

SUBJECTIVITY AND SUBSTANCE: HEGELIAN FREEDOM IN NATURE AND IN HISTORY

Terry Pinkard
Georgetown University

Among the many developments in philosophy in the last several years has been the relatively recent wave of books and articles, especially in ethics, linking Kantianism with Aristotelianism. Hegelians are not surprised. For Hegel, there was a kind of logic to the key concepts in Aristotle and Kant that inevitably pushed us from one to the other, and something like that thought is behind his notorious summary statement in the *Phenomenology* that “everything hangs on apprehending and expressing the true not merely as *substance* but also equally as *subject*.” Or as we might alternately put it, everything hangs on what in the world we take Hegel to mean by that assertion. Answering that requires us to take a stand on what constitutes Hegel’s idealism and what constitutes his version of naturalism (if there is such a thing as Hegel’s naturalism at all).

Subjectivity in nature

There is a classical and also short answer: The fundamental reality in the world was spirit, and both nature and humanity were both developments of or expressions of that more fundamental reality. In short, Hegel was in that respect a Schellingian. Schelling had in effect transformed Spinoza’s substance into spirit, and nature, so Schelling said, was just “congealed spirit,” so that “matter is nothing else but spirit intuited in the equilibrium of its activities.”¹ On the classic reading, Hegel is only Schelling with something like a “logic” linking the various expressions of spirit to itself that is supposed to replace Schelling’s appeal to some kind of intellectual intuition and to his system of “indifference points” that emerge from the “potencies” (*Potenzen*) of things. Although one of the most hotly debated points in the early reviews of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* had to do with whether Hegel really was a Schellingian, by the 1840’s, the justifiably neglected H. M. Chalybäus seems to have set the classical reading into stone.) Now, although it is true that Hegel started out as a Schellingian of sorts in 1801, already by 1804-1805 he had completely dropped the Schellingian language of the potencies and intellectual intuition in favor of something else and was openly critical of Schelling. To my mind, Eckart Förster has recently shown that the decisive influence in the development of the particularly historical dimension of the *Phenomenology* was Hegel’s acquaintance while writing the book of Goethe’s very non-Schellingian theory of plant metamorphosis.²

There is obviously a lot to that story, so let me just state here a counter-assertion: Essentially Hegel was more of a Kantian-Fichtean than he was a Fichtean-Schellingian. One of the tipoffs that Hegel’s own conception of idealism differs from more ordinary conceptions of idealism lies in one of his favorite metaphors which has to do with how animals are idealists.³ They do not take food to be untrue or one-sided appearances of any underlying reality. They take it to be nutrition, and they are right. Animals are idealists not because they actively constitute the objects of their world. Rather, to use a different metaphor, things “show up” in an animal’s sensory field as food because of the purposes the animal brings to bear on itself and its environment. Lettuce is not food for rabbits because rabbits create lettuce. Rather, lettuce shows up for rabbits as food because of the kind of creatures rabbits are, just as rabbits show up as food for foxes because of the kinds of creatures foxes are.⁴

On the Hegelian (and Fichtean) picture, things in the world show up in our experience depending on the spontaneity at work in that experience. Food can show up to an animal but not to an iron spike. Likewise, to use Hegel’s example, animals can experience illness, a way in which their proper functioning is thwarted, whereas non-purposive entities, like a rock, cannot.⁵ It is only for creatures with the proper nervous systems that things can “show up” as food, and only for self-conscious creatures can other things “show up” in experience as states, constitutions, divinities, artworks, and ethical requirements.⁶ Crucially for Hegel, this is not because the individual subject “posits” these kinds of things. Indeed, it is the Fichtean individualistic language of the “I positing things” that leads directly to images of our imposing form on matter or imposing conceptual meaning on distinct and neutral sensible information, and this is what Hegel wishes to avoid.

The world “shows up” for creatures with a capacity for self-consciousness in a way that it cannot for non-self-conscious creatures. Since receptivity to the world is “within” spontaneity (the conceptual) such that the world can show up in determinate ways to self-conscious creatures, there is nothing “outside” spontaneity, and this means that spontaneity is boundless, *unendlich* (or “infinite” as it is usually translated). Put in this way, Hegel’s idealism is not the idea the world is inherently spiritual but that there is nothing in principle in the world that is unavailable for conceptual thought. Even things that cannot be directly experienced, such as the infinitely small and the infinitely large can show up for conceptual thought when and only when the appropriate conceptual apparatus has been constructed (such as the differential and integral calculus). It is also an idealism in the further sense that the “totality” of such things is only available to thought and not to intuition.

Even if Hegel’s idealism is not Schelling’s idealism, they are both nonetheless metaphysics, but Hegel’s metaphysics is of a very different sort. Moreover, Hegel’s project is not that of an investigation of something like “how we must think” coupled with some view to the effect “and who cares what the world is really like.” It is, rather, a direct descendent of Kant’s *Critiques* and more especially Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*: It is the “science of science,” an account of explanatory adequacy, an account of accounts. It is more like what A. W. Moore and Robert Pippin have recently called “making sense of making sense” (although their conceptions of what it is to “make sense of making sense” differ rather markedly).⁷ That is not and cannot be a system free of ontological commitment, and it is not a system that can be indifferent to the way the world is. However, it is not Schellingian metaphysics.

Nonetheless, one of the main parts of Schelling’s project was his view that if we are to make good on Kant’s and Fichte’s forms of idealism, we are required to fashion a more comprehensive conception of nature that had a place for rational agency within itself. Hegel transformed that part of the project into his own kind of disenchanting Aristotelian naturalism. Indeed, this conception of disenchanting nature as explained through the natural sciences constitutes one of the greatest turning points in history:

The discovery of the laws of nature enabled men to contend against the monstrous superstition of the time, as also against all notions of mighty alien powers which magic alone could conquer... [it turns out that] the Host is simply *dough*, the relics [of the Saints] mere *bones*. The rule (*Herrschaft*) of subjectivity was posited against belief founded on authority, and the laws of nature were granted recognition as the only bond connecting the external with the external. Thus all miracles were disallowed: for nature is now a system of known and recognized laws.”⁸

The task of philosophy, on the other hand, is to ask about the conception of nature that is revealed in such empirically oriented research and to bring it into what Hegel calls the “diamond net” of metaphysics – that is, to inquire into the ultimate intelligibility of this conception of nature. Unlike Schelling, who holds that the overall natural scientific conception of the world is itself inadequate and requires completion with his metaphysics of mind as congealing itself in nature, Hegel holds that what is inadequate about nature for our purposes is that nature is not only not mind “congealed,” it is that nature means nothing, aims at nothing, and cannot organize itself into better or worse. This is “disenchanted” nature.

Nonetheless, there is a place for functional teleology in the structure of organisms that discloses a more limited form of Aristotelian teleology. As noted, for Hegel, the concepts of disease and injury suggest that such explanations have a basis in a real feature of the world. The various organs of a plant or an animal perform various functions that are aspects (or “moments” in Hegel’s terms) of the organism as a whole functioning well. Organisms (the “wholes” of such organs) themselves have two general functions to fulfill: survival and reproduction, even though sometimes the requirements of survival conflict with those of reproduction and vice versa. Because of this, things can be said to go well or badly for the organism (even if the animal does not have the neurological apparatus to note that something is going badly for it). When something external to the normal functioning of the organism interferes with it, and it is prevented (or has difficulty with) achieving the goals appropriate to its life-form, then it can be said to be diseased. To say that an animal is in a diseased state is thus not merely a subjective requirement on our part. If the plant or

animal is diseased, it really is diseased (and it is diseased not merely “for us”). If disease is real, then nature has functions (that is, purposes of a sort) within it, even though nature as a whole is thoroughly non-purposive.

Moreover, although the emergence of life on earth itself fulfills no further purpose, life is nonetheless its own purpose – both Hegel and Kant call it a *Selbstzweck* – even though the purpose of life is distributed among many different creatures who do not share that purpose with each other. As having a purpose of staying alive and reproducing, some animals can also be said to respond to reasons that are more or less in the world. For example, the zebra running from the lion can be said to be responding to a good reason right there before it. More intelligent animals may even maintain a certain flexibility about how they do this and thus display a certain intelligence or at least a high level of cognitive skill. Hegel even attributes subjectivity to those animals, so he clearly sees a kind of continuum at work there in the passages from life to animal life to human life. Things show up to such creatures because of the kind of creatures they are. This is not, at least as far as I can see, an exercise in “category theory.” It is this conception of purposes within a nature that itself aims at nothing which is a major part of “Hegel’s naturalism.”

What then is the difference between animal life and human life? The non-human animal cannot, as both Aristotle and Hegel put it, entertain its purposes *as* purposes.⁹ Humans are self-conscious primates, odd creatures in the natural order, not because they are made of different “stuff” or because their mental events weirdly cause physical events but because they have a distinct kind of self-relation. In a move that Hegel picked up from Hölderlin, he holds that our conscious life is an apperceptive life in which we are always, already “originally” placed in a world of normative involvements. To have an apperceptive life is to have a way of moving within this world of involvements in which there is a normative awareness of what one is doing without there being any separate act of reflection accompanying one’s awareness. Moreover, this form of self-consciousness is part of the very makeup of conscious acts. To be judging, for example, is also to be aware that one is judging, that is, to know (if for example, one is asked) that one is judging and not, say, swimming, or cooking or gardening. (This is a theme central to Robert Pippin’s work on Hegel on self-consciousness.¹⁰) When something goes wrong in those involvements, or when somebody is challenged, we as it were stand back from these involvements to evaluate them. This is standing back “as it were” because in standing back, we are still standing somewhere, even if that somewhere becomes progressively more abstract as we have historically been driven to more abstract self-conceptions. An original division is introduced into self-consciousness because of its capacity to exercise such reflection on itself, and that capacity for reflection means that unlike other animals, human agents can entertain their ends *as* ends.¹¹ It is worth stressing that apperception is not primarily an agent’s reflective relation to the status of her own judgments, although it involves a capacity for such reflection. The absolute identity of the two-in-one of which Hölderlin spoke (at least in the *Being and Judgment* fragment and which we can assume he conversed about with Hegel and Sinclair in Frankfurt) just is the apperceptive self. This conception of agency’s apperceptive self-relation more or less just is Hegel’s metaphysics of subjectivity.

What Wittgenstein said in the *Investigations* – “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” – could easily have been endorsed by Hegel. However, Hegel would add: That we naturally do these things makes all the difference in the world, since in doing so, we thereby make ourselves immediately into subjects, apperceptive selves. We do not cease to be natural creatures, but we do become natural creatures with a different form of self-relation. Here both Hegel and Hölderlin were following in the footsteps of Kant: What distinguishes us is not the stuff out of which we are made but the kinds of activities (like judging) which characterize us. Again, although this is not a non-metaphysical claim, it is also not the kind of monistic claim that Schelling makes. Spirit is its own product, as Hegel provocatively states it, and as we – or, in the nominative form, spirit – develops itself in history, we acquire new capacities to respond to our ends as ends and not merely as drives, impulses, and natural needs.

“How do we make sense of making sense” does not call for the same kind of answer that a question like, “Why did the pipes burst yesterday?” does. In that rather pedestrian way, Hegel is claiming that not all explanations are causal. Still, there can be lingering doubts about whether this account of Hegel’s idealism adequately expresses Hegel’s often stated view that it is the “actual” with which he is concerned, and that the actual is the Idea (with a capital “I” to distinguish it from “ideas,” *Vorstellungen*). Hegel defines the

Idea consistently across his mature works as the unity of concept and objectivity and, sometimes, as the unity of concept and reality. Hegel thought that he had sufficiently argued that explanatory adequacy requires us to differentiate among “making sense of making sense” into the different realms of speaking of particulars, classifying them, or making generalizations (such as “this is red,” or “American Robins live on average 1.7 years”) from judgments like “The tie only looks green in the store but is blue in normal sunlight” and “Deficiency in vitamin D may cause cognitive impairment in older adults”, and yet again from judgments such as “What you just said does not follow from your premises,” or “This makes no sense within the current standards of physics.” (These represent, very roughly, the “logics” of Being, Essence, and Concept.) The point is that although there are lots of ways of making sense of things (as an individual of a type, as appearances of an underlying reality, etc.), those ways of making sense of things also require us to make sense of making sense, of understanding what it is to draw a conclusion from a premise or to fit some claim into a larger picture. (Again, for the purposes of this paper, this is not so much an argument as it is just a restatement of Hegel’s overall view.)

What Hegel calls the “Idea” is the ultimate expression of making sense of making sense. In the “Idea,” we aim at comprehending both how our norms (the various “concepts”) fit together with the world and therefore how, metaphorically, the world does or does not cooperate with us in our endeavors. Being the creatures we are, we are not just reliably differentially responding to the world. We are also justifying our claims about it, about ourselves, and holding ourselves accountable to ourselves and others – in short, making sense of things. Now, what I take Hegel to be claiming when he says things like, “Only the Idea is actual,” is that a unified account of mind and world cannot do without an account of the specifically apperceptive engagement which primates such as ourselves orient ourselves. That requires an account of ourselves as normative but natural creatures. Because we are such natural creatures, as Hegel stresses, “laws and principles have no immediate life or validity in themselves. The activity which puts them into operation and endows them with real existence has its source in the needs, impulses, inclinations, and passions of man.”¹² What is at work, *wirklich*, actual in the human world is that combination of “needs, passions, inclinations” and our sense of what it is we are trying to do, have become, and what we can ultimately account for – only some of which may at any time be clear to us.

What counts as the “Idea” has to do therefore with what we take to be really going on in our individual and collective lives, and here Hegel’s naturalism and his idealism have a substantive and controversial point to make. Whereas Marx, for example, thought that what was really at work in social life was class struggle (although Marx was never so simplistic to think that absolutely everything in social life was class struggle), Hegel thought that what was at work had to do in part with the varying conceptions of authority and the self-conceptions related to those forms of authority. At least in that respect, Marx’s charge that Hegel was an “idealist” was perfectly on target. (However, if we take Marx to be saying that therefore Hegel thought that only “thoughts” were at work in history and social life, then it is not on target.¹³)

It is a major part of Hegel’s views that something like “modernity” is characterized by the “Idea,” a deep-level commitment that nobody is by nature authorized to rule over anybody else. (This is the sense of his thumbnail sketch for his not always attentive young students to the effect that history moves from “one is free to some are free to all are free.”) We are natural creatures who have come with great difficulty to comprehend this truth, and this has had such profound consequences for social and political life that it has taken a couple of thousand years to absorb and to develop the kinds of institutions and practices that can “endow those laws and principles with real existence.” It also even has consequences that Hegel himself rather adamantly refused to draw – for example, that men have no authority by nature to rule women. It is also the case that we have not yet – certainly not by 1820, and not now – succeeded at institutionalizing this Idea.

As it develops, that “Idea” incorporates within itself a comprehension of what it is to be an agent, what kinds of social life are realizable or even possible for such agents, and what the world itself must be if such a view of agency and its associated practices are to have a “real existence.” Even though the social world that is part of our “real existence” may itself be irrational (as large parts of it surely are), the “Idea” behind it may be rational, and, to cite Hegel again, when viewing the world from the standpoint of that developing “Idea “who is not clever enough to see a great deal in his own surroundings which is in fact not what it ought to be?”¹⁴

Reconciliation has to do with understanding the rational necessity of things. This is the problem raised, for example, for Antigone. In terms of the Greek “Idea,” she has “by nature” an unconditional duty to give her brother the appropriate burial rites, an unconditional duty to obey Creon (and thus not give her brother those rites), and, especially as a Greek woman, an unconditional duty not to decide for herself what her unconditional duties are. Since whatever she does is wrong, she knows that by necessity she will suffer for it. “Because we suffer, we acknowledge that we have erred,” so Hegel translates her text. She can be reconciled to this fate only if the Greek Idea continues to make sense, and, or so it is Hegel’s suggestion, because of tensions like this, the Greek Idea increasingly came to make less sense to the Greeks themselves. They found themselves carrying on and committed to norms and ideals that they themselves no longer seemed to understand. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein remarks about a way of doing philosophy such that “one thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.” Wittgenstein concluded that it was “a *picture* [that] held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”¹⁵ Hegel would substitute: it was an Idea held us captive, and we could not get outside of it. So it was for the Greeks, the Romans, and the early moderns. What gets us “out” of such an Idea is not a new and superior Idea but the breakdown of that Idea itself and where we land as it falls apart around us. These breakdowns are dissolutions of meaning, when the general sense of things starts seeming senseless, and we cannot find a way to make sense of making sense. We carry on, but we do not understand what exactly it is we are doing.

This is part of Hegel’s naturalism and his idealism. We are self-conscious primates whose apperceptive orientations are rarely fully clear to ourselves, and as we work them out, we have historically found key elements of them to be unlivable. Hegel does not adhere to the more common reflective picture that we must “stand back” or “stand above” our various commitments and evaluate them or that we are to reflectively take on a practical identity from which to make such evaluations (a view which often claims to be “Kantian” in spirit). In saying that, though, he is also not denying that, say, Greeks could ever “step back” from their determinate commitments and, working within their Idea, make all kinds of adjustments to their practices, nor that they could even take note of great conflicts within their social order. That kind of making good on things is the work of what Hegel calls “the understanding,” in which we often find ourselves with incompatible commitments and strive to bring everything into order. Nothing wrong with that – it is one way we speak of exercising rationality. More interesting to Hegel is how we deal with the consequences of such breakdown when we find ourselves committed but no longer really understanding what we are committed to. In those cases, we have to worry about whether our “Idea” is itself not fundamentally at odds with itself.

The space of reasons and the space of causes

Freedom is consistently characterized by Hegel in terms of *Beisichsein*, “being at one with oneself.” As we might put it more colloquially, one acts freely when the act is “up to you” and not up to somebody or something else (although this formulation will have to be qualified).¹⁶ Being “up to you,” however, has two senses. On the one hand, it can be up to you in terms of your having the authority to carry out the action. On the other hand, it can be up to you in terms of your having the power to carry out the action, that is, to cause the action. Moreover, the opposition between freedom and necessity, or self-determination and natural causality, is certainly real, and, so Hegel thinks, not an opposition that can be simply overcome or defined away.¹⁷

As he sees it, the opposition involves two elements that run into each other. On the one hand, purposes lie in the space of reasons, and the space of reasons sets its own bounds, at least in the sense that what counts as a reason is not limited by anything external to reason itself. (In the terms Hegel himself prefers, reason is infinite, that is, its claims are not bounded by anything other than reason itself. If it were finite, it would be bounded by something external to itself, but for Hegel, reason is not bounded, for example, by non-rational religious revelation.¹⁸) On the other hand, purposes-as-reasons are limited, bounded, and determined on all sides by matters external to the purpose. In that sense, purposes (or more generally, reasons for action) exhibit the same structure as all mind-world relations. The space of reasons is boundless, but all specific reasons are clearly bounded.¹⁹ The authority of a reason is like the authority of a

person. For it to have authority, it must be recognized, but it is never simply identical with its being recognized.

Freedom, something's being up to me in the second sense of my producing the action or event, is, Hegel says, the "concept in its existence."²⁰ Nobody acts in a boundless situation. One has a determinate purpose that one seeks to achieve, that is, to realize. The purpose is, on the one hand, a reason lying within the "infinite" space of reasons (as the "inner") and, on the other hand, the world in which the purpose is realized is the "outer."²¹ The embodied agent seeks to realize the finite purpose by acting in terms of the reason he has for acting. In acting, the agent brings into play mental states, musculature, his nervous system, his perceptual apparatus and other aspects of his embodiment. These are the "means" by which the agent seeks to achieve his purpose. These all involve causal relations, but the relation between the subject and his action is not itself causal. It is, as Hegel argues, more like that of a syllogism, a way in which the purpose (as belonging to the space of reasons) is expressed in a bounded ("finite") world.²² Since the purpose is distinguishable from its realization, it is tempting – as with all such versions of the "Idea" – to think that the distinguishable components are separate "things" (for example, mental events and physical events) that must then be somehow correlated. If that move is made, then as distinguishable items, they seem to be opposed – one lying in the space of reasons, the other in the space of causes.²³ However, the action as an action has a meaning that the so-called external events do not have. The events that transpire – the moving of the body, the change in some aspect of the circumstances – have the meaning that they do only as the realization of the purpose. Likewise, the purpose is the purpose it is only as involving the psychological and bodily means that it has at its disposal as well as the extensions of its embodiment that it creates in making tools.

If this is taken on the normal model means-end mode of reasoning, it would seem to generate an infinite regress. An "internal" purpose would demand an "external" means of realization, and for that it would need yet another means to connect it to that external means, and so on.²⁴ If there is to be no such regress, then the purpose must be immediately connected with its means of realization. The concept that fills the role of immediately connecting purpose and means is the very concept of life itself, specifically, that of an organism whose "totality" is determined in terms of the various functions its "parts" play in the sustaining of the whole, as when the organism does such and such for nutrition, such and such for reproduction, and so on. Although the organism itself need not be designed by an intelligent being to fit a purpose, what it does is to be explained in terms of the purposes, or functions, such as nutrition and reproduction, for the organism as a whole and which make the functions into the necessary functions that they are. Self-conscious primates (human agents), on the other hand, have their purposes as purposes before them, but the general structure is the same: The "inner" is to be taken in terms of its relation to the "outer." The purpose, as belonging to the space of reasons, is the purpose it is only in terms of its being realized in some kind of action. The two – the action and the purpose are not identical – but they are not separable. The agent as a whole is where the regress stops, or, in Hegelian terms, where the mediation between action and purpose takes place. However, the agent himself is not the endpoint of any story. He also belongs to another set of mediations.

What seems like the problem for action – how is the space of reasons translated or shifted into the space of causes? – is made over by Hegel into a different problem. The problem is not how something from one sphere – the "inner," the space of reasons – gets a foot in a completely other sphere – the space of causes – but how, as it were, the unity of reasons and causes are essential to understanding certain entities. Agents are minded creatures, and that means that they are able to give themselves a second nature, a nature that is informed by their conceptual capacities, and to have one's nature informed by one's concepts determines what will show up in one's experience. The ability to see, say, a clock as a clock rests on the way that perceptual experience is and can be informed by the concepts we have at our disposal. (For example, one does not, at least typically, see colors and infer to "clock." Rather, one directly sees a clock.) Likewise, bodily capacities for action can be informed by concepts in a similar way. For example, one wishes to look up a reference and reaches for the dictionary (or clicks on the image of a button that brings up the desired website). Purposes, as reasons, inform the action in the immediate way in which a perception is informed by concepts. An action, as a realization of a purpose, is not an immediate translation of something implicit into something explicit. (Indeed, to see it as primarily a "making explicit" is to treat the inner as determinate on its own, and then to see the issue as that of which of any number of "outer" things best

expresses the already determinate “inner.”²⁵) Actions are norms realizing themselves in behavior, and the meaning they have is social in nature, not fixed entirely by the agent himself.²⁶ The world in which there are actions, that is, events that have a meaning as the realization of purposes, is not a world of internal things determining external things but rather a world in some things mean what they do in terms of what the agents are doing, not just in terms of what is happening. The space of reasons moves into the space of causes only through the mediation of a certain kind of “totality,” namely, the acting agent – as a whole – as having a second nature of dispositions, habits and skills that is informed by his conceptual capacities, themselves learned and honed in a social space.²⁷

The sidesteps the need for a more metaphysical conception of agency-causation. (That is, it achieves what Hegel calls a sublation, an *Aufhebung*.)²⁸ What seems to be the metaphysical chasm between the space of reasons (as “infinite”) and the space of causes (as “finite”) is bridged by the concept of a natural agent whose second nature is informed by his conceptual capacities. As appealing to the space of reasons, sustained in relations of recognition mediated by institutional and practical structures, the agent directs his actions in terms of his purposes, which are the unity of norms as linked with the facts of his nature (the most conceptually important of which is his second nature). For the agent, his mental states and muscular movements cause things, but it is he, not them, who is the cause of the action.²⁹ What is required for action to be under the guidance of the will is neither a special form of causality, nor a causal relation between, say, mental states and actions. It involves more mundane matters, such as learning self-control, learning sometimes to think before acting, and the variety of other acquired habits and skills that self-conscious primates try to instill in their offspring.³⁰ It does not take as its paradigm the idea that “one can always have done otherwise.”

Even in the case of an agent realizing her purpose, the agent must have the requisite standing for it to count as an act of freedom, and only somebody already inhabiting the (infinite) space of reasons can have that standing. (Telling the washing machine it has the “standing” to wash the clothes is pointless. The washing machine does not inhabit the space of reasons.) Although an animal realizes its purposes in acting, agents realize their purposes, as Hegel puts it, *as purposes*.³¹ An agent is self-conscious, which means, to use Hegel’s terms, that to be not merely a purposive organism but rather a free agent, she must negate her immediacy, or, in less Hegelian terms, the agent must be able to put her second nature to work in going beyond the reasons she has at any time in order to reshape that nature by submitting her habits and embodied norms to those of reason itself. If the space of reasons itself is itself developing, then the limits of the agent’s freedom are in part those of the limits of the (finite) space of reasons available to her.

Freedom, finitude and free choice

Although it requires a much longer argument to establish it, there is a Hegelian conclusion that is crucial here: Our modern conditions require a kind of reflective stance on our lives that we can mistake for being a ground-level condition for agency itself. For example, it is clear, if one accepts Hegel’s account, that there simply is no longer any respectable argument to the effect that some by nature have the authority to dominate others. Yet it is also clear that in all the power-structures within which we live, some do in fact irrationally dominate others, and that some forms of domination – here one thinks of all the post-colonial debates together with the ongoing discussions of racism and sexism – have continued to be practiced long after their insufficiencies have been exposed. What is actual – the idea that “all are free” – and which lies behind the various appearances of our social and political world has never, and maybe never will be, fully actualized. (The authoritative concepts at work may never fully be brought into “real existence.”) In fact, what counts as the actualization of an “Idea” is itself almost always a matter of controversy and of existential import, not just a matter of making some internal norm explicit or of living up to some ideal.

It is this sense of being ready to unsettle our settled convictions through a kind of experience – which, for Hegel, paradigmatically comes up in the modern arts – that pushes us on to experience or come to think that what we have been doing up until now as something illusory and not merely not living up to an explicit ideal. Part of the unsettling feature of modernity is that we can think that we have at least settled what we take to be at stake, even while admitting that we have not lived up to such ideals, only to find that under the pressure of reflective thought we turn out not to have settled, except in the abstract, what really was at stake. (Something like this can be found in Hegel’s discussions of the family and our own astonishment at some

of the illusions he himself maintains.) It is this attitude – the willingness to be committed and to be able to ask at any given point whether one has really gotten straight on the “Idea” to which one is committed – that constitutes Hegel’s irony. We know that the actual is that “all are free,” but we have to remain open to the ways in which we find not merely that we are not living up to stated ideals, but that we have only illusorily formulated what was necessary to achieve those ideals. Now, given all the negative things Hegel says about irony, it is hard to credit him with endorsing anything like it. For him, calling himself an ironist of any sort most likely would have meant throwing his hat in with Friedrich Schlegel, and he would probably have preferred sticking needles in his eyes rather than do that. However, the notion of deep commitment coupled with an openness to being unsettled within it is, so Hegel seemed to be arguing in the *Aesthetics*, a condition of sorts for living a modern life. There he says that we are, like it or not, now amphibians, forced to live with the tensions of modern life, convinced that an order in which all are free – so that, as he put it, even the life of the poorest shepherd has infinite worth and remains “untouched by the noisy clamor of world history”³² – is an order that is actual, at work in our world, but in which all kinds of tensions necessarily remain. Moderns have to continually ask themselves just how modern they really are.

It has long been a staple of Hegelian commentary that Hegel contrasts arbitrary free choice to genuine freedom, that is, contrasts or even opposes *Willkür* to *Wille*. On that view, Hegel is in agreement to that extent with Locke, who is careful to insist that liberty is not license.³³ True freedom, on that reading, is to be found in the kind of social morality called “ethical life” (the term of art for translating Hegel’s use of the German, “*Sittlichkeit*”). More recent commentators have also noted (correctly) that Hegel nonetheless makes room for such arbitrary free choice within his conception of true freedom as something somehow appropriate to modern life. Once the distinction between true freedom and arbitrary free choice is attributed to Hegel, then it is tempting to make one further move and to identify true freedom as acting in terms of one’s true self and then to identify the true self with the ethical self (which is contrasted to the untrue self, which acts in terms of arbitrary principles or motives). However, to think that Hegel opposes arbitrary free choice to genuine freedom is to make the same mistake as thinking that Hegel thinks that the finite and the infinite are two separate things (maybe one small and one very big). True freedom is being at one with oneself, and that involves one’s standing, the kinds of things that are authorized by the concrete shape the space of reasons has taken in one’s time. To be free is in part to have the standing to make claims against others, and the feature of a world in which “all are free” is that of each having the standing to make some choices that are indeed arbitrary, where the authority of determining what is driving oneself by and large rests with the individual agent himself. That this form of reciprocal recognition is difficult and precarious is part of Hegel’s point. It requires some very complex practices and institutions – what Hegel identified as the composite of rights, moral obligations, families, civil societies and constitutionally governed states – for it to be actual. That one is authorized to make certain kinds of demands and that it is “up to you” to decide on an action even when it is true that neither you nor anybody else may be in a position to determine how exactly your first and second nature is lining up with your more reflectively determined thoughts about what to do is itself not an obviously easy matter to put into practice.

The tendency to identify the true self with the ethical self is, however, itself informed by Hegel’s own rather classicist leanings. The Hegelian conception of freedom has its home in the “Idea” informing the ancient world. In such a world, there is a normative order, a natural justice that is part of the structure of the cosmos. On that conception, first, the world has a normative order internal to itself even though it was not designed to instantiate that order. Second, each person has a set of ultimate requirements binding him or her depending on where he or she stands in that order (as statesman, father, mother, sister, warrior, tradesman, etc. – these can be conceived somewhat metaphorically as the “office” each holds). When each person fulfills the absolute requirements of his or her respective office, the whole spontaneously harmonizes with itself, but when people violate the absolute requirements of their office, the order of world has to right itself, and the order of things (or the gods) thus punishes them for their transgressions. In that world, nature itself makes sure that what is required for it is brought about, and there is no gap between second nature and subjectivity. People have both the standing and the powers that are appropriate to them. In acting in accordance with one’s ultimate place in the world, one is at one with oneself.

In a disenchanting world, where there is no eternal justice that reigns as part of the cosmos, those items seem to split apart, and the issue of freedom becomes more complex and more fragmented. One cannot assume that nature will guarantee that second nature and rational subjectivity will always coincide. Who

one really is becomes a question that cannot really arise in the ancient world with its conception of the cosmos as a normative order. For example, freedom as “authenticity” can come to seem like a real problem, maybe even a real option where nature does not guarantee any spontaneous harmony in action. As the meaning of authority becomes more clear – or, in Hegel’s language, as our self-consciousness develops – and it becomes clear that nobody by nature rules over anybody else, then the possession or lack of certain powers – for example, literacy and illiteracy – come to play a key role in determining the quality of freedom for actors living in a disenchanted “Idea.” For the illiterate person denied all chance of schooling in an industrial world, the lack of a developed second nature and not only that of an inferior social status form the limits of his or her freedom. That all changed, so Hegel argued, with the French Revolution. Subjectivity acquired a new meaning.

This also sets the stage for the classic Hegelian reconciliation. Out of the unity of nature and spirit there emerges a split as the apperceptive self becomes the reflective self. As that split takes up an institutional role in early modern Europe, the philosophers of the time take it to be a fundamental rift between the normative and the natural. Now we are ready for the reconciliation of the two in a conception of spirit that takes itself to be natural while preserving the gains of Kantian and Fichtean philosophy.

¹ F. W. J. v. Schelling and P. L. Heath, *System of transcendental idealism (1800)*, (Charlottesville, 1978), p. xxxvi, 248 p., p. 92; *Werke*, p. 453 (521 Frank edition)

² E. Förster, *The twenty-five years of philosophy : a systematic reconstruction*, (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. xi, 408 p..

³ Hegel, G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969). §246. . 9: “There is a metaphysics which is all the rage in our time, which holds that we cannot know things because they are completely closed off to us. One could put it this way: Not even the animals are as stupid as these metaphysicians, for they go directly to the things, seize them, grasp them and consume them.” §44. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the philosophy of right*, (Cambridge [England] ; New York, 1991), p. lii, 514 p., , p. 76: “The free will is consequently the idealism which does not consider things as they are to be existing in and for themselves, whereas realism declares those things to be absolute, even if they are found only in the form of finitude. Even the animal does not subscribe to this realist philosophy, for it consumes things and thereby proves that they are not absolutely self-sufficient.” G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Phenomenology of Spirit translated by Terry Pinkard’, (2010)., (§109): “Nor are the animals excluded from this wisdom. To an even greater degree, they prove themselves to be the most deeply initiated in such wisdom, for they do not stand still in the face of sensuous things, as if those things existed in themselves. Despairing of the reality of those things and in the total certainty of the nullity of those things, they, without any further ado, simply help themselves to them and devour them. Just like the animals, all of nature celebrates these revealed mysteries which teach the truth about sensuous things.”

⁴ This language of “showing up” in experience was suggested to me by Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla. See also R. Kukla and M. N. Lance, *'Yo!' and 'lo!': the pragmatic topography of the space of reasons*, (Cambridge, Mass. ; London, 2009), p. xi, 239 p.

⁵ Hegel, G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969)., §371.: “The stone cannot become diseased, because it comes to an end in the negative of itself, is chemically dissolved, does not endure in its form, and is not the negative of itself which expands over its opposite (as in illness and self-feeling). Desire, the feeling of lack, is also, to itself, the negative. Desire relates itself to itself as the negative—it is itself and is, to itself, that which is lacking.”

⁶ This is one way of taking Robert Pippin’s gloss on Hegel’s claim that “self-consciousness is desire itself,” namely, as a way of having certain things show up in experience. R. B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Princeton, 2010).

⁷ A. W. Moore, *The evolution of modern metaphysics : making sense of things*, (New York, 2012), p. xxi, 668 p.

⁸ *Philosophy of History*, Sibree translation, slightly altered.

⁹ Hegel, *Enzyk.* II, §389: “Since the impulse can only be fulfilled through wholly determinate actions, this appears as instinct, since it seems to be a choice in accordance with a determination of an end. However, because the impulse is not a known purpose, the animal does not yet know its purpose as a purpose. Aristotle calls this unconscious acting in terms of purposes φύσις”

¹⁰ R. B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Princeton, 2010)..

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969)., §360: “Da der Trieb nur durch ganz bestimmte Handlungen erfüllt werden kann, so erscheint dies als Instinkt, indem es eine Wahl nach Zweckbestimmung zu sein scheint. Weil der Trieb aber nicht gewußter Zweck ist, so weiß das Tier seine Zwecke noch nicht als Zwecke, und dieses so bewußtlos nach Zwecken Handelnde nennt Aristoteles φύσις.”

¹²G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history : introduction, reason in history*, (Cambridge Eng. ; New York, 1975), p. xxxviii, 252 p., p. 70.

¹³ To take just one minor example of Hegel's idealism: In the lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel dismisses the "pious wish" that if only Christian love were universal, all would be well. Instead, we require a distinctively developed set of institutions to make anything even approaching the conceptions behind that unfulfillable wish even remotely actual. G. W. F. Hegel, *The philosophy of history*, (New York, 1956), p. xvi, 457 p., p. 338: "Right must become ethos and habit; practical activity must be elevated to rational action; the State must have a rational organization."

¹⁴G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), §6.

¹⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations = Philosophische Untersuchungen*, (New York, 1953), p. x, x, 232, 232 p., ##114-115.

¹⁶ This is one of the senses of "bei sich" in Hegel. One is, as it were, taking the phrase literally, "alone with oneself" in the action, that is, the action is "up to you." The full sense is that of being at one with oneself in the existence (or "otherness") of the action, or being at one with oneself in one's dependence on another person (as in love and friendship).

¹⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), pp. 436-437: "Der Gegensatz von *causis efficientibus* und *causis finalibus*, bloß *wirkenden* und *Endursachen*, bezieht sich auf jenen Unterschied, auf den, in konkreter Form genommen, auch die Untersuchung zurückgeht, ob das absolute Wesen der Welt als blinder Naturmechanismus oder als ein nach Zwecken sich bestimmender Verstand zu fassen sein. Die Antinomie des *Fatalismus* mit dem *Determinismus* und der *Freiheit* betrifft ebenfalls den Gegensatz des Mechanismus und der Teleologie; denn das Freie ist der Begriff in seiner Existenz."

¹⁸ The idea that reason might be bounded by, for example, givens of sensuous intuition itself leads to an infinite regress of sorts. When one draws such a line, one is at it were viewing it from a standpoint above the line. The very idea of a limit itself demands its resolution in his conception of the space of reasons as the "absolute." Hegel notes: "Even if the topic is that of finite thought, it only shows that such finite reason is infinite precisely in determining itself as finite; for the negation is finitude, a lack which only exists for that for which it is the sublatedness, the *infinite* relation to itself." G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), §359; G. W. F. Hegel and A. V. Miller, *Hegel's philosophy of nature : being part two of the Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences (1830)*, translated from Nicolin and Pöggeler's edition (1959), and from the *Zusätze in Michelet's text (1847)*, (Oxford/ New York, 2004), p. xxxi, 450 p., p. 385. As Wittgenstein remarked in the preface to his *Tractatus* that "to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense." See L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. The German text of Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, (London, New York, 1963), p. xxii, 166 p. diags., p.

3.

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), pp. 446-447: "Der Zweck ist hiernach *endlich*, ob er gleich seiner Form nach unendliche Subjektivität ist. *Zweitens*, weil seine Bestimmtheit die Form objektiver Gleichgültigkeit hat, hat sie die Gestalt einer *Voraussetzung*, und seine Endlichkeit besteht nach dieser Seite darin, daß er eine *objektive*, mechanische und chemische *Welt* vor sich hat, auf welche sich seine Tätigkeit als auf ein *Vorhandenes* bezieht; seine selbstbestimmende Tätigkeit ist so in ihrer Identität unmittelbar *sich selbst äußerlich* und so sehr als Reflexion-in-sich, so sehr Reflexion nach außen. Insofern hat er noch eine wahrhaft *außerweltliche* Existenz, insofern ihm nämlich jene Objektivität gegenübersteht, so wie diese dagegen als ein mechanisches und chemisches, noch nicht vom Zweck bestimmtes und durchdrungenes Ganzes ihm gegenübersteht./ Die Bewegung des Zwecks kann daher nun so ausgedrückt werden, daß sie darauf gehe, seine *Voraussetzung* aufzuheben, d. i. die Unmittelbarkeit des Objekts, und es zu *setzen* als durch den Begriff bestimmt."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 437. "... *das Freie ist der Begriff in seiner Existenz.*"

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 448. "Das erste unmittelbare Setzen im Zwecke ist zugleich das Setzen eines Innerlichen, d. h. als gesetzt Bestimmten, und zugleich das Voraussetzen einer objektiven Welt, welche gleichgültig gegen die Zweckbestimmung ist."

²² *Ibid.*, p. 448. "Der Zweck schließt sich durch ein Mittel mit der Objektivität und in dieser mit sich selbst zusammen. Das Mittel ist die Mitte des Schlusses. Der Zweck bedarf eines Mittels zu seiner Ausführung, weil er endlich ist, - eines Mittels, d. h. einer Mitte, welche zugleich die Gestalt eines äußerlichen, gegen den Zweck selbst und dessen Ausführung gleichgültigen Daseins hat."

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 448. "Der Zweck bedarf eines Mittels zu seiner Ausführung, weil er endlich ist, - eines Mittels, d. h. einer Mitte, welche zugleich die Gestalt eines äußerlichen, gegen den Zweck selbst und dessen Ausführung gleichgültigen Daseins hat."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 456. "aber dieses Mittel ist ebenso ein schon durch den Zweck bestimmtes Objekt; zwischen dessen Objektivität und teleologische Bestimmung ist ein neues Mittel, und so fort ins Unendliche, einzuschleichen. Damit ist der unendliche Progreß der Vermittlung gesetzt."

²⁵ Hegel makes this point about "realization" versus "making it explicit" difficult in his own texts. He uses *Verwirklichen* and its cognates quite a lot, but he also likes to speak of the "translation" of the inner into the outer quite a bit too. "Translation" suggests that one is making explicit some meaning already there. To make the case against "translation" as "making explicit" one has to take "translation" as metaphorical – but why? – or to go into the way in which translation in its more literary sense is itself a matter of realizing a meaning, not just making one meaning explicit in another one.

²⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), p. 461: “der Begriff hat sich in ihr so bestimmt, daß seine Besonderheit äußerliche Objektivität ist, oder als die einfache konkrete Einheit, deren Äußerlichkeit ihre Selbstbestimmung ist.”

²⁷ Ibid., p. 461: “Die Bewegung des Zweckes hat nun dies erreicht, daß das Moment der Äußerlichkeit nicht nur im Begriff gesetzt, er nicht nur ein Sollen und Streben, sondern als konkrete Totalität identisch mit der unmittelbaren Objektivität ist.”

²⁸ I have argued for this interpretation of “*Aufhebung*” in T. Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*, (2012), p. 240. The point being made here is nonetheless, I think, independent of that interpretation.

²⁹ This explains what would seem like Hegel’s otherwise odd claim that people are “Ideas,” a claim in fact so odd in its surface structure that it looks like a great recommendation to discard that part of the Hegelian terminology altogether. The claim is of that in comprehending the reality of these odd creatures that are self-conscious primates, we speak of them in the dual normative-factual way we speak of all such “Ideas.” Heinrich Heine parodied the oddity of this way of talking when he claims that in a dream, his friend Moses Moser told him “I should not let anything get to me, because I am only an idea, and to prove to me that I am only an idea, you hastily reached for Hegel’s *Logic* and showed me a confused passage in it, and Gans knocked at the window, – but I jumped furiously around the room and yelled: I am not an idea and know nothing about any idea, and my whole life I haven’t had a single idea.” H. Heine, T. P. Pinkard and H. Pollack-Milgate, *On the history of religion and philosophy in Germany and other writings*, (Cambridge, 2007), p. xli, 218 p., p. 121.

³⁰ This relation between the causal and the “syllogistic” conception of action is treated differently in C. Yeomans, *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*, (London, 2011). Yeomans seems to think that it must be accommodated to the libertarian insight into the necessity of open and branching futures, and that requires a more teleological comprehension of the whole. Something like this also seems to underwrite the recent work of Sebastian Rödl. [CITE](#)

³¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), §360; G. W. F. Hegel and A. V. Miller, *Hegel's philosophy of nature : being part two of the Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences (1830), translated from Nicolin and Pöggeler's edition (1959), and from the Zusätze in Michelet's text (1847)*, (Oxford/ New York, 2004), p. xxxi, 450 p., p. 389: “Since the impulse can only be fulfilled through wholly determinate actions, this appears as instinct, since it seems to be a choice in accordance with a determination of an end. However, because the impulse is not a known purpose, the animal does not yet know its purpose as a purpose. Aristotle calls this unconscious acting in terms of purposes *φύσις*.”

³² G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history : introduction, reason in history*, (Cambridge Eng. ; New York, 1975), p. xxxviii, 252 p., p. 92

³³ “But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it.” J. Locke and C. B. Macpherson, *Second treatise of government*, (Indianapolis, Ind., 1980), p. xxiv, 124 p., p. 9.