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Nature, Spirit, and the Question of Subjectivism in Hegel:
Two Key Aspects of Hegel's Treatment of Nature

by

Theodore Craig

Under the Direction of Sebastian Rand, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that two key aspects of Hegel's treatment of nature in his *Philosophy of Nature* point to an important subjectivist thread running through the work. First, I consider Hegel's claim that (§1) spirit is prior to nature, and second, I consider the claim that (§2) nature is the Idea in the form of otherness. For Hegel, spirit is prior to nature because it most fully expresses the Idea, whereas nature is the Idea in the form of otherness. In the final portion of the paper, (§3) I examine the consequences of these claims for the status of nature in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* system. Although Hegel's philosophy should not be considered subjectivist in a Kantian sense, there is still an important dimension of subjectivism in his treatment of nature. I argue that Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* is subjectivist in the sense that he believes nature is essentially—though not fully—a subject.

INDEX WORDS: Hegel, German Idealism, Philosophy of Nature, Philosophy of Mind, Naturalism, Subjectivism

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2022

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Two Key Aspects of Hegel's Treatment of Nature

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August 2022

DEDICATION

For my parents, James and Kiyoi.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and feedback of Sebastian Rand. I am also grateful to Jessica Berry, Heather Phillips, Juan Piñeros Glasscock, and Andrea Scarantino for their continued support throughout my time at Georgia State.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

All references to Hegel's work will use the following abbreviations. In the case of the tripartite *Encyclopedia*, I will use the abbreviation, section number, followed by 'A' for *Anmerkung* or 'Z' for *Zusatz* when appropriate. For example, the citation 'PS 381A' refers to the Remark (*Anmerkung*) following section 381 of the *Philosophy of Spirit*.

- EL Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2015. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic*. Translated by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PS Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2010. *Philosophy of Spirit*. Edited by Michael Inwood. Translated by A. V. Miller and W. Wallace. New York: Oxford University Press.
- PN Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2007. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the 'Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences' (1830)*. Edited by J.N Findlay. Translated by A.V Miller. New York: Oxford University Press.
- D Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1977. *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. Edited and translated by H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- SL Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2010. *Science of Logic*. Edited and translated by George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- F Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1977. *Faith and Knowledge*. Edited and translated by Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris. Albany: State University of New York Press.

INTRODUCTION

One way to frame the German idealist tradition is to place front and center the problem of subjectivism, the view that external objects are only mental objects within the circle of consciousness. A number of recent interpretations of Hegel have looked to his *Philosophy of Nature* (PN)¹— where he treats the question “What is nature?”—as offering conclusive evidence of his naturalism, and thus as ruling out a Hegelian subjectivism.² Terry Pinkard, for example, has argued that “[t]he specific character” of Hegelian idealism “emerges in Hegel’s discussion of nature” and is best understood as a “disenchanted Aristotelian naturalism” (Pinkard, 2012:19). Accordingly, Pinkard’s reading of PN focuses on what nature must be like for “minded” animals to develop within it and for spirit to emerge from it. Yet, defending such an interpretation is quite difficult given Hegel’s insistence that “the emergence of spirit from nature must not be conceived as if nature were absolutely immediate, the first” because “spirit is what is absolutely first” (PS 381Z). Such remarks pose a formidable obstacle for interpreters who wish to ground a less subjectivistic version of Hegel in his treatment of nature. While PN can seem to offer resources for such a naturalism, both its content and its methodology point away from nature, and thus away from naturalistic readings, towards the logical and metaphysical priority of spirit, mind, or *Geist*, and thus in an apparently subjectivistic direction.

In this paper, I focus on two key claims in PN: first I consider Hegel’s claim that (§1) spirit is prior to nature and second, I consider the claim that (§2) nature is the Idea in the form of otherness. For Hegel, spirit is prior to nature because it most fully expresses the Idea, whereas

¹ I use the Miller translation of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*, but I have occasionally made my own adjustments to Miller’s translation. For instance, I have opted to use the term “Concept,” rather than “Notion” as Miller does, in translating “*Begriff*.”

² For the view that Hegel’s philosophy moves away from subjectivism towards naturalism and realism, see Beiser (2002), Kreines (2015), Stern (1990), Stone (2005), Ng (2020), and Pinkard (2005) (2012).

nature is the Idea in the form of otherness. In the final portion of the paper, (§3) I examine the consequences of these two key claims. I first argue that although Hegel's philosophy should not be considered subjectivist in a Kantian sense, there is still an important thread of subjectivism in his treatment of nature. Hegel's PN is subjectivist in the sense that nature is essentially—though not fully—a subject.

1 THE PRIORITY OF SPIRIT OVER NATURE

Throughout his mature work, the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel repeatedly claims that spirit has priority over nature, often referring to spirit as nature's truth.³ Part of what he means by this claim is the merely epistemological and furthermore uncontroversial thesis that nature can only be known by spirit, and thus our knowledge of nature depends upon spirit. In making this claim, Hegel is not far from Kant, in that both see knowledge of nature as epistemically dependent upon subjectivity. However, Hegel goes much further than Kant in claiming that nature's essential characteristic is that it is "only relative," in the sense of being "essentially related to a First" (PN 247Z). For Hegel, spirit is not only epistemically prior to nature— because knowledge of nature requires a knowing subject— but conceptually prior to nature— because nature without spirit would be in an important sense incomplete.

1.1 Anthropocentrism in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*

Although Hegel enjoys expressing himself in sweeping and general terms, the principle of spirit's priority over nature is not left in such terms. It is rather instantiated on the ground as well, for instance in Hegel's account of animals. Here his anthropocentrism—and thus the priority he accords to spirit as human mindedness— is on full display, as when he explicitly says that the animal in general, including higher-order non-human animals, can only be understood with reference to "the perfect animal" —the human (PN 370Z). To be clear, this anthropocentrism is not merely a claim about the biological constitution of some species of mammals, humans, being

³ PN 251, "Spirit [...] is the truth and final goal of Nature, and the genuine actuality of the Idea." See also PN 376Z, "Spirit [...] is *prior* to it [Nature], Nature has proceeded from spirit[...] in such a manner that spirit is already from the very first implicitly present in Nature." See also, PS 381, "Spirit is the truth of nature, and is thus *absolutely primary* with respect to it." PS 388, "Spirit has *come into being* as the truth of nature. [...] this result has the meaning of the truth and of what is prior[...]" See also PN 248A, "Nature appears as First[...]" only to sensory consciousness. Hegel also makes clear that nature *qua* nature is not to be "divinized," and that any product of Spirit ("mental image, the slightest fancy of mind, the ply of its most capricious whims") is a far superior basis for knowledge of God.

the most complex or fully developed. The natural features of the human species—such as its hands—do figure into such a narrative, especially in his *Anthropology*; however, what makes the human the highest animal is not some natural feature but its spirituality, for what makes those features salient in the first place for Hegel is that they are the expression and actualization of spirit (PN 370Z, PS 411, 411A, 411Z). Thus, the point is that Hegel’s anthropocentrism regarding animal lifeforms is a direct consequence of the priority he accords spirit.

Now, Hegel’s anthropocentrism is not a mere epistemic thesis that the concept of the perfect animal serves as a heuristic principle for how *we* must understand animal lifeforms regardless of what they actually are. He is not claiming that we impose a hierarchical conceptual order upon nature, ranking humans above other forms of natural life, because we can only know nature as if it were a *Scala Naturae*.⁴ For one, were Hegel’s anthropocentrism is strictly epistemic, he would be guilty of the same version of subjectivism he so ardently criticized in Kant.⁵ The version of subjectivism Hegel found so problematic in Kant was a skeptical one that viewed conceptual determinations of objects as being merely subjective and as not pertaining to things themselves.⁶ For the purpose of focusing on Hegel, I will bracket the question of whether Hegel’s interpretation is an adequate interpretation of Kant. Let’s characterize this version of subjectivism as follows:

Skeptical subjectivism (S): Human knowledge is only of appearances; we do not have knowledge of objects as they are in themselves apart from our forms of intuition.

⁴ Terry Pinkard, for instance, sometimes seems to endorse such an epistemic view when he speaks of the conceptual requirements that *we* have in order to think of nature coherently, even though nature itself is (or might be) otherwise. According to Pinkard, “[Hegel’s PN] expresses the necessary classifications involved in the Idea of nature” but these are only classifications “*for us* (for *Geist*)” (Pinkard, 2002: 272).

⁵ See Hegel’s remarks that teleology in Kant “[...] only serves as a maxim for our limited human understanding [...] This *human* perspective is not supposed to affirm anything concerning the reality of nature. The perspective remains wholly subjective” (D 163).

⁶ See, for example, Hegel’s extensive discussion on the Kantian philosophy at the beginning of the *Encyclopedia*, “[E]ven Kantian objectivity of thinking itself is in turn only subjective insofar as thoughts, despite being universal and necessary determinations are, according to Kant, *merely our* thoughts and distinguished from what the thing is *in itself* by an unsurmountable gulf” (L 41Z).

It's worth noting that according to S there may be mind-independent objects; however, if there are, then we simply can have no knowledge of them. As it pertains to the knowledge of animal lifeforms, Hegel clearly rejects S and endorses a much stronger ontological thesis that the highest animal presents us with the "standard" through which we can know non-human animals to be constitutively "undeveloped" (PN 352Z, 370Z). That is, the conceptual determinations identified in the perfect animal are not imposed upon nonhuman animals—which may for all we know be otherwise. Rather, the conceptual determinations given in the perfect animal articulate the essence of all animal lifeforms. As Hegel says, "[t]here is only one animal type and all varieties are merely modifications of it" (PN 370Z). Hegel goes so far as to say that if the variety of animal lifeforms do not align with "the general determinations" given in the perfect animal "which must be made the rule[.]" then – *contra* empirical, inductivist method – "it is not the rule [...] which is to be altered, as if this had to conform to these existences, but conversely, it is the latter [the existent animal lifeform] which ought to conform to the rule; and insofar as this actual existence does not do so, the defect belongs to *it*" (PN 370Z). Insofar as animal lifeforms fail to exhibit those determinations given in the concept of the perfect animal, these lifeforms are imperfect.

Despite Hegel's outright rejection of S, there is nevertheless a clear dimension of subjectivism in his treatment of animal lifeforms, albeit of a different type.⁷ To understand what distinguishes a Hegelian subjectivism from the epistemic counterpart, we need to have a better

⁷ We can see further examples of Hegel's rejection of subjectivist skepticism in his criticisms of empiricism in the introductory *Zusatze*. "Now although the empirical treatment of Nature has this category of universality in common with the Philosophy of Nature, the empiricists are sometimes uncertain whether this universal is subjective or objective; one can often hear it said that these classes and orders are only made as aids to cognition." Hegel claims that the conceptual determination of natural objects—natural laws, forces, genera, or species— are not "subjective additions" imposed from without by us; rather, "they are the objects' own inner essence; the orders not only serve to give us a general view, but from a graduated scale of Nature itself." (PN 246Z)

understanding of what kind of priority spirit has over nature—the character of which becomes evident in Hegel’s methodological approach to nature.

1.2 The Conceptualizing Approach to Nature

Hegel gives an indication of the kind of priority spirit has over nature at the beginning of PN when he addresses the goal of PN. Although PN does aim to answer the question “what is nature?,” Hegel never characterizes the goal of PN as a mere knowledge of nature. Rather, the goal of a philosophy of nature is “that spirit find in nature its own essence” (PN 246Z, 251).⁸ The point is that spirit’s essence is subjectivity, and it is in this sense that Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie* is subjectivist.

For Hegel, an answer to the question “what is nature?” must involve accounting for what nature must be like in order to be intelligible in the first place; an answer to that question is to be found, as he says, only in “reference to the knowledge of nature” (PN Introduction Z). The core of the argument is that any coherent account of what nature is ontologically (e.g., it is atoms and void, monads, substance, will, etcetera) simultaneously demands a solution to the epistemological problem of how knowing it to be such is possible, and this methodological criterion shows that the conception of nature as a realm of objectivity devoid of subjectivity— a position common to many physicalist naturalists— is a nonstarter for the understanding of nature.⁹ It is not just that subjectivity is an epistemic requirement for knowledge of nature, and hence, any picture of the natural world cannot coherently eliminate subjectivity while also

⁸ Hegel does not restrict this aim to *Naturphilosophie* alone. Hegel believes that all knowledge is directed at the recognition of spirit. “All activity of the mind is, therefore, only an apprehension of itself, and the aim of all genuine science is just this, that mind shall recognize itself in everything in heaven and on earth. There is simply no out-and-out Other for the mind” (PS 377Z).

⁹ Typically, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is thought to be the work where he most systematically addresses the question of knowledge; however, the entire introductory *Zusatze* to PN focuses on the metaphysical question “What is Nature?” and he claims that we can only provide an answer to this question by transcending the “one-sidedness of the theoretical and practical approaches to nature” in a conceptual treatment of nature.

claiming to know it; for Hegel, this epistemic requirement has ontological significance. Hegel's claim is that in knowing nature at all, we must know nature to be implicitly a subject and to exemplify types of subjectivity. In Hegel's words, we must "find in this externality only the mirror of ourselves" (PN 376Z). Only an approach that recognizes "Nature as free in her own peculiar vital activity"—as being a kind of subject— can know nature. Such an approach sees nature as exemplifying a hierarchy of subjectivity culminating in spirit (PN 245Z). Hegel calls this approach a "conceptualizing approach" to nature (PN 246).

Hegel arrives at the "conceptualizing approach" by showing that the two approaches we ordinarily adopt towards nature—practical and theoretical approaches— fail to answer the question "what is nature?" We can only answer this question if we integrate the practical and theoretical into a unified approach to nature. The practical approach— as when we utilize nature for our own purposes by, e.g., building homes from natural materials or by reshaping an environment for better farming— treats nature merely as a means to satisfy this or that end, and in so doing, understands nature to be exhausted by *our* own ends (PN 245). In the theoretical approach— as when we attempt to step back, as we do in natural science, to understand nature as something independent of us— we are directed at knowing nature, but this approach fails to adequately grasp nature independent of the subject (PN 246). The theoretical approach, Hegel argues, is "self-contradictory" because simply by thinking of nature we transform it from what it is, an immediate existent object, into something it is not, a thought or a universal concept— "natural objects do not think, and are not presentations or thoughts" (PN 246Z).¹⁰

¹⁰ "[T]he theoretical approach is self-contradictory, for it seems to bring about the direct opposite of what it intends; for we want to know the Nature that really is, not something that is not. But instead of leaving Nature as it is, and taking it as it is in truth, instead of simply perceiving it, we make it into something quite different. In thinking things, we transform them into something universal; but things are singular and the Lion as Such does not exist. We give them the form of something subjective, of something produced by us and belonging to us, and belonging to us in our specifically human character: for natural objects do not think, and are not presentations or thoughts" (PN 246Z).

Hence, both approaches are incapable of telling us what nature is because they each fail to demonstrate that they stand in any relation to an independent nature. Hegel goes so far as to say they fail to show that they are approaches to nature at all: the practical approach treats nature and natural things as “nothing in themselves[,]” only a means for our purposes; and the theoretical approach cannot explain how the concepts, by which it understands nature, pertain to nature and are not merely subjective concepts *in us* (PN 246Z). Although these approaches fail independently, they each offer elements which are requisite for the knowledge of nature.

Starting from a fundamental gap between spirit and nature, subject and object, as the theoretical approach does, is a dead end; instead, we need to start from their unity. However, to unify the two in a distinct third thing—like an independent Platonic form in which both spirit and nature participate— would only raise the question of how the third thing relates to both spirit and nature. Rather, nature and spirit must be unified within one of these terms. Yet, if we accept the epistemic requirement (that subjectivity is required for knowledge), then nature cannot be devoid of subjectivity while also being known to be so. Nature, taken as wholly non-subjective, cannot be the basis for understanding nature; such a nature has no awareness of itself and cannot tell us what it is. Thus, nature alone cannot account for how nature is knowable at all. Hegel’s point is that there is a clear asymmetry between nature and spirit: spirit can be the basis for the understanding of nature and spirit, whereas nature cannot. Hence, self-knowing spirit is prior to nature, and it is only in and through spirit that the unity of nature and spirit can be known.¹¹

¹¹ Hegel makes a very similar argument when he speaks of the weakness of materialist philosophies in the *Anthropology*: “[T]he standpoint of separation is not to be regarded as final, as absolutely true. On the contrary, the separation of the material and the immaterial can be explained only on the basis of the original unity of both. [...] this unity must not be taken as something neutral in which two extremes of equal significance and independence come together, since the material has no meaning at all beyond that of a negative over against spirit and over against itself” (PS 389Z).

“[T]he healing of this breach [between nature and spirit]” must be found in spirit, “the solution must be sought in consciousness itself” (PN 246Z).¹²

What we need, Hegel argues, is an approach that unites spirit and nature, an approach that can account for its own relation to nature—whether the relation is one of grasping nature in thought or acting within nature. The comprehending approach—what Hegel also calls the “true teleological method”—integrates moments of the practical and theoretical approaches to nature into a totality; it sees purposes or ends (practical moment) as inhering immanently in nature’s own structure (theoretical moment). In short, it recognizes nature as being self-determining in its own way and in doing so it sees spirit everywhere “implicit in nature” (PN 376Z). Only an approach that accounts for the unity of nature and spirit by seeing nature as exhibiting subjectivity at various levels of its existence could coherently answer the question “what is nature?”¹³ What Hegel means to show us by bringing together the practical and theoretical approaches to nature is that we can only truly grasp nature if we see it as being, to some degree, a subject capable of grasping its own ends. In other words, nature aims at subjectivity. However, although nature is permeated by subjectivity—and so there are ‘ends’ immanent in the natural world for Hegel—subjectivity is only truly brought to fruition in spirit. Spirit is nature’s “truth and final goal” (PN 251). Thus, nature without spirit is incomplete. It is in this sense that spirit is prior to nature.

¹² Christian Martin’s (2021) recent essay, “Three Attitudes Towards Nature,” is helpful here. Martin shows that Hegel’s PN articulates a philosophical orientation towards nature capable of conceiving of it as a unity, an orientation which empirical sciences are unable to give. However, Martin’s emphasis that the unity of nature is an *aesthetic, felt* unity directly contradicts Hegel’s claims that the sought for unity takes place in the *cognition* the comprehends, that is, in spirit (Martin, 2021: 9-11). In making the unity of nature an aesthetic, felt unity rather than a unity in cognition, Martin’s interpretation more closely resembles Goethe’s or Schelling’s philosophy of nature, which Hegel derides as being “naïve” (PN 246Z). For Hegel, the unity must not be an immediate one in feeling, but a resultant unity in cognition.

¹³ Joshua Wretzel’s (2021) recent essay, “Hegel’s Critique of Materialism” clearly articulates a related point concerning Hegel’s conception of immaterialism: “[T]here is simply no way to understand the fit between mind and nature without also fundamentally changing the way we understand nature” (Wretzel, 2021: 161).

2 NATURE IS THE IDEA IN THE FORM OF OTHERNESS

Although Hegel recognizes nature as exemplifying a variety of subjectivity, it is only in spirit that subjectivity is fully expressed. In what follows, I hope to show that the priority accorded to spirit in Hegel's philosophy is due to its being the fullest manifestation of the Idea. Once we understand the specific way that nature is the Idea, we can appreciate the centrality and importance Hegel accords to spirit, and consequently, shed light on the subjectivist dimension in his treatment of nature.

The Idea is the central point around which Hegel's system moves, and it is his preferred term for the unity of concept and reality.¹⁴ Each sphere within the *Encyclopedia*—Logic, PN, and PS—exhibits a different relation between the concept and its reality. Hegel describes the Idea at the beginning of the *Encyclopedia* as “the true *in and for itself, the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity*” (L 213). Yet, part of the challenge of understanding the status of nature in Hegel's system involves determining what Hegel means by calling nature the “Idea in the form of otherness.”

2.1 The Impotence of Nature

For Hegel, nature has a paradoxical character. On the one hand, he claims that nature is *in itself* the Idea (PN 248A). In saying so, Hegel means that nature has an intelligible structure due to the concept being immanent within it. Hegel even goes so far as to say that “the being of Nature is essentially ideality” which is to say that nature is essentially intelligible (PN 247Z). Yet, on the other hand, Hegel also claims that the Idea *as it is in and for itself*, as the perfect conformity of concept and reality, is ultimately “not present in nature”—and only first appears in spirit.¹⁵ Hegel

¹⁴ The term “Concept” or *Begriff* in Hegel, translated as “Notion” by Miller, is contentious, but it is generally agreed upon that *Begriff* designates the conceptual or intelligible structure that constitutes an object.

¹⁵ See, PN 247Z, “Since Nature is the Idea in the form of otherness, the Idea, conformable to its Concept, is not present in Nature as it is in and for itself, although nevertheless, Nature is one of the ways in which the Idea

is adamant in the introduction to PN that nature in its immediate existence fails to accord with its own conceptual structure perfectly. He calls this inability of nature to exemplify its own conceptual structure the “impotence” of nature, and it is because of this impotence, Hegel says, that natural entities are vulnerable to deformity, are not easily classifiable empirically, and are “a prey to boundless and unchecked contingency” (PN 248A). However, these two characterizations of nature—as both “impotent” and *in itself* the Idea—are in tension with one another. Insofar as nature is the Idea—and the Idea is the unity of concept and reality—nature is essentially, even if only implicitly, that same unity. Yet, insofar as nature is impotent, it is incapable of explicitly presenting such a unity. Hence, Hegel refers to nature as the “contradiction of the Idea” and the “unresolved contradiction” (PN 248A, 250).

The contradiction manifests an apparent tension in Hegel’s approach to nature. As Hegel claims, “The *contradiction* of the Idea, [...] is more precisely this: that on the one hand there is the *necessity* of its [Nature’s] forms which is generated by the Concept, and their rational determination in the organic totality; while on the other hand, there is their indifferent *contingency* and indeterminable irregularity” (PN 250). The tension stems from Hegel’s commitment to both the intelligibility of nature, which Hegel attributes to the presence of the concept immanent in nature, and his commitment to that same nature being unable to make its existence conform to its conceptual structure explicit, which Hegel believes explains the difficulty, even the “impossibility,” of finding fixed natural kinds based on an empirical treatment of nature¹⁶. That nature is intelligible at all is due to the concept being immanent in

manifests itself, and is a necessary mode of the Idea.” See, also, PN 374 “Natural existence as such does not itself contain this universality [of the concept] and is not therefore the reality which corresponds to it [the concept]” and PN376Z “The living being is, it is true, the supreme mode of the Concept’s existence in Nature; but here, too, the Concept is present only in principle.”

¹⁶ See, for example, “This is the impotence of Nature, that it preserves the determinations of the concept only *abstractly*, and leaves their detailed specification to external determination” (PN 250). See also, “Undoubtedly, traces of the determination by the Concept are to be found even in the most particularized object, although these

nature, but that natural things are not exhausted by their conceptual determinations is due to nature's being impotent.

Now, despite the insistence that nature is the “unresolved contradiction,” nature's most essential aspect is to be found in its concept. Hegel's emphasis on this conceptual dimension of nature—and so on nature's being implicitly the Idea—is clearly visible in the way Hegel resolves the earlier opposition in our ordinary approaches to nature by proposing a synthesis of theoretical and practical approaches to nature, what he calls a comprehending or conceptualizing approach. According to such an approach, the “universal aspect of things,” arrived at through thinking, is what constitutes the essence of natural things (PN 246Z). As Hegel says, “Not until one does violence to Proteus—that is not until one turns one's back on the sensuous appearance of Nature—is he compelled to speak truth[,]” and even “Philosophical, true idealism consists in nothing else but laying down that the truth about things is that as such immediately single, i.e. sensuous things, they are only a show, an appearance” (PN 246Z). In short, nature is not independent of the Idea for Hegel. Nature is the Idea, yet *qua* nature, it exists in “the form of otherness”—as not fully expressing the unity of concept and reality.¹⁷ “[O]nly in spirit,” Hegel says, “does absolute unity of concept and reality occur” (PS 386).

2.2 Spirit is the Truth of Nature

Although nature and spirit are both modes of the Idea, the major difference between the two is that spirit fully expresses the Idea by exhibiting an identity of concept and reality. At times,

traces do not exhaust its nature. Traces of this influence of the Concept and of this inner coherence of natural objects will often surprise the investigator, but especially will they seem startling, or rather incredible, to those who are accustomed to see only contingency in natural, as in human, history. One must, however, be careful to avoid taking such a trace of the Concept for the total determination of the object” (250R).

¹⁷ “Since Nature is the Idea in the form of otherness, the Idea, conformable to its Notion, is not present in Nature as it is in and for itself [i.e., as it is in Spirit], although nevertheless, Nature is one of the ways in which the Idea manifests itself, and is a necessary mode of the Idea” (PN 247Z).

Hegel even equates spirit with the Idea, saying that “spirit is the infinite Idea” and spirit is the “genuine actuality of the Idea” (PN 251, PS 386).¹⁸ Nature, on the other hand, does not explicitly present the Idea as it is in itself; nature presents the Idea in the form of otherness—a form whose existent reality fails to match up with its concept. At the beginning of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel calls spirit “the truth of nature” because spirit—by presenting the Idea—presents nature’s own essence (PS 381).

Hegel also characterizes spirit as the “self-knowing Idea” and as the “simple self-relation” (PS 381Z, 382). Cutting across all these characterizations is a certain way of framing the concept/reality distinction. What Hegel means in saying that spirit is the identity of concept and reality is that spirit can grasp itself in thought and that in doing so spirit is what it is. That is, something is spirit by virtue its self-knowing. Spirit, for Hegel, is not some discrete entity¹⁹—as it was for Descartes, a thinking substance, — but is essentially characterized by its own active self-reference. What characterizes spirit is not only that it bears a certain structure (i.e., the unity of its concept and its reality) but that its structure shows how spirit’s self-knowledge must be isomorphic with its actualization— “in self-knowing spirit the product is one and the same as that which produces it” (PS 379Z). In Hegel’s words, “Spirit is essentially only what it knows itself to be” (PS 385Z). All of which is to say, that the development of a self-understanding of spirit would at the same time be an expression of spirit.

Although nature does achieve varying degrees of subjectivity, and thus varying degrees of self-knowledge, natural entities do not make themselves into what they are by knowing

¹⁸ In PN 258A, he states, “[T]he True [...] the Idea, Spirit, is *eternal*.” He also, at other times, contrasts the Idea with nature in, for example, PN 248Z, “Nature is the negative because it is the negative of the Idea. This existence [immediate natural existence], however, is only momentary, not a true existence; the Idea alone exists eternally[.]”

¹⁹ “Spirit is not an inert entity but is rather what is absolutely restless, pure activity [...] not an essence that is already complete before its appearing, keeping to itself behind the mountain of appearances, but truly actual only through the determinate forms of its self-revelation” (PS 378Z).

themselves to be such.²⁰ Hence, Hegel everywhere refers to nature as “unmindful of itself,” “estranged from itself,” and “external to itself” (PN 247, 247Z).²¹ It is otherwise in spirit. The kind of self-knowing in spirit achieves an isomorphism between the concept of spirit and its actuality. In short, knowing itself to be a certain way can constitute what spirit is (or makes of itself).

²⁰ For example, the animal organism, by pursuing other members of its species with which to reproduce, displays a degree of self-awareness concerning its own participation in a genus; it “recognizes” its own genus as being in another member of the species.

²¹ Nature’s inability to know itself in a fully robust way is also a reason why nature cannot serve as the basis for the unity of nature and spirit.

3 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STATUS OF NATURE IN THE SYSTEM

Up to now, I've argued that Hegel accepts (§1) spirit is conceptually prior to nature due to the very fact that (§2) nature fails to fully express the Idea. Thus, nature is not self-sufficient. In the remainder, I wish to flesh out some of the consequences that I believe follow from my interpretation.

If Hegel is subjectivist in any sense, it is not because he believes that human knowledge of nature stops short of knowing what nature really is (as S above did). Hegel has already criticized the one-sidedness of the theoretical approach to nature, which treats it as an alien other, and claimed that the original identity of subject and object in “the cognition which comprehends” does not merely grasp nature *for us* but gets at the *essence of things*.²² Nevertheless, he must be considered subjectivist in another sense because he accepts the thesis that nature itself is, to some degree, a subject, or displays varying degrees of subjectivity and self-determination. We can distinguish this form of subjectivism as follows:

Natural Subjectivism: Nature consists in a variety of subjectivity that form a hierarchy from lowest-levels to the highest-levels of subjectivity.

The key to this version of subjectivism is that subjectivity culminates in spirit. For Hegel, we can make sense of nature's subjectivity only if we recognize spirit as the completion of nature's goal. It is in this sense that nature without spirit would be incomplete. Formulated in this way, we might be tempted to say that Hegel does not believe that the natural world is mind-dependent at all, rather it is merely mind-like or spirit-like.²³ However, there is a further sense in which Hegel is a subjectivist that follows from spirit's being the fullest expression of the Idea.

²² See, for example, “This universal aspect of things is not something subjective, belonging to us: rather is it, in contrast to the transient phenomenon, the noumenon, the true, objective actual nature of things themselves” (PN 246Z).

²³ Inwood (1992: 129) also claims that Hegel's idealism is, at least in part, the thesis that the world is “mind-like.”

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel claims that things are actual only to the extent that they exhibit the Idea. He states, “[T]he idea is the unity of the concept and objectivity, the true, we must not regard it as just a *goal* which is to be approximated but itself remains always a kind of *beyond*; we must rather regard everything *as being* actual only to the extent that it has the idea in it and expresses it.” (SL 12.174). What follows from these claims is that nature, to the extent that it does not achieve full subjectivity, should not be considered actual. The affirmative element in nature is the manifestation of the concept in it, but the concept is only brought to full expression in the realm of spirit.

Hegelian subjectivism: Everything is actual to the extent that it expresses the Idea, and the Idea is fully expressed in spirit.

Because nature *qua* nature is only the “self-degradation” of the Idea, it is relegated to a lower status in terms of its actuality (PN 248R). Thus, Hegel calls nature “derivative,” “untrue,” “the negative,” and even “non-being” (PN 248R, 376Z, PS 388). Such a status can be seen if one recognizes the internal linear progression happening within Hegel’s PN, a progression that moves from the most “self-external” dimensions of nature—and so least subjective—, such as the spheres of mechanical physics and chemistry, to the most self-internalized and subjective dimensions of nature, such as it occurs in organic life. Yet, even the highest sphere of nature, that of non-human animal life, fails to adequately unite its concept with its own reality. Hence, PN’s linear progression tracks with nature’s attempt to express its subjectivity and make manifest the Idea, but this progression exemplifies a goal that is only achieved in spirit which actualizes the Idea.

It is this sense of subjectivism that is the most controversial in Hegel interpretation. It is a version of subjectivism that has commonalities with traditional metaphysical interpretations of

Hegel.²⁴ According to these traditional readings, the subject plays an ontological role in bringing the object into being. Further research into the subjectivistic character of Hegel's philosophy ought to clearly distinguish Hegel's use of the terms actuality from existence (or existent natural things). Hegel frequently refers to finite natural things as having existence, though he does not accord them actuality. A fuller treatment of this distinction might temper Hegel's seemingly bombastic claims. Nevertheless, I have tried to show throughout this paper that while we would be wrong to construe the natural world in Hegel's view as merely the objects of finite consciousness, we cannot neglect the centrality that subjectivity plays in constituting the natural world for Hegel.

²⁴ As found in Beiser (2005), Solomon (1987), and Taylor (1975).

4 CONCLUSION

In my paper, I have argued that Hegel's PN should be understood considering two key aspects that suggest there is a subjectivist dimension to the work: the priority of spirit over nature and the fact that nature's otherness is relative to the Idea. Although Hegel outrightly rejects the Kantian variety of skeptical subjectivism, there is nevertheless a form of Hegelian subjectivism in his treatment of nature. Namely, nature itself exhibits an array of subjectivity, and that the natural world is in a variety of ways self-determining. Although nature for Hegel is not merely a mental object of some finite consciousness, Hegel is committed to the view that nature is the result of subjective activity.

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