to and overcoming the natural situation of climate, diet, unreflective habits and so forth.) Different terms and issues emerge in the kind of developmental logic defended in the Phenomenology of Spirit, the philosophies of history, art, and religion, and in the underlying commentary on the development of the history of philosophy that undergirds the Science of Logic. In one way or another, all such Hegelian accounts attempt to make the same internal case for the ultimately superior claim of a ‘rationally self-determining’ norm for human subjects.

Now, in a formal sense, that kind of case is not all that unfamiliar. The question Hegel is trying to answer is roughly the same as for any such historically rational constructivist: what normative forms would be consistent with such constructed status. Like Kantian constructivists, the answer must have to do with those norms that realize and embody the condition of their very possibility: that they exist and are maintained only as constructed, only in so far as ‘Geist is a result of itself’. This could not be so, such norms could not be both constructed and claim the allegiance of all, if they merely represented an exercise of power by one group over another, or could not embody some general mutuality, a way in which each is counting as one among many.

It is easy enough to be sceptical about the possibility of this form of justification of spirit, but the first step in appreciating Hegel’s overall case is his more comprehensive claim: that only this sort of story will allow us to understand why we have become so wedded to this notion of ourselves as self-determining individuals, and as so self-determining by reliance on a norm of rationality, why we were not wedded previously, why we saw ourselves, unsuccessfully, as manifestations of, parts of, nature, and how that self-understanding is not in some permanent, inexplicable tension with what we now understand as nature.

This is all another way of making a familiar claim on Hegel’s behalf. It recalls the inspiration that is responsible for so many Hegel revivals, in Marx’s Berlin and Paris and London of the mid-nineteenth century, in Kojève’s Paris of the 1930s, and in the Heidelberg and Frankfurt of the 60s and 70s. The inspiration for such ‘turns to Hegel’ arises first from some sense of the difficulty in understanding the

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significance – what appears the permanent, unsurpassable significance – of the disruption in human time designated as modernity, a break or rupture in human experience like no other. Secondly, for many, the only philosopher with the conceptual and phenomenological means with which to understand this event was, remains, Hegel. I share that view and have tried to show here how his theory of spirit might help confirm it.

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NOTES

1 An affirmative answer to the last question provokes two other difficult questions: what sort of political order and social system best realizes such a capacity, or both allows and makes more likely that individuals can act as free subjects? And there is a historical question. This is so because attention to the possibility and importance of freedom (at least when freedom is understood as self-determination of some sort and when freedom so understood is counted as a capacity of each, not merely a few, and as universally valuable) is relatively recent in the philosophical tradition and is characteristic especially of the modern Western epoch in philosophy. One might then ask: why and when did the theoretical question begin to look the way it now does, and why and when did the political question of justice come to depend so much on the question of freedom?

Hegel’s ‘philosophy of objective spirit’ comprises his answer to the former question. He gave the most ambitious and speculative answer in the history of philosophy to the second.

2 I do not mean to commit Hegel to any particular theory here, although almost anything general one tries to say about the desideratum of any theory of freedom will seem to tilt one way or another, in this case perhaps towards a ‘non-alienation’ or ‘self-determination’ theory. As we shall see, though, there are such a number of components to Hegel’s account of the ‘achievement’ of and realization of freedom, that it would be a mistake to over-interpret this desideratum too hastily. For a very helpful overview of the various dimensions of the modern notion of freedom, especially as a ‘life ideal’, see Geuss 1995. Also indispensable, for both taxonomic and analytic reasons, Pothast 1980.

3 It is important to note that Hegel holds that no conceptual or semantic analysis can settle the question of what would satisfy these conditions or even what the conditions means. Only a philosophically oriented analysis of the historical genesis of such a norm can point the way towards a successful satisfaction of such criteria. See Siep 1979: 292. ‘Die Einrichtung oder Entwicklung solcher Institutionen bring das Prinzip Freiheit nicht nur zur Geltung, sondern bestimmt und modifiziert seine Bedeutung.’ I discuss this methodological issue further, below. For an important discussion of the relation between the two criteria at issue in this summary of freedom, the ‘Spontaneität’ and ‘Eigensetzlichkeit’
conditions, see Fulda 1996: 47–63. Fulda makes use of the speculative doctrine of universality (Allgemeinheit) to try to explain what Hegel might mean by the crucial notion of ‘bei sich selbst sein’. I attempt here to offer a gloss oriented much more by the rationality of Hegel’s Fichtean strain, or the ‘priority of the practical strain’.


5 Admittedly, there is no compelling, prima facie reason why being in such a state, however valuable or wonderful it might be, should count as being free. Hegel must show that to be so, and tries to do so by trading on our sense that I have acted freely if I can ‘identify’ with my activities and projects, if they are and can be experienced by me as being mine. See my discussion of this and the compatibilism issue in Pippin 1997a.

6 There is of course a relation between my views of what I will or should do, my intentions and reasons, and the actual action. It is obvious that I can have various reflective attitudes towards what I should do, or about what the claims of others on me should lead me to do, and I sometimes act accordingly or ‘on’ such views, and I sometimes do not act accordingly or ‘on’ them. But for Hegel this relation is not a causal, but an ‘expressive’ one. I discuss this issue further in ‘What is the Question for Which Hegel’s Theory of Recognition is the Answer?’ forthcoming. See also Taylor 1985 and Quante 1997.

7 The reason that the compatibilist description is misleading is that compatibilism is merely a permissive position, or makes only a logical point: that a universal determinism could hold, and it would still be possible to assert in some sense that we are nonetheless free. In classical forms of compatibilism such a claim is defended by proposing only a relatively weak notion of freedom (as in Hobbes’ example of water running ‘necessarily’ downstream but ‘freely’ if unimpeded by external barriers). Fichte’s and Hegel’s analysis of the conditions necessary for some event counting as a free action, while similar to many dual aspect positions, are considerably more ambitious and not content with a permissive position. A much closer description of the desideratum: Wilfrid Sellars’ hope for a ‘stereoscopic vision, where two differing perspectives on a landscape are fused into one coherent experience’. Sellars 1963b: 4. Sellars’ version of the problem at issue is also worth noting: ‘Whether the adoption of the synoptic view would transform man in bondage into man free, as Spinoza believed, or man free into man in bondage, as many fear …’, p. 18.

8 Sellars 1968: 51.

9 The philosophy of Geist can be neither empirical nor metaphysical, but has as its task to consider the Notion of Geist in its immanent, necessary development out of itself into a system of its own activity … the metaphysical manner of analysis wants to do only with the concept, without regard to its appearance; the concept is only an abstraction, and the determination of it only itself a dead concept. Geist is this essentially, to be active; that means – to bring itself and indeed only its concept to appearance, to manifest its concept. Hegel 1968ff., vol. 15: 217. (My emphasis.)

10 On the one hand, this is clearly a non-Kantian direction. Kant’s dualism may not be metaphysical but it is strict; the realms of nature and spirit are either/or, never both/and, while for Hegel, spirit is, as we shall see, a kind of achievement which some natural beings are capable of, and so there can be a continuity between natural and spiritual dimensions. On the other hand, Hegel frequently and enthusiastically embraces Kant’s critique of rational psychology, praises Kant for having ‘freed’ us from (rather than answering) the very questions of rational psychology (simplicity, materiality, etc.) by showing that the soul is not a thing (Seelendinge) but is, instead, ‘the I’, and Hegel takes himself to be following what he claims to be Kant’s direction, away from any question about the appropriate metaphysical predicates for soul and toward its ‘true essence’, ‘the pure identity of self-consciousness with itself’, or ‘freedom’. This all makes it quite impossible that Hegel
himself proposed any sort of immaterial or material, or for that matter, any ‘neither material nor immaterial’ substance account of soul and mind. See also the remarkable passage from the Heidelberg Enzyklopädie, §32a, where the contrast with any Seelelding is made by reference to ‘die reine Identität des Selbstbewuβtsein mit sich selbst’, that is, ‘die Freiheit’. Hegel 1817.

11 For more details on such a position, see Pippin 1997b: 417–50; and on the relation between the systematic and normative issues, see Pippin 1997a.

12 The Zusatz to E§379 presents the official statement of the developmental procedure at work in the Encyclopaedia. See especially, ‘… each particular notion is derived from the self-producing and self-actualizing universal notion or from the logical idea. Philosophy has to grasp spirit as a necessary development of the eternal idea, and to allow that which constitutes the particular parts of the science of spirit to unfold itself purely from the notion of spirit.’ Hegel 1978: 16–17 (Petry’s translation modified).

13 Hegel explicitly rejects any attempt to rely exclusively on ‘subjective’ (or ‘intentional’) models of teleology (the ‘subjectively held goals, making causal use of means to achieve those ends’ model). We thus have to be very careful in interpreting what Hegel means when, by contrast, he suggests that what the natural world is ‘for’ is a certain ‘end’, the emergence and full realization of ‘spirit’. This sort of a claim has to do with, first, his theory of concepts, and the gradual emergence in human time of an adequate understanding of basic concepts. So, to understand, say, a chemical reaction requires that we see it as realizing or manifesting ‘what it is to be so marked off as a chemical reaction’. (It certainly does not mean: to understand how the event is ‘striving’ to realize itself fully as a chemical reaction.) That means understanding what function such a classification can play in an inter-connected system, and how the limitations of various conceptual classifications become manifest and are supplemented and overcome. Ultimately, this all will require an interpretation of the Hegelian claim that everything can be understood as ‘fulfilling’ the requirements of ‘the Idea’. But that will all be in the ‘manifesting a coherent conceptual scheme’ direction, not a ‘revealing God’s mind before the creation’ direction. The latter after all was meant as an image by Hegel. See Hegel 1971, vol. 2: 386, 396; Hegel 1970b: #58, #204. The best single piece on the foundational issues involved: Theunissen 1978. Also helpful: Willem DeVries 1991, and Warnke 1972.

14 Sellars 1963a: #17, p. 146. Or the classic formulation, p. 169.

15 cf. the formulation in the Zusätze to §377–482 in the compilation edited by Boumann: In dem so alles Materielle durch den in der Natur wirkenden an-sich-seyenden Geist aufgehoben wird, und diese Aufhebung in der Substanz der Seele sich vollendet, tritt die Seele als die Idealität alles Materiellen, als alle Immaterialität hervor, so daß Alles, was Materie heißt, – so sehr er der Vortstellung Selbständigkeit vorspiegelt, – als ein gegen den Geist Unselbständiges erkannt wird. (Hegel 1932: 12, my emphasis, Hegel’s italics.)

16 The most interesting of Hegel’s attempts to explain what he means by the whole Zusichselberkommen claim, or that nature itself is only in-itself not yet for-itself Spirit, occur in the various versions of the Berlin lectures on the history of philosophy, from the Winter Semester of 1819/20 on, in commenting on and interpreting Aristotle’s doctrine of nous pathetikos. He explicitly notes that this gloss on passive nous as the ‘thinkable in nature, not yet thought’, means that nature, as such mere dynamis, is in this sense alone something ‘nicht Wahres’, ‘keine Wirklichkeit’, as in the Encyclopaedia language here. ‘Das Denkbare ist der passive nous; und das, was ihm zum gedachten macht, das ist der tätige nous.’ Hegel endorses, within the limits of such a gloss, what he regards as Aristotle’s ‘most speculative’ or pantheistic or ‘acosmic’ thought: that all is alive with nous, but that has nothing to
do with one substance finally becoming another or what it really is (was), but with what is implicitly thinkable finally being so conceived as to be finally and coherently and actively thought (understood), and in that sense ‘liberated’, freed as thinkable. cf. ‘Das Wahre der Nature, ihre Seele, ist der Begriff.’ All as cited in the very helpful essay by Kern 1971: 237–59.

17 These sorts of formulations begin to explain why Hegel, when speaking of fully realized forms of spirit, forms wherein a self-understanding and relations with others have been self-determined, and so nature ‘overcome’, speaks of such spirit, or ‘the truth of such self-developing self-consciousness’ as ‘the form of the self’ (and so not the realization of a substance or the freeing of a thing from its limits.) See Hegel 1971, vol. 2: 33; also Hegel 1968ff., vol. 9 (Phänomenologie des Geistes): 427.

18 At the end of the Zusatz to E§378, Hegel again criticizes rational psychology for treating the soul as a thing (Seelending) which stands in some bizarre external relation to the body, all as opposed to his position, which has it that the soul is ‘bound up internally with the body through the unity of the notion’. Hegel 1978: 12/13 (my emphasis). The nature of this unity ‘through the unity of the notion’ is partly what is being, still rather obscurely, addressed in the §381 passage quoted above.

19 The radicality of Hegel’s position on the self-constituted character of Geist (and the sort of organismic he is proposing) is already clear in the critique of Jacobi in Glauben und Wissen. He completely rejects not only the epistemological side of Jacobi’s intuitionism, but any claim for the natural, transcendent character of ideals, the good, the supersensible. Contrary to Jacobi, Hegel’s position is daß transcendentale Einbildungskraft und Vernunftkenntnis etwas ganz anderes ist, als Jacobi begreift, daß sie weder die Natur analysirt, noch Gegebenes in analytische Einheit und Mannichfaltigkeit auseinander reißt, sondern selbst organisch und lebendig, und Totalität, die Idee der Totalität erschafft und construirt, als absolute ursprüngliche Identität des Allgemeinen und Besonderen. Hegel 1968ff., vol. 4: 372 (my emphasis).

20 … ‘Aristotle’s books on the soul, as well as his dissertations on its special aspects and conditions, are still by far the best, and even the sole work of speculative interest on this general topic. The essential purpose of a philosophy of spirit can be none other than re-introducing the Notion into the cognition of spirit, and so-reinterpreting the meaning of these Aristotelian books.’ Introduction, Hegel 1978: 11.

21 This is, I think, the general direction in which Michael Wolff’s groundbreaking study, Das Seele-Körper Problem, is moving (Wolff 1992).

22 The claim still in dispute is similar to one that even Sellars, for all his naturalism, was willing to concede, that an attempt to understand ‘person’ as ‘what science says man is’ must fail, that the ‘reconstruction … is in principle impossible and the impossibility is a logical one.’ Sellars 1963b: 38.

23 Yet even with so little to work with, we have, I hope, seen enough to begin to appreciate the radicality and scope of Hegel’s reformulation (rather than resolution) of traditional discussions of the problem of freedom.

For example, it should be clear that it would be a mistake to read Hegel as a ‘weak monist’ (as DeVries 1988 does). Such a reading would have him holding that there is indeed in the universe only one sort of thing, matter, but arguing for supervenience relations, arranged in a kind of hierarchy of complexity (pp. 41–6). There is something to be gained by seeing Hegel’s position this way, but it can also be misleading. For one thing, most contemporary supervenience theorists hold that fixing all the truths of the ‘base’ or ‘real objects’ language thereby fixes the truths of the higher and supervening language, and this suggests a thesis of determination and explanation that is finally more robustly

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physicalist than Hegel could accept. And secondly, in order to account for the nature-spirit relation (why it arises at all, not just to account for the logical distinction between the explanatory forms), those who interpret Hegel in this way describe a realist teleology in which ‘spirit’ must appear because it is internal to the ‘telos’ of nature. But, I have been trying to stress, the self-realization of Geist does not ‘happen’, and does not ‘develop’ as if it were a kind of metaphysical ‘process’. As we have seen, ‘spirit’ is said to be its own product and its relation to nature is one of ‘liberation’, the overcoming of nature’s immediacy, and hence the great negative labour of the concept.

In a passage from the Kehler-Nachschrift, Hegel anticipates modern forms of neutral or anomalous monism (and emergent property and supervenience theories), and rejects them as ‘Materialismus’, providing no real theory of Geist. Quoted in Wolff 1992: 58.

25 ibid., p. 89.
26 This point especially is made very well and defended persuasively by Brandom 1977: 187–96.
27 Sellars 1963b: 40.
28 Even though in contemporary philosophy such a position on the priority of normativity is associated with Sellars and Sellarseans like Brandom, it is originally Fichte’s position, as I have tried to show in several other papers. Fichte’s constant objection to dogmatism is not a defence of an ontological alternative, but the claim that one couldn’t ‘be’ one, and he is well aware of what else this kind of response commits him to showing. See ‘Fichte’s Alleged One-Sided, Subjective, Psychological Idealism’, forthcoming in The Cambridge Companion to Fichte, ed. Günther Zöller and also in a volume of conference papers edited by Sally Sedgwick.
29 There are Kantians who maintain that Kant too had a notion of a developing and historically maturing commitment to the conception of ourselves as rational beings. Henry Allison, for example, claims that in his philosophy of history, anthropology, culture and teleology, Kant ‘provides a fairly rich, nuanced picture of human reason as a “naturalized”, historically conditioned faculty …’ Allison 1997: 45. But this confuses Kant’s general reflections on the conditions under which the eternally and universally binding authority of reason would be more likely observed, his marginal speculations on ‘what we may hope’ about our ability to withstand better, under different conditions, our ‘twisted’ and ‘radically evil’ dispositions, and a much more radical claim: that reason’s authority as a norm is itself essentially historical, that we do not become such rational creatures until we make ourselves into such beings. Calling reason in Kant a ‘naturalized, historically conditioned faculty’ is thus misleading. We can always do what we ought in Kant, at any age, in any society; and freedom in the Kantian sense is an all or nothing, hardly a ‘historically conditioned’ faculty. (This amounts to a defense of McDowell’s worries about Kant, against Allison’s rejoinders, but, for reasons already indicated, I think Hegel’s position is considerably more historicist and ‘Fichtean’ than any Aristotelian notion of ‘second nature’ will allow. See McDowell 1994: 84–6.
30 This line of interpretation both deflates the importance of the Natur-Geist distinction (the post-Cartesian metaphysical issues are rendered irrelevant, and most contemporary philosophy of mind is bypassed) and also ‘re-inflates’ the status of Geist, although now as a historical achievement, not just a historical event in the becoming of who we now are. The question is not about the irreducibility of the Geisteswissenschaften, but avoiding that issue does not land us, say, in a pragmatic justification of the ‘sciences of meaning’ or Geist-talk in general. (cf. Rorty 1979: 353–6.) The question Hegel’s account raises is not primarily how best to understand meanings, but the question that that one depends on: the sources and
nature of normativity, how we have come to hold each other to certain accounts, and why (the condition of meaning); what goes wrong with certain ways of collectively doing so, what goes right with others. Hegel’s position is so radical because (i) this is all an account of Geist amounts to and (ii) within that account, he defends a sweeping claim: that the advent of modernity marks off a decisive and unsurpassable phase in this attempt, the ‘overcoming of and liberation from nature’.

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