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The Overcoming of the Idea of Life in Hegel's *Science of Logic*

by

Carlos Schoof

Under the Direction of Sebastian Rand, PhD

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

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

ABSTRACT

In the present thesis, I argue that Karen Ng's attempt to draw on resources from Hegel's *Science of Logic* to defend a naturalist interpretation of the Hegelian account of cognition is not as promising as she thinks it is. In the first section, I offer an overview of the debate between anti-naturalist and naturalist interpretations of the Hegelian logical space of reasons. I clarify some terms involved in the debate and locate Ng's novel interpretation in a wider philosophical discussion. In the second section, I offer some arguments to resist Ng's interpretation, according to which the Idea of Life is never overcome in later stages of the *Science of Logic*. I uncover Ng's interpretive presuppositions and put pressure on her interpretation. Finally, I consider two potential objections to my arguments and sketch a different line of thought to approach Hegel's Idea of Life.

INDEX WORDS: Hegel, naturalism, Science of Logic, life, normativity

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2023

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- EL Hegel, G.W.F. (2010), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: The Science of Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GW 11 Hegel, G.W.F. (1978), *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band. Die Objektive Logik* (1812/1813). Edited by Fridrich Hogemann and Walter Jaeschke. Berlin: Meiner.
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- GW 29,1 Hegel, G.W.F. (2017), *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion und Vorlesungen über die Beweise vom Dasein Gottes*, edited by Walter Jaeschke, Band 29,1.
- GW 29,1 Hegel, G.W.F. (2021), *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion und Vorlesungen über die Beweise vom Dasein Gottes*, edited by Walter Jaeschke, Band 29,2.
- KrV Kant, I. (1998), *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KU Kant, I. (2000), *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LPR 1 Hegel, G.W.F. (1984), *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume 1. Introduction and The Concept of Religion*, edited by Peter Hodgson, University of California Press.
- LPR II Hegel, G.W.F. (1984), *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume 2. The Determinate Religion*, edited by Peter Hodgson, University of California Press.
- PhG Hegel, G.W.F. (2018), *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PN Hegel, G.W.F. (2004), *Philosophy of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

PREFACE

In the present thesis, I argue that Karen Ng's attempt to draw on resources from Hegel's *Science of Logic* to defend a naturalist interpretation of the Hegelian account of cognition is not as promising as she thinks it is. In the first section, I offer an overview of the debate between anti-naturalist and naturalist interpretations of the Hegelian logical space of reasons. I clarify some terms involved in the debate and locate Ng's novel interpretation in a wider philosophical discussion. In the second section, I offer some arguments to resist Ng's interpretation, according to which the Idea of Life is never overcome in later stages of the *Science of Logic*. I uncover Ng's problematic interpretive presuppositions and put pressure on her main exegetical claim with regard to the Idea section of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Finally, I consider two potential objections to my argument and sketch a different line of thought for approaching Hegel's Idea of Life.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of life is philosophically interesting because of its intuitive and yet elusive nature. We all seem to understand what life means and to successfully distinguish between the living and the non-living. However, neither philosophy nor the particular sciences have managed to provide a non-controversial account of life. There are some scholars that even doubt the possibility of attaining a meaningful definition of life and demarcating it from other phenomena. However, several attempts to understand life have taken place throughout the history of ideas.

According to Aristotle, life is not a univocal notion, but we can better understand it by listing the features that are distinctive of organisms (*DA* 403b23-24). In *DA* II, he provides the following list of life-functions: (i) thinking, (ii) perception, (iii) local movement and rest, (iv) nutrition, (v) touch, (vi) appetite or desire, and (vii) reproduction.¹ All these functions can be easily observed in everyday experience, and they are properly understood by the natural philosopher. He classifies the living creatures according to their life-functions and seeks to understand those functions themselves. The following taxonomy arises from his inquiry: first, plants possess the power of nutrition and reproduction only; second, non-human animals possess the previous powers plus those of perception, movement, touch, and appetite; finally, human animals possess all the previous powers plus that of thinking. This taxonomy raises some questions. How should we understand the fact that some living beings possess one set of life-functions rather than another? Are those life-functions interrelated material components only? The Aristotelian answer requires appeal to the notion of soul.

¹ I take this summary from Matthews (1992: 187), who puts together many Aristotelian passages from *DA* II.

Unlike modern scientists, Aristotle does not believe that natural objects can be fully understood in terms of their material constituents and properties. Natural beings are definitively made of matter, but the latter has a specific form which makes those beings be what they are and behave in the way they do. In the Aristotelian framework, living beings possess a form that is not reducible to (and yet not separated from) matter: soul. A soul is the kind of unity that is distinctive of living beings (*DA* 411b6-8) and that successfully explains all the relevant facts about them (*DA* 402a6). To cognize the soul is to cognize the living creature's activity, which is always goal-directed. As we know from empirical observation too, every living being strives to reach its best condition (*Phys.* 193b11-18; 194a27-33). A living creature acts in accordance to its distinctive life-function and seeks to exercise it in an optimal way. This is the reason why, in Aristotelian jargon, the formal cause of a living being (that is, its form or soul) concurs with its final cause (that is, its purpose or goal). Aristotle's account of nature makes it clear that nature, life, and purposiveness are all deeply intertwined.

We might conclude two things about life on the basis of Aristotle's framework. First, we might conclude that life designates a specific kind of unity that is exclusive of certain beings. This unity is the conjoining of all the life-functions of an organism. Going beyond the Aristotelian framework, we might say that an organism is what Kant calls a synthetic universal (*KU* 5: 407). This universal constitutes a sort of unity in which the parts are not independent from the whole and they cannot be understood without consideration of other parts.² A machine can be disassembled without its parts losing their character. However, if an organ is separated from the body to which it belongs, the organ loses its character. For example, a lung cannot still be a lung unless it is related to the heart within the circulatory system of a human individual. Second, we

² However, Aristotle describes organic bodies as not merely additive wholes in *DA* 412a29-b6.

might conclude that to be alive is to hold a special relationship, via the life-functions, with other beings, with the environment, and with oneself. Unlike artifacts or numbers, living creatures establish metabolic relationships with those three things. First, a lion eats zebras and transforms their flesh into food. The lion digests the flesh, assimilates the nutrients, and defecates the residues. These residues contribute to the growing of grass, which eventually becomes zebras' food. Second, living beings shape their environment in significant ways. For example, beavers' shelters change the path of rivers and bees are responsible for the flourishing of flowers. Third, living beings have a form of self-relation insofar as they are self-aware and distinguish themselves from both the environment and other beings. Moreover, something that is perhaps more familiar to us evolutionists than to Aristotle, living creatures shape themselves by shaping the environment. When human beings started using tools to cultivate the soil, this change in the environment brought about a change in societal organization and human subjectivity. All the previous facts about living creatures add meaning to the Aristotelian idea that nature (and thus, soul) is an inner principle of change (*Phys.* 192b20-23). Although a living being depends on external elements, it attains a high degree of self-subsistence and self-organization.

I have introduced the concept of life by mentioning the problem of attaining a proper definition of it. However, one of the life-functions that Aristotle includes in his list, namely, thinking, brings about another problem that is far more relevant for the present thesis. I shall call this problem the problematic status of the concept of life. As I understand it, the problem can be summarized in the following question: is thinking, or, more precisely, knowledge, a natural or a supernatural function? The problem arises from Aristotle's view on thinking and the intellect. On the one hand, Aristotle lists thinking among other life-functions without making a relevant distinction between them, thus suggesting that thinking lacks an entirely different status from that

of touch or reproduction. Aristotle would be suggesting that thinking is just one more natural function of animals. I think that claim is appealing for our contemporary mindset. Our best scientific claim that nature endowed us with the power of thinking for very natural purposes like survival and adaptation. On the other hand, however, Aristotle also claims that the particular thinking in which we engage when we do mathematics, logic, or metaphysics, seems “out of this world”. Aristotle (*Met.* 987a30-31) ascribes the origin of Plato’s Theory of Forms to the intuition that mathematical knowledge provides access to a more fundamental realm of being than mere sensation and opinion. This fundamental realm of being is portrayed as eternal, unchanging and intellectual: features we would hardly ascribe to living natural things. With regard to the connection between nature, life, and intellect, Aristotelian philosophy raises a famous puzzle. Aristotle makes two seemingly incompatible claims: that the soul is always embodied (*DA* 413a4), but that the intellect, which belongs to the soul, is wholly separated and unmixed (*DA* 429b5). The picture becomes stranger if we recall that Aristotle speaks of God as pure thinking and as living the best of all possible lives (*NE* 1178b21-28). God’s intellectual activity makes him, unlike every animal, completely happy and self-subsistent (*EE* 1244b7-8). When we engage in philosophical thought, that is, when we acquire knowledge of the first principles of reality, we become God-like for a brief time and we no longer seem to be just animals living their natural life. If there is a “life” involved in cognition, we might think, it means something other than natural (animal or vegetal) life.

The era of Modernity is usually characterized as attempting to get rid of Aristotle’s account of nature and life. Although advancing a different project from that of his anti-philosophical contemporaries, Descartes popularized the idea that nature ought to be understood as mere extension and its properties. When he rejected Aristotle’s account of the soul, Descartes also

rejected teleology and established a mechanistic framework in which life could hardly play the crucial explanatory role it played in previous centuries. At least in the hegemonic scientific and philosophical tradition, life would remain a disdained concept until late Modernity. Descartes introduced a different problem about life, which I shall call the problem of the philosophical (ir)relevance of the concept of life. As I understand it, the problem can be summarized in the following question: is the concept of life useful for our understanding of the world and ourselves? Descartes' answers seem to be a straightforwardly no. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant offers a similar negative answer in the context of a discussion about the nature of teleological judgments, that is, judgments about purposes. In the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" section, Kant is principally concerned with the notion of natural purpose. The general definition of a purpose is "the object of a concept, in so far as the concept is seen as the cause of the object" (KU 5: 220). The paradigmatic example of the previous definition is an artefact because an artifact is the effect of the concept that an artisan possesses in his mind before producing it. Interestingly, however, organisms are also instances of purposiveness. In order to get a better understanding of the Kantian account of organisms we should consider his distinction between external and internal purposiveness.

External purposiveness is the purposiveness we ascribe to things we take merely as means. Artifacts are the best example of this kind of purposiveness because they are something merely relative to us, that is, in Aristotelian terms, they have an external principle of being and change. However, living beings too, at least when we consider them as beneficial for us humans, can be further examples of external purposiveness. Internal purposiveness, on the contrary, is the purposiveness we ascribe to things that are both means and end, or cause and effect of themselves, at the same time (KU 5: 370-371). Living beings, considered independently of their relationship

to us, seem the paradigmatic example of internal purposiveness. His intuitions seems confirmed when Kant explains in which sense can a tree be regarded as an example of internal purposiveness. A tree is cause and effect of itself in three relevant ways: it reproduces itself as a species; it preserves itself by assimilating resources from the environment; and its parts only subsist because they have a reciprocal relation with each other.³ As Aristotle would say, internal purposiveness implies self-organization. Kant seems to repeat the same idea: “an organized and self-organizing being, [is] called a natural end” (KU 5: 374). However, Kant’s framework is completely different from Aristotle’s.

Kant surprisingly claims that organisms and life are not deeply intertwined concepts. Consider how he addresses the problem of our understanding of organisms. According to Kant, the model on which we initially understand organisms is that of artifacts because in the latter the idea of a purpose is more easily conceived (KU 5: 370). However, Kant admit that it is blatantly contradictory to claim that natural organisms are better understood if interpreted as designed according to an artificial plan. The reason is straightforward: when we say of something that it is “natural” and “alive” we mean precisely that it is not “artificially designed”. Therefore, to treat nature as the product of art seems incorrect. According to Kant, however, for lack of a better model, we must judge “as if” the products of nature were products of art. He considers a potential alternative model: that of life. In the Aristotelian philosophical tradition, organisms are naturally understood on the model of life. It is almost impossible not to think of organisms and life as implying each other. However, Kant resists the idea that the concept of life can be used to explain organisms. Kant speaks of organisms as “an analogue of life” (KU 5: 374). By analogue Kant

³ Kant understands organic unity as a synthetic whole, that is, as a whole in which the parts presuppose the whole. Natural ends are organized that way: “In such a product of nature each part is conceived as if it exists only through all the others, thus as if existing for the sake of the others and on account of the whole” (KU 5: 374)

means that organisms are something merely similar to life. However, he claims that nature is matter and that matter is always lifeless. On his view, if we admit that nature is alive, then we would be committed to hylozoism, the view according to which everything is alive, and we would bring about the death of natural philosophy, whose aim is to understand nature in terms of matter and its constituents.

In conclusion, the Kantian talk about inner purposiveness, organisms and natural ends does not imply the concept of life. Life remains as an obscure concept that has, at best, a regulative, instead of a constitutive, function. A constitutive principle is a principle that provides knowledge of the world and that constitutes experience. For example, the principle of causality structures our knowledge of the world because our experience is not possible unless we recognize the reality of causes and effects. On the contrary, a regulative principle does not provide knowledge of the world but serves as guide for scientific investigation. For example, the idea of a single general law that fully captures the structure of nature is an ideal that scientists pursue and which guides their inquiry, even though we are not entitled to affirm that such a law has reality or that we will ever reach it. Life seems like a plausible model on which we might understand inner purposiveness, but Kant sometimes rejects even this possibility and strips life of any significant role.

In her recent book (2020), Karen Ng argues that the concept of life constitutes the core of Hegel's idealism. Contrary to Kant, Hegel would belong to a long-standing Aristotelian tradition in which explaining life is a necessary part of the task of explaining ourselves and the activity of thinking (Ng 2020: 4). Hegel would disagree with Kant's mistreatment of life as a merely regulative concept. However, Hegel would still raise the Kantian idea of life as inner purposiveness because he would have found in this idea the crucial tool to overcome the limitations of critical philosophy itself, especially its skeptical claim that knowledge is limited to appearances. Whereas

the *Critique of Pure Reason* has a negative function, insofar as it points out the limits beyond which cognition cannot go, the idea of life in the *Critique of Judgment* has the positive function of denying those limits and showing a new way of understanding conceptual thinking (Ng 2020: 24). Recall that, according to Kant, purposiveness constitutes a concept-object relation in which the concept contains the ground for an object's reality. This model contrasts with Kant's general account of pure concepts, which emphasizes their formal and empty nature. Hegel would find in Kant's idea of inner purposiveness an account of concepts in which they have a creative power. However, this new Hegelian understanding of conceptual form, which would show that he thinking of the concept of life as deeply explanatory, brings back a familiar problem: that of the problematic status of thinking and knowing. Like Aristotle, Hegel makes some puzzling claims about knowledge and its relationship to nature. He speaks of cognition as a spiritual activity that negates nature but also as a power we have in virtue of being just natural creatures. The old Aristotelian problem of determining whether thinking is just another life-function or something else seems to reappear under a new guise. The present thesis is an attempt to clarify how Ng's interpretation of Hegel's Idea of Life, according to which Hegel has a naturalist account of knowledge, is not as promising as the think it is.

2 DEBATES ABOUT HEGELIAN IDEALISM AND NATURALISM

The Aristotelian theme of a seemingly supernatural intellect and the Kantian theme of a new understanding of conceptuality are connected with the interpretation of Hegel's idealism. In early Anglophone scholarship, Hegel's absolute idealism was understood as a weird metaphysical position that made the life-function of thinking into something utterly supernatural. However, later scholarship attempted to show Hegel's idealism was not extravagant metaphysics, but that it should rather be understood as a critical development of Kant's transcendental idealism. According to certain consensus, Hegelian idealism can be understood as an articulation and defense of the "unboundedness of the conceptual" (McDowell 1996: 24). This phrase describes a thesis about the relation between thought and reality that contrasts with Kant's transcendental idealism.⁴ In the latter, in order to yield knowledge, thought must bring an intrinsically non-conceptual reality into unity with conceptual form.

According to Robert Brandom (2019: 106-107), a major figure in scholarship about post-Kantian philosophy and conceptual content, Kant believes there is a content common to both knowledge and what is known. Such content would "appear in conceptual form on the subjective side of the intentional nexus and in non-conceptual form on the objective side" (Brandom 2019:

⁴ Leaving aside Hegel's interpretation of it, transcendental idealism consists of three main claims. First, there is a distinction between things in themselves [*Dinge an sich*] and things as they appear to us [*Erscheinungen*]; second, spatio-temporal objects of our experience (that is, appearances) are representations and do not exist apart from their connection to possible perceptions; third, we do not and cannot have cognition of things in themselves (Allais 2015: 4).

107). The conceptual form is identified with the concepts, judgments and inferences that belong to the spontaneous faculties of understanding and reason. The non-conceptual form is identified with the intuitions that belong to the receptive faculty of sensibility. In addition to the previous distinction between concepts and intuitions, Kant makes a further distinction among intuitions. He distinguishes between the matter and form of an intuition. Whereas form (time and space) is imposed by us, matter (an array of sense data) is something merely given to us from the outside. The matter of intuition, as something externally given, constitutes a non-conceptual residue that necessitates the introduction of a “thing in itself”. This is the name Kant gives to things insofar as they are considered in abstraction from our conceptual powers. According to Kant, there is way in which things are independently of us and which we cannot know: “cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself, but uncognized by us” (*KrV*. BXX). Moreover, the thing in itself is described sometimes as what affects the receptive faculty of sensibility (*KrV*. A44/B61; A190/B235) and, therefore, as what constitutes the cause of appearances without being itself an appearance (*KrV*. A288/B344). These Kantian claims bring about a problematic picture.

A main thesis of transcendental idealism is that one ought to distinguish between the world as it really is (the unknowable, because non-conceptual, “thing-in-itself”) and as it appears to us (the knowable, because conceptually-formed, “appearances”). Given that spatiotemporal intuition and conceptual form constitutes the particular way in which we, human beings, cognize, then knowledge is something subjective and relative. Likewise, given that we cannot cognize the objective structure of the world, then the knowledge we attain does not seem to be knowledge at all. Many of Kant’s earliest readers ascribed him, therefore, a version of skepticism. One of those readers was Hegel, who aims to provide a non-subjectivistic account of knowledge –that is, to

overcome the Kantian “fear of the object”– (GW 21.35), and to show that the idea of a non-conceptual contribution to cognition is incoherent.⁵ Those tasks are carried out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Science of Logic* (1812-1816/1832), two of Hegel’s main philosophical works in which he advances an account of conceptual thinking that opposes transcendental idealism.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) refutes the skeptical claim that thought stands on one side and reality on the other by exhibiting the internal inconsistencies of such a claim. Consider how Hegel summarizes this goal:⁶

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I have presented consciousness as it progresses from the first immediate opposition of itself and the subject matter to absolute knowledge. This path traverses all the forms of the *relation of consciousness to the object* and its result is the *concept of science*. (GW 21: 32)

The phenomenological inquiry examines all the possible oppositions between consciousness and objects and shows that every attempt to keep them separated fails in its own terms. Hegel calls the varied oppositions between consciousness and objects “shapes of consciousness” (*PhG*. ¶178). However, this name does not imply that the phenomenological inquiry does not address non-individual forms of opposition. Later in the *Phenomenology*, we encounter “shapes of the world”

⁵ Hegel sometimes recognizes that Kant already got rid of the thing in itself: “in its more consistent form, transcendental idealism did recognize the nothingness of the spectral thing-in-itself, this abstract shadow divorced from all content left over by critical philosophy, and its goal was to destroy it completely. This philosophy also made a start at letting reason produce its determinations from itself. But the subjective attitude assumed in the attempt prevented it from coming to fruition” (GW 21.31)

⁶ The importance of this goal does not imply that refuting skepticism is the only philosophical goal of the *Phenomenology*. As Michael Forster summarizes, the *Phenomenology*’s tasks are pedagogical, epistemological, and metaphysical. The pedagogical tasks are those of teaching modern individuals to understand and accept Hegel’s system by rejecting alternative viewpoints, providing a compelling path toward such system and also a provisional presentation of its contents. The epistemic tasks are those of justifying philosophy by defending it against skepticism and providing a proof of Hegel’s system for all non-Hegelian viewpoints in the light of their own views and criteria. The main metaphysical task is that of accomplishing Absolute Spirit’s self-knowledge and its realization (Forster 1998: 14).

(*PhG.* ¶441), in which consciousness possesses a more explicit collective and historical dimension. Following the path of consciousness is supposed to help the reader attain the concept of true knowledge (or science), in which no problematic opposition between subject and object remains.

According to Hegel, the Kantian account of knowledge is not truly argued for but constitutes a mere presupposition (*PhG.* ¶74). Hegel demands the reader bracket her own presuppositions about what “knowledge” is –which are deeply informed by philosophical ideas, scientific methods or cultural practices– and to devote her attention to the spontaneous way in which consciousness relates to itself and its putative objects of knowledge. In order to discover what knowledge actually is, we should simply observe the activity of knowing itself and follow its development *as it itself appears* (*PhG.* ¶3). At any given stage, consciousness advances a standard of truth, which under closer scrutiny turns out to be internally contradictory. This defect raises the need to transform such standard and to integrate it into a more coherent framework. Consciousness eventually arrives at a framework in which inconsistencies are no longer present and the standard of truth is adequately justified. At that point, in Hegel’s words, the appearance of knowledge (its underdeveloped form) becomes actual knowledge (its fully developed form) (*PhG.* ¶¶76-78). Actual knowledge gets rid of the scission subject and object.

The structure of consciousness that underlies the whole phenomenological process is the following: “consciousness distinguishes something from itself while at the same time it relates itself to it” (*PhG.* ¶82). In terms of knowledge, we may distinguish, therefore, two aspects of the object: on the one hand, it is something external, unknown, and independent from us (the object as it is “in itself”); on the other hand, it is something related to and informed by our cognitive powers (the object as it is “for us”). Whereas Kant believes that the “in itself” of things (the non-conceptual) is divorced from their “for us” (the conceptual), the *Phenomenology* shows the

opposite. In the last framework, called Absolute Knowing, both aspects make up an all-encompassing unity that Hegel describes as a sort of conceptual self-consciousness. The *Phenomenology*'s conclusion is, thus, the demonstration of the unboundedness of the conceptual: nothing is given from outside the sphere of conceptuality. Every object is what it is within a conceptual space of reasons that is not conditioned by any external thing-in-itself. In the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, reason becomes its own standard of knowledge and is ready to explore the space of reasons in a more appropriate way.

It becomes one of the tasks of the *Science of Logic* (1812-1816/1832) to exhibit the space of reasons⁷ as a self-developing system of categories that represent fundamental structures of thought and reality. By “system” Hegel understands a totality in which a particular content is justified only as a moment of the whole (*EL* ¶14). By “categories” he understands a comprehensive set of primitive and non-empirical concepts without which nothing could even be empirically intelligible. The subject-matter of logic is pure thinking, that is, the activity of examining the categories and the laws of thought that underlie any particular domain of cognition (*EL* ¶19). As Pippin puts it, the *Science of Logic* can thus be understood as “an account of all possible account-givings” (2019: 32) and as “the basic structure of any ‘rendering intelligible’” (2019: 70). Despite being sometimes portrayed as pure forms; the categories are not formal in the Kantian sense: they are not intrinsically empty and do not require an externally given content (*GW* 21: 28). Given that

⁷ Although interpreters speak of a single “space of reasons”, we should actually distinguish two of them. First, the conceptual space of reasons of the *Phenomenology*; second, the logical space of reasons of the *Logic*. Their difference lies in the status of the concepts that make them up. According to Hegel, even if the *Phenomenology* offers an examination of the “pure essentialities” (*PhG*. §34) of thought, also called categories, it displays them as exemplified in particular phenomena. For example, the *Phenomenology* does not examine the category of plurality “as such”, but considers a plurality of concrete objects, of living organisms, of physical properties, etc. However, in the *Science of Logic*, the concept of plurality is treated in its purity. For an insightful account of the difference between the conceptual space of reasons and the logical space of reasons, which can be also interpreted as two levels in a same space of reasons, see Pippin 2019: 66-69.

the *Science of Logic* presupposes the result of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is wrong to ask whether the categories are subjective or objective: they are both at once. This is one of the reasons why Hegel speaks of logic as concurring with ontology. Likewise, given that thinking finally examines itself without relying on an external standard and that “the forms of thought have been freed from the material in which they are submerged [namely, representations]” (GW 21.12), the *Science of Logic* is the domain in which we withdraw “back into freedom in this area of self-certainty” (GW 21.14).

The logical categories make up a totality that Hegel calls the Idea. This notion, often identified as Hegel’s space of reasons itself, is the most comprehensive framework of determinacy in which the unity of spirit and nature is knowable. Once the reader understands the nature of logical cognition and the categories, she is able to draw resources from the *Science of Logic* to cognize spirit and nature. Even if the specific connection between the *Science of Logic* and the *Realphilosophie* remains unclear,⁸ Hegel emphasizes the importance of the former for the proper understanding of the latter. It seems reasonable, therefore, to claim that understanding the logical space of reasons is crucial for understanding Hegel’s overall project. In contemporary scholarship, there are two prominent lines of interpretation regarding this “space of reasons” and the conceptual knowledge involved in it. Those interpretations are sometimes distinguished by their anti-naturalist

⁸ As early as in Schelling, we find a depiction of Hegel’s philosophy as aprioristic metaphysics devoted to show that actually existing things (culture and nature) proceed from a sort of divine thought (the Idea). The *Science of Logic* would be an instance of negative philosophy (to which Schelling opposes his own positive philosophy). As Houlgate explains, this negative philosophy “seeks to determine in a systematic manner all that is a priori conceivable and possible (...) it starts from the bare idea of infinite possibility or potential (...) and seeks to determine how all the manifold possibilities of being follow necessarily from this infinite potential (...) such philosophy seeks insight through pure reason alone” (1999: 103). In short, Hegel’s *Science of Logic* would conflate the order of intelligibility with the order of reality and overestimate the power of the former. He would attempt to literally “derive” reality from logical thought.

or naturalist orientation. Before addressing those interpretations, I shall clarify the term “naturalism”.

2.1 Naturalism

I mentioned earlier that already in Aristotle we find conflicting claims about the nature of knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge seems like a natural life-function among others; on the other hand, it seems like something quasi-divine that elevates us above the realm of nature. The conflict between the naturalist and anti-naturalist interpretations of Hegel’s account of cognition can be seen as a further instance of that old problem. We might want to clarify two meanings of naturalisms in contemporary Anglophone philosophy that are relevant for the debate that concerns us.

2.1.1 Metaphysical naturalism

The first sense of naturalism is “metaphysical naturalism”, which is a sense mainly intended to oppose supernaturalism. It is the ascription to metaphysical naturalism that allows interpreters to take their distance from a long-standing infamous interpretation of Hegel and to constrain their claims within what they take to be reasonable interpretive boundaries.

According to some authors (Risjord 2014: 9), metaphysical naturalism amounts to the view that the human mind is part of the natural world and that humans ought to be seen as wholly natural. Although this claim seems a platitude, it is intended to oppose the not-so-uncommon position of supernaturalism. This term designates a commitment to the existence of “entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (Mackie 1977:

38). Among the plausible candidates for such entities are Platonic Forms, Cartesian souls, and Leibnizian monads. Moreover, philosophers committed to supernaturalism usually posit a special epistemic faculty through which we access those entities, properties, or relations (Macarthur & DeCaro 2010: 3). Among the plausible candidates for such faculties are Platonic *noesis*, Aristotelian *nous*, or intellectual intuition. For many years, especially in Anglophone scholarship, Hegel was taken as a paradigmatic case of supernaturalism. Consider Bertrand Russell's assessment of Hegel:

From his early interest in mysticism, he retained a belief in the unreality of separateness: the world, in his view, was not a collection of hard units, whether atoms or souls, each completely self-subsistent. The apparent self-subsistence of finite things appeared to him to be an illusion; nothing, he held, is ultimately and completely real except the whole. But he differed from Parmenides and Spinoza in conceiving the whole, not as a simple substance, but as a complex system, of the sort that we should call an organism. The apparently separate things of which the world seems to be composed are not simply an illusion; each has a greater or lesser degree of reality, and its reality consists in an aspect of the whole, which is what it is seen to be when viewed truly (...) All this must have come to him first as a mystic 'insight'; its intellectual elaboration, which is given in his books, must have come later. Hegel asserts that the real is rational, and that the rational is real. But when he says this he does not mean by 'the real' what an empiricist would mean. He admits, and even urges, that what to the empiricist appear to be facts are, and must be, irrational; it is only after their apparent character has been transformed by viewing them as aspects of the whole that they are seen to be rational. Nevertheless, the identification of the real and the rational leads unavoidably to some of the complacency inseparable from the belief that 'whatever is, is right'. The whole, in all its complexity, is called by Hegel 'the Absolute'. The Absolute is spiritual; Spinoza's view, that it has the attribute of extension as well as that of thought, is rejected (1947: 758).

The previous description contains all the relevant supernaturalistic features. First, Hegel's monist ontology consists of a complex entity called the Absolute that possesses many aspects (which would underlie the everyday objects of experience); second, this entity, as well as its aspects, are spiritual and dissimilar to any entity recognizable from an empirical and scientific standpoint; finally, those entities would have been revealed to Hegel by means of a mystic insight. What Russell seems to have had in mind is not exactly Hegel, but British Idealism. This position was the philosophical trend against which he and Moore rebelled (Soames 2003: 94-95). However,

such a misrepresentation of Hegel's philosophy is not exclusive of Russell and Anglophone thought. It began as soon as Hegel died. In Germany, Hegelian philosophy (and post-Kantian Idealism overall) was soon interpreted by neo-Kantianism as an awful relapse into the "thingy metaphysics" that Kant presumably refuted.⁹ A careless reading of Hegelian notions like the Absolute, the Spirit, the Idea, or the categories themselves, supports such a view. Likewise, it is tempting to think of absolute knowledge (the last framework of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) or pure thinking (the kind of thinking involved in the *Science of Logic*) as further examples of supernaturalistic faculties.

However, one of the tasks of subsequent Anglophone Hegelian scholarship was to overcome such supernaturalist interpretation. There were many strategies for doing so. As Beiser (1995: 1) notes, facing Hegel's metaphysical claims, interpreters can go in the following directions. They can: (i) defend Hegel's metaphysics; (ii) ignore Hegel's metaphysics and salvage from his philosophy what is interesting for contemporary discussions; or (iii) deny that Hegel was doing metaphysics in any philosophically loaded sense of the term. Beiser also warns of a false dichotomy that underlies many debates: either Hegel is a metaphysician of the worst kind, or he has no metaphysics at all (1995: 3). Many interpreters try to locate themselves somewhere in between those extremes but they also accuse each other of falling into one extreme. Now, irrespective of their differences, almost all contemporary interpreters resist ascribing

⁹ Kant's philosophy is usually understood as a rejection of pre-critical metaphysics. This term designates the attempt to acquire knowledge about objects in general (through concepts that apply neutrally to possible or actual beings) and about the objects of supreme human interest (the soul, the world, or God) independently of experience. The branch of metaphysics that studies objects in general is called general metaphysics (or ontology); the branch that studies the objects of supreme human interest is called special metaphysics (and is further divided into rational psychology, rational cosmology, and natural theology). Kant's critical philosophy intends to show that pre-critical metaphysics did not investigate the nature and scope of knowledge (the task of transcendental philosophy), so that they incurred in contradictions that they were unable to address. According to Kant, the putative objects of knowledge of pre-critical metaphysics are not objects of theoretical cognition at all.

supernaturalism to Hegel. Consider two important interpretations in Anglophone scholarship: Robert Pippin's and Terry Pinkard's.¹⁰ Pippin's recent book (2019) about the *Science of Logic* attempts to explain the Hegelian claim that logic coincides with metaphysics. While he tries to address the objection that his previous interpretation (1989) of Hegel's philosophy makes Hegelian idealism into a variety of transcendental (and hence subjectivistic) thought without metaphysical relevance, Pippin also makes it clear that Hegelian metaphysics have nothing to do either with Neoplatonism (2019: 6) or with the idea that the mind passively grasps intellectual entities like the categories (2019: 9). Terry Pinkard (2012) famously ascribed a form of disenchanted naturalism to Hegel. Among other things, the term "disenchanted" emphasizes the idea that Hegel is not committed to any weird metaphysical claim. Moreover, such naturalism makes the claim that nature, on its own, "aims at nothing" (1996: 23), and that it is better studied by experimental-mathematical natural sciences. However, such naturalism also recognizes that we, natural creatures, "make ourselves distinct from nature" (1996: 20) by developing the intriguing sphere of normativity. In neither of these two major interpretations do we find any trace of supernaturalism.

In conclusion, metaphysical naturalism, as opposed to supernaturalism, helps us understand what is at stake in the Hegelian debate about the natural status of thinking: a potential relapse into supernaturalism. However, the previous account is not wholly informative. When briefly addressing Pinkard's interpretation of Hegel I alluded to the term "normativity". The relationship between naturalism and normativity is crucial in the debate in Hegelian scholarship and this fact requires us to understand naturalism in a complementary way.

2.1.2 Second Nature Naturalism

¹⁰ Their disagreement is evident in Pinkard (1989).

Recall that the debate between naturalist and anti-naturalist philosophers concerns the space of reasons, that is, normativity. One famous account of normativity is found in John McDowell's *Mind and World*, a work that advances the notion of a "naturalism of second nature" (1994: 86). This form of naturalism further clarifies what is at stake in the debate about Hegel's space of reasons. McDowell seeks to dissolve the dichotomy between "bald naturalism" and "rampant platonism" (1994: 77), that is, between a modern scientific naturalism that reduces knowledge to the language of the natural sciences and a supernaturalism that takes knowledge as something "outside the space of nature" (1994: 71).

The starting point of McDowell's position is the puzzle of perceptual knowledge. The term "perceptual knowledge" seems like an oxymoron. On the hand, as "perceptual", it is supposed to imply the immediate deliverances of the senses and be fully explained in terms of natural causal laws. It thus belongs to the realm of law (more precisely, of those laws that belong to natural sciences). On the other hand, as "knowledge", it is supposed to consist in judgments that are justified through, and not only causally connected to, perceptions. It thus belongs to the space of reasons. Now, the realm of law and the realm of reasons seem to be wholly different from each other and this situation raises problems for our understanding of cognition itself. The consequences that follow from this picture are worrying. For someone who wants to alleviate the tension between the previous two elements, it seems that the available paths are either the reduction of the space of reasons to the realm of law (a full naturalist account of knowledge, or "bold naturalism"), or the isolation of the space of reasons as something independent, self-enclosed, and which loses connection to something "real" (a full supernaturalism or "rampant platonism"). Supernaturalism is not the only awful consequence of the taking the space of reasons as isolated. Some philosophers, like Karen Ng, believe that the isolation of the space of reasons would turn that very notion into

something nonsensical. She claims that “without those constraints [life-constraints], universal free activity [knowing] would be nothing more than a philosopher’s fantasy, or, in a familiar turn of phrase, nothing but frictionless spinning in a void” (2021: 468). Ng thinks that to conceive of the space of reasons as unrelated to nature would open the terrain of reckless speculation. Anything could be reasonable because reasons would be just free-floating entities that a “reasoner” can manipulate at will.

McDowell understands his project in *Mind and World* as an attempt to dissolve the dichotomy between bold naturalism and rampant platonism. He argues that we must begin by noticing that nature is not exhausted by the realm of law: “we need to bring responsiveness to meaning back into the operations of our natural sentient capacities as such, even while we insist that our responsiveness to meaning cannot be captured in naturalistic terms, so long as ‘naturalistic’ is glossed in terms of the realm of law” (1994: 77). Therefore, we must “refuse to equate [modern science’s “understanding of the realm of law”] with nature” (1994: 78). Rationality must not be understood as something completely distinct from nature, but as something that, without losing its special status, is located within it. Our rationality is obviously integrated into nature because our rational capacities are attached to our bodies and do belong to the realm of law. In McDowell’s framework, “first nature” is understood as the “objectified domain of processes that have to be made intelligible insofar as they are subject to mere legality, and that are thus considered as in themselves empty of meaning and of normative conceptual connections” (Testa 2007: 480). However, although human beings are born with a first nature, they undergo a process of education. The first nature capacities are transformed in such a way that they take on a new form, namely, a form in which conceptual structures permeate everything. This is the meaning of “second nature”, which is implied in the debates between the naturalist and anti-naturalist debate

about Hegel's account of normativity. According to Ng (2020), such debate is between two interpretations of the Hegelian space of reasons: the apperception-oriented interpretation (which is anti-naturalist) and the life-oriented interpretation (which is naturalist). She understands her interpretation as offering an alternative to the dominant apperception-oriented interpretation and as advancing a new version of the life-oriented interpretation.

2.2 The apperception-oriented interpretation

The starting point of this interpretation is Robert Pippin's *Hegel's Idealism* (1989), which contributed to the overcoming of supernaturalistic readings of Hegel. In that book, Pippin offers an account of Hegel's philosophy that emphasizes its relationship with the Kantian idea of apperception in order to shed light on many obscure Hegelian claims about the nature of reality and knowledge.¹¹ According to Pippin, the Hegelian praise of the Kantian unity of apperception that is found in the *Science of Logic* is key to understanding Hegel's idealism and his rejection of the Kantian subjectivistic account of knowledge.¹² Karen Ng (2020: 13) also considers Robert Brandom as another representative of that interpretive line. At first sight, Ng's claim sounds weird because Brandom is philosophically closer to McDowell's idea of a second-nature naturalism. However, I believe she mentions Brandom because of his emphasis on self-consciousness (a sort of synonym for apperception) when interpreting Hegel: "one of Hegel's big ideas is that creatures with a self-conception are the subjects of developmental processes that exhibit a distinctive

¹¹ "The basic position of [Hegel's] entire philosophy should be understood as a direct variation on a crucial Kantian theme, the 'transcendental unity of apperception'" (Pippin 1989: 6).

¹² The always quoted Hegelian passage is the following: "It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Reason that the *unity* which constitutes the *essence of the concept* is recognized as the *original synthetic unity of apperception*, the unity of the "*I think*," or of self-consciousness" (GW 12.17-18).

structure” (Brandom 2007: 125). Now, Pippin’s apperception-oriented interpretation can be summarized as follows.

Hegel’s philosophical project is a completion of Kant’s critical project insofar as the former eradicates the threat of skepticism that results from maintaining the unknowable thing-in-itself. In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, more precisely in the section on the Deduction of the Categories, Kant argues that concepts and intuitions, which are two heterogeneous sources of knowledge, have their source in the synthetic unity of apperception (*KrV*. B134). This insight should have allowed Kant to get rid of the thing-in-itself and show that there is not any non-conceptual residue. The reason seems to be that the very notion of a non-conceptual part of intuitions (namely, its matter) would disappear if the activity of apperception shapes the entire structure of intuition. However, whereas Kant failed to work out his own insight, Hegel sets himself the task of developing that insight and turning it into a new theory of conceptuality and rationality. Likewise, he would have added to the Kantian epistemological picture a substantial historical and intersubjective dimension. Given his rejection of supernaturalism and his focus on the deduction of the categories, Pippin’s interpretation of Hegel is usually understood as non-metaphysical (in Beiser’s taxonomy) and to be excessively Kantian (thus failing to account for some original features of Hegel’s philosophy).

According to Ng, the apperception-oriented interpretation faces the following problem: it is problematically anti-naturalist in the sense that it seems to amount to a relapse into supernaturalism. Ng claims that for both Pippin (2002) and Brandom (2007) the space of reasons is independent of our status as living entities, so that normativity cannot be explained in naturalistic terms. One might ask what the meaning of “independent” is that Ng uses here. It is plausible that Pippin and Brandom are only claiming that the realm of reasons is not the realm of law because

we access the former in a different way. However, Ng focuses on some expressions that suggest that the apperception-oriented interpretation uses “independent” in a stronger sense. For example, Pippin claims that we should stick to a strong division between nature and spirit (2002: 201) and that when we engage in knowledge we leave nature behind (2002: 189). These claims make it seem that knowledge is something not-natural in a suspiciously supernaturalistic sense. Likewise, Brandom claims that “self-conscious beings do not have natures, they have histories” (2007: 126) and that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel shows that “life (...) is not an essential element of the self” (2007: 128). As Ng puts it, “Pippin and Brandom (...) [strip] life of any positive explanatory force in the theoretical and practical activities of self-determining reason” (2020: 13). It seems that Ng believes that in the apperception-oriented interpretation the phenomena of knowledge and self-consciousness have *nothing* to do with life. Maybe this is the reason why she claims that such an interpretation is “characterized by its indifference to the determination of life” (Ng 2020: 14). The language of indifference is indeed used by Pippin (2007: 85-56) in some scattered passages in his account of the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology*. In that context, Pippin claims that apperception is distinguished by its “indifference to life imperatives” (2007: 85). Likewise, he affirms that human beings would achieve their status as cognitive and practical agents only after recognizing that they are not (just) biological beings (2007: 86). However, “biological” is not co-extensive with “natural” or even “physical”.

It seems that Ng is suggesting that, even if the apperception view intends to foreclose supernaturalistic readings of Hegel’s idealism, its denial that norms are natural makes the space of reasons into something spooky. Ng’s critique of the apperception-oriented interpretations looks like a further instance of the false dichotomy that Beiser talks about: a rejection of any form of naturalism immediately becomes an alleged endorsement of supernaturalism. In a recent paper,

Paul Redding addresses the philosophical position of conceptual realism, which is the view according to which concepts are, in some non-deflationary sense, mind-independent (2020: 22). He ascribes this view to Robert Brandom and discusses his unsuccessful attempts to prevent his view from potentially becoming “thingy metaphysics”. Redding suggests that the claim that concepts are mind-independent must eventually collapse into the claim that there are thing-like entities, namely, concepts, floating around. Moreover, Redding also claims that conceptual realism would need to ascribe supernatural cognitive capacities to us, so that we can grasp those mind-independent entities (Redding 2020: 22-24). Redding’s worries about Brandom’s interpretation are somehow similar to Ng’s: they are worries about the danger of supernaturalism.

2.3 The life-oriented interpretation

The apperception oriented interpretation is confronted by the life-oriented interpretation of Pinkard (2012), Bernstein (2015), and Khurana (2017). Like the apperception-oriented interpretation, the life-oriented interpretation also aims to demystify some metaphysics in Hegel’s thought and to fight supernaturalism. However, the life-oriented interpreters insist on the idea that the living status of cognitive agents is essential for making the very idea of a space of reasons intelligible (Bernstein 2015: 114). These authors believe that the natural activity of life conditions the spiritual activity of knowledge because “life is the medium in which spirit realizes itself” (Khurana 2017: 452). In this picture, therefore, spirit cannot leave nature behind because knowledge is not an exemption from nature but rather the product of self-interpreting animals in relation to nature (Pinkard 2012: 5). The previous picture amounts to metaphysical naturalism but

adds some insights from the second-nature naturalism. This position is best represented, it seems to me, in the work of Thomas Khurana.

In *Das Leben Der Freiheit. Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie* (2017), Khurana sets himself the task of showing that life and normativity are deeply intertwined insofar as life shapes freedom. By freedom, Khurana understands the Kantian notion of autonomy. According to Kant, to be free is to be autonomous, that is, to regard oneself as the author of the laws to which one is subject. However, he also addresses a non-Kantian element. Khurana suggests that, although it is reasonable to claim that only humans can be free, self-legislation could be considered an instance of a more general form of freedom. Freedom could also be understood as self-constitution, that is, as a capacity to constitute one's own being. This sense of freedom is not exclusive to humans because any living being displays such a structure. Living beings have immanent norms (or, in Aristotelian terms, life-functions) according to which they act. The theme of self-constitution is only part of the story. As Khurana claims:

life is a transitional concept that relates the realm of nature to the realm of freedom (...) what is living seems to have the double character of being both already and not yet free: compared with the external necessity of dead nature, living beings already seem to exhibit a basic type of spontaneity and normativity that on the other hand still has to be superseded on the path to the freedom and normativity of spirit. (2017: 11)

Notice that life is not taken here as a mere biological phenomenon, that is, but as something that possesses a significant degree of normativity. For example, an elephant must reproduce itself and ought to have tusks. However, such degree of normativity does not exhaust normativity. Animals do not have epistemic or practical ought: what is true, what is right. When we consider more complex animals, like us humans, we find that self-constitution becomes autonomy. We may have immanent norms that make us free, but we are only completely rational and free when we become aware of those norms. However, for the life-oriented interpretation, human autonomy is

just a further elaboration of the general freedom that belongs to anything living. This idea emphasizes the continuity between nature and spirit that the apperception-view misses. The latter interpretation, at least in Ng's rendition of it, claims that to become rational and free is to *stop being* a natural entity.

Although the life view attempts to overcome the difficulties that the apperception view encounters, it is not free from problems of its own. Whereas the apperception view seems prone to supernaturalism, the life view seems prone to a first nature naturalism. The challenge of the life view is to avoid making normativity into something merely biological while at the same time emphasizing its continuity with nature. Luca Corti has noted that Khurana's interpretation suffers from this tension:

on the one hand, [Khurana] says that the transformation into self-conscious being is 'continuous' with nature (it is after all a transformation of life, in which life is preserved but takes on a different form) (...) on the other hand, he claims that becoming normatively self-conscious is a deeply 'discontinuous' process, for it (...) cannot be seen as a natural development of some biological capacity. (Corti: 2019: 4)

Finally, it is worth noticing that the concept of life that the life-oriented interpretation uses is one we might find in Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, that is, the part of his system that deals directly with the realm of nature and of culture. "Life" means for them the strictly natural life. Interestingly, however, Hegel's account of life is not restricted to natural life. In the *Science of Logic*, when dealing with the logical categories, he includes the Idea of Life. One might wonder, therefore, whether the life-oriented interpretation could make a stronger case for its position if it turned to the *Science of Logic*, the so-called foundation of the *Realphilosophie*. Here is precisely where Karen Ng's interpretation enters the picture and adds something interesting to the previous debate.

2.4 Karen Ng's interpretation

Karen Ng (2020) suggests that Hegel's idealism is grounded in the *logical* Idea of Life. Such life is neither the natural life of organisms nor the spiritual life of culture, but the logical life which Hegel includes as a category in the final stage of his systematic articulation of the space of reasons in the *Science of Logic*. In the context of the aforementioned debate, Ng's claim that "life is a necessary presupposition of cognition" (2020: 257) means that knowledge is not only causally conditioned by, but structurally grounded in, life. According to her interpretation of the *Science of Logic* (*SL*), the Idea of Life determines the space of reasons in such a way that spirit is unable to leave nature behind because doing so would imply going against its own logical structure. Here, the term "logical" adds something substantial to the previous life-oriented interpretations. By "logical" Ng understands something that is the foundation of nature and spirit insofar it provides them their structure. This reading implies that if the Idea of Life is shown to be the foundation of the Idea of Cognition, then the argument in favor of a naturalist interpretation of cognition is made at a more fundamental level in Hegel's system. If Ng's interpretation is correct, it could provide a stronger argument to the life-oriented interpretation by showing that life is all-pervasive in the Hegelian framework. We might then characterize her position as one that argues for the "unboundedness of life", insofar as, for Ng, the "unboundedness of the conceptual" is most basically a further elaboration of vital activity.

Ng begins her text with an historical reconstruction of the theme of inner purposiveness in Kant and post-Kantian philosophy, which I only briefly mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis. However, in the second part of the book she offers an exegesis of Hegel's work that reconstructs the philosophical role that life plays. Of the many themes that Ng touches upon, I

shall only concentrate in her exegetical claim about the status and role of life in *Science of Logic*: that the Idea of Life is never overcome in the later stages of that work (Ng 2020: 9) and that, therefore, the cognition elaborated in those stages does not involve going beyond nature. In the final section of *Science of Logic*, Hegel offers his understanding of the Idea, which is “truth itself” (SL 523/GW 12.173) because it is the complete adequacy of subjectivity (“the concept”) and objectivity (“reality”). The three categories under the title of the Idea (Idea of Life, Idea of Cognition, and Absolute Idea) display an increasing degree of such adequacy. However, Ng argues that the Idea of Life is not a mere stage among others. The subsequent stages are only variations of life, so that the latter is both an enabling condition and a constraint on knowledge (Ng 2020: 14).

3 THE OVERCOMING OF THE IDEA OF LIFE

Ng's interpretation of the Idea of Life can be summed up as follows: life is "not a determination that is ultimately overcome" (Ng 2020: 9). This exegetical claim is supposed to capture the idea that Hegel endorses the view that I shall call the "unboundedness of life". This view need not stand in opposition to the famous "unboundedness of the conceptual". In Ng's interpretation, the former view would be the foundation of the latter view. She emphasizes the crucial role that the Idea of Life plays in shaping the Idea of Cognition.

3.1 The meaning of overcoming

In order to better understand Ng's main exegetical claim, we shall consider the two main formulations she gives to such a claim. It seems to be that Ng uses two different formulations for her claim: (1.1) the empirical unrevisability of life and (1.2) the logical unrevisability of life. Although Ng mainly works with the second formulation, the first one sheds light on the importance and limits of the second.

3.1.1 The empirical unrevisability of life

Ng claims that the Idea of Life is not *empirically* revisable: "none of the thought-determinations of the Logic are straightforwardly revisable in light of experience, and life is no exception" (Ng 2021: 462). The claim refers to all the categories of *Science of Logic*. Given that Ng does not offer a defense for such claim, I shall consider the usual evidence for it. I use that evidence to suggest how Ng understands the relationship between the categories and experience.

Doing so will allow me to argue in Section 2 that such understanding is inconsistent and problematic.

The main textual support for the view that Hegelian categories are non-empirical consists in Hegel's repeated claim that the categories are "pure essentialities" (GW 21.8) free "of all sensuous content" (GW 21.42). Logic, which is the systematic exposition of those categories, is correspondingly called the "science of pure thinking" (GW 21.45). It is worth recalling that for Kant "pure" means wholly a priori (*KrV* 107, Bx). Unsurprisingly, therefore, when Hegel's use of the term is read against the Kantian background, *Science of Logic* is interpreted as an a priori project divorced from the empirical.¹³

Hegel sometimes insists on purity in a way that deprives the categories of any reference to the empirical domain. He asks the reader of *Science of Logic* not to consider categories as exemplified in natural or spiritual phenomena (*EL* 31, ¶3), but to focus on their inner "particular content" (GW 21.49). Likewise, he claims that the true philosophical question about the categories is not whether and how they refer to objects of experience, but whether they are "something true in and of themselves" (*EL* 68, ¶28). The first quote suggests that categories have a structure of their own independent of their empirical instances. The second quote suggests that the truth-value of propositions about categories is independent of how the world is. Hegel also claims that, whereas Kant takes up the categories as they appear in logic textbooks (hence, in Hegel's view,

¹³ Orsini (2021: 49-50) notes that the Logic can be interpreted as *partially* or *entirely* divorced from the empirical. In the former case, it is interpreted as explaining experience by categories that, although not derived from experience, are by no means separated from it. In the latter case, it is interpreted as aprioristic metaphysics devoted to showing the primacy of divine thought. Ng does not endorse the second interpretation, but she believes the Logic is sufficiently divorced from the empirical to call it "empty" (Ng 2020: 20).

empirically), he intends to derive the categories from thought itself (hence purely).¹⁴ This purpose of deducing the categories from the activity of thinking suggests that the categories grow internally from thought and that only later are, somehow, applied to the world. However, despite some unfortunate Hegelian formulations, the categories do not pop out of mind like a toast from a toaster.¹⁵

The *Science of Logic* exhibits a comprehensive set of categories obtained through “an unstoppable and pure progression that admits of nothing extraneous” (GW 21.38). This means that the Logic begins from the least intelligible category (pure being) and progresses to the most intelligible category (the Idea), all solely with the resources of reason itself. Hegel claims that the conceptual progression must not proceed from presuppositions outside the Logic. The rejected external resources are non-examined assumptions held by common opinion, subordinate sciences or particular philosophical positions. Pure thinking cannot take anything external as a criterion to judge how categories develop into further categories. Moreover, the Logic cannot even presuppose any of the categories derived in the course of its own development (GW 21.27). This means that a particular category (and less an empirical concept) cannot serve as a model for understanding logical form.¹⁶ As Hegel insists, what conceptual thinking and logical method are “only emerge as the final result and completion” (GW 21.27) of the Logic.

The features of *Science of Logic* mentioned above show that the categories are neither empirical nor empirically revisable. Ng’s endorsement of that picture manifests in her constant use

¹⁴ See *PhG*. ¶235, 139 and *EL* 86, ¶42, where Hegel follows Fichte’s reinterpretation of the Kantian metaphysical deduction, according to which the categories are “derived” from thought through its rational activity.

¹⁵ The expression is Pippin’s (2019: 87-88) and makes reference to the interpretation of the Hegelian “derivation” of the categories as a Neo-platonic self-causing process.

¹⁶ Houlgate is the interpreter who has emphasized that aspect of Hegel’s Logic the most: “this means that prior to any particular transition in the *Logic*, we have no model available by which to judge how that transition *should* proceed” (2006: 35).

of the terminology of apriority when describing Hegel's project¹⁷ and in her demand to understand the Idea of Life without any appeal to natural or spiritual examples (2020: 255-256). Likewise, she asks the reader not to consider Hegel or herself as working at the empirical level (2020: 7; 263-265) and emphasizes that logic cannot appeal to anything beyond itself to derive (and thus presumably to alter, revise or modify) the categories (2021: 85, 111). Finally, she appeals to Hegel's metaphor, according to which the Logic is "the realm of shadows" (GW 21.42), as a proof that the categories are not empirically revisable (2021: 461-462).¹⁸

3.1.2 *The logical unrevisability of life*

Not only does Ng claim logical life is empirically unrevisable, but also *logically* unrevisable. The Idea of Cognition would not be a "transformation of the [logical] form of life" (Ng 2020: 274), even though cognition appears later in the *Science of Logic* and notwithstanding the progressive nature of Hegel's argument. There Ng's claim refers to the Idea of Life only. However, I shall explain what "logical revisability" generally means to understand her position regarding life.

We can minimally understand logical revisability (or progression) in Hegel as a transition between two categories. The transition is prompted by a deficiency of the first category that finds its partial resolution in the new one that has immanently arisen. In order to understand what it means for a category to be deficient, consider the following passage:

...the *finitude* of the thought-determinations is to be construed in this double sense: the one, that they are *merely subjective* and are in permanent opposition to the objective; the other, that due to their *limited content* generally they persist in opposition to each other. (EL 66, ¶25)

¹⁷ See Rand 2021: 433-438 for a detailed account of Ng's a priori terminology.

¹⁸ Ng seems to share Pippin's intuition that the metaphor is a critical remark noting the insufficiency of the logic (Pippin 2019: 28). I develop this idea in Section 3.

I take “finite” here as a synonym for “deficient”. There are, consequently, two ways in which categories can be finite. First, they can be taken as utterly subjective and standing in opposition to the objective in some essential sense. This Hegelian claim is another way of stating Hegel’s objection to the Kantian understanding of the categories and cognition,¹⁹ which the *Phenomenology of Spirit* already refuted (GW 21.54). Second, categories can be finite in a way that does not invoke subjective deficiency. According to the Introduction to *Science of Logic*, the outcome of every conceptual transition “is a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding (...) because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it” (GW 21.38). This means that every transition involves what Hegel calls “sublation”. Leaving aside the complexities surrounding the term, sublation works in the following way. First, we are faced with a category that has a seemingly stable definition. Second, we find that the category is internally contradictory –it has limited content– because a one-sidedness comes to the fore and makes the initial category collapse (usually into its opposite). Finally, we grasp the unity of the opposition between the two categories and arrive at a third one that incorporates them but solves their contradiction.

Ng confirms this two-sided account of logical revisability (2020: 182; 248). However, she restricts its application, claiming that the nature of conceptual transformation changes in the Idea section of *Science of Logic* such that life is “totally unrevisable” (2021: 464). In light of the above account, her claim would mean that the Idea of Life has no deficiency, either subjective or

¹⁹ “Critical philosophy (...) gave to the logical determinations an essentially subjective significance out of fear of the object (...) but the liberation from the opposition of consciousness that science must be able to presuppose elevates the determinations of thought above this anxious, incomplete standpoint” (GW 21.35).

objective, and that its content remains unchanged.²⁰ I suspect two facts may motivate the claim that life is logically unrevisable. First, Hegel speaks of the Idea as being, precisely, the adequacy of subjectivity and objectivity to one another, suggesting that there is nothing deficient (or inadequate) in any of the Idea's three forms, including life.²¹ Second, Hegel depicts the Idea as the ground of the whole Logic (GW 12.11). Given that a transformation of ground seems to entail a transformation of what is grounded and that Hegel portrays the conceptual transitions that make up the Logic as necessary (GW 21.18), no stage of the Idea could be revised on the risk of compromising Hegel's system (Ng 2020: 247-258).

My answer to the previous two features will remain brief. Hegel makes it clear that deficiencies are to be found everywhere in the *Science of Logic* except in the Absolute Idea, thus emphasizing the deficiency of every preceding stage (GW 12.237-238).²² As I mentioned in my Introduction, the three categories under the title of the Idea display an increasing degree of adequacy, which suggests that conceptual transitions still occur within the Idea, albeit in a way different from how it occurs earlier. Altogether this evidence suggests that the Idea of Life is logically revisable and that we can expect Hegel to show us the specific content of the Idea of Life and the corresponding deficiency that the later stages intend to overcome. In Section 3, I show how Hegel accomplishes those tasks.

²⁰ Sometimes, she speaks of life as not being “fully” (Ng 2020: 9) or “completely” (Ng 2020: 274) sublated. I take this as an attempt to distinguish her interpretation without denying that categories are transformed and yet remain in a significant way (GW 21.94). Nonetheless, given that Hegel nowhere establishes a distinction between full and partial sublation, and that Ng does not explain how that distinction could be understood, I shall ignore those qualifications.

²¹ This reason is found in a recent account of logical life: “Hegel claims that the idea is already the unity of the concept and objectivity, and life is, therefore, something that cannot be taken as one-sided” (Englert 2016: 68).

²² “...the entire logical course in which all the shapes of a given content and of objects came up for consideration (...) has shown the transitoriness and the untruth of all such shapes (...) on the contrary, it is the absolute form [the Absolute Idea] that has proved itself to be the absolute foundation and the ultimate truth” (GW 12.237-238).

3.2 Against empirical unrevisability

In the previous section, I unpacked the claim that the categories are not empirically revisable and I mentioned the Kantian reading of the term “pure”, which overemphasizes the distance between the logical and the empirical. I also tried to show that Ng endorses some version of that reading. Although the natural way of proceeding would be to show, against Ng, that Hegelian categories are not empirically unrevisable, I will proceed differently.²³ The present section attempts to challenge Ng’s reading of empirical unrevisability by addressing two objections that bear on her claim that life is logically unrevisable.

The first objection is that Ng’s reading implies a problematic view of *Science of Logic*, which, it seems to me, is what actually motivates her claim that the Idea of Life is logically unrevisable. In short, life must be logically unrevisable for it to play the role Ng needs it to play: being “an antidote to the emptiness of logic” (2020: 256). The Idea of Life would not be another category derived in the space of reasons, but a necessary condition which, when added into logic, so to speak, plays the vital role of avoiding logic’s default condition of emptiness. According to Ng’s interpretation, the logical categories are not sufficient to avoid cognition’s lack of content, so they remain empty forms until something fills them (Ng 2020: 20; 257). This claim recalls the problematic Kantian picture in which “thinking is by itself empty (...) and only then gains a content [from outside]” (GW 21.28). However, Ng would not accept that picture and would resist ascribing

²³ Ng claims that the categories are “not straightforwardly” (2021: 462) revisable in light of experience. She thus admits that, in some sense, they are. Both naturalists (Pinkard 1988) and anti-naturalists (see Brandom in Pippin 2019: 67-69) interpreters offer accounts of how the categories are empirically revisable without losing their logical status.

to the categories the first form of finitude I mentioned in Section 1.2. I believe she pushes the emptiness problem down the line, from the empirical to the logical, so that the logical concept of life, rather than experience, prevents the Logic from remaining empty. Whereas in Kant intuitions filled the default emptiness of concepts, in Hegel it is life what fills the default emptiness of cognition. However, Ng's attempt to avoid the Kantian picture is not successful.

Ng offers two pieces of evidence to support her claim about logical emptiness. First, she uses (2020: 256, note 17) the following passage: "if the logic were to contain nothing but empty, dead forms of thought, then there could be no talk in it at all of (...) life" (GW 12.179). She reads this passage as stating that if the concept of life is not included, then logic remains empty. However, the passage states something different: it is because logic is not empty that we are allowed to talk about things that usually seem beyond its scope. Hegel is perhaps ironizing here against some philosophical enemies who take logic to be a merely formal discourse, as he previously did in GW 12.5). Second, Ng uses (2020: 256) the following quote:

...the necessity of considering the idea of life in logic would be based on the necessity, itself recognized in other ways, of treating the concrete concept. But this idea [of life] has arisen through the concept's own necessity; the *idea*, that which is *true* in and for itself, is essentially the subject matter of the logic; since it is first to be considered in its immediacy, so that this treatment be not an empty affair devoid of determination, it is to be apprehended and cognized in this determinateness in which it is *life*. (GW 12.179-180)

Ng rephrases this quote to claim that the Logic remains empty unless it succeeds in including life. However, the passage claims that concreteness alone would give us reason to consider the Idea of Life, but that we do not even need that reason since the Idea of Life has arisen on its own, systematically, in the articulation of the space of reasons. We are not given any clue that suggests the Idea of Life plays the role Ng assigns to it. Throughout the *Science of Logic*, we learn that we need to consider all the aspects of a category to understand it properly (or

“concretely”). If the Idea shows itself to have an initial way of being (the Idea of Life), we must consider the latter to get a complete picture of the former. In conclusion, given that the passages do not show that “Hegel is stating unequivocally” (Ng 2020: 257) that the logic is empty, and that many passages actually claim the opposite,²⁴ Ng’s reading must rely upon assumptions beyond the passages themselves. I believe her Kantian reading of “purity” is doing the interpretive work here.

My second objection is that Ng’s reading of empirical unrevisability is inconsistent. Despite recognizing the Hegelian requirement that the Logic cannot take any isolated concept, less an empirical one, as a model, she fails to meet it. This failure makes Ng’s position vulnerable to the objections addressed to other naturalist interpretations, and unable to avoid a relapse into the Kantian picture mentioned above. Ng claims that “species-concepts [natural kinds of the living] are the model on which Hegel grounds his understanding of logical form” (Ng 2021: 464). Not only does this claim make a single type of concept into the paradigmatic type of logical form in *Science of Logic*, but the type in question is an empirical concept. This fact does not sit well with Ng’s own insistence on the logical status of the concept of life. It is likely Ng’s goal of showing that Hegel “naturalizes his idealism” (Ng 2020: 265) that forces her to appeal to natural, and not only logical, life. That Ng takes the logical concept of life as partly empirical is implied in her claim that life “strikes us immediately, in a way that is neither exhausted by further conceptual determination nor fully up to our control” (Ng 2020: 20). Logical thought is thus dependent on something that is, for Hegelian standards, external. In conclusion, insofar as Ng’s interpretation does not restrict itself to the purely logical domain, we are potentially entitled to address to it some objections we would address to any other naturalist interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy.

²⁴ For example, *EL* 47, ¶19; *EL* 61, ¶24Z; and *GW* 11.15-16. Ng recognizes that the passage in which Hegel speaks of the Logic’s emptiness is “most surprising” (2020: 256).

3.3 Against logical unrevisability

Even if we concede Ng that her account of the Idea of Life remains strictly logical, life is logically revised. I proceed in two stages: (3.1) first, I argue that the Idea of Life has the structure of “immediate singularity”; (3.2) second, I show that its deficiencies are overcome. However, I shall explain first Ng’s view on the logical structure of life and how such view expands her claim that life cannot be overcome.

According to Kant, cognition requires the logical form of *universality* (concepts and judgments) to be brought to unity with the logical form of *singularity* (sensible intuitions). Ng claims that Hegel’s variation of this thesis is that cognition consists of a relationship between “two modes of judgment” (2020: 256). The first mode of judgment, ordinary and immediate, is the original judgment [*ursprüngliche Urteil*] of life. Human beings, as living entities, structure the world by interpreting a seemingly bare *this* as “a *this* to be avoided or pursued, a *this* to be eaten, a *this* to be mated with, [etc.]” (Ng 2020: 259). Given that the judgment of life brings into unity the universal (e.g., “to be eaten”) and the singular (e.g., “this”), Ng calls it a synthesis of the manifold. By synthesis she understands the putting together of different items. Such synthesis is associated with rudimentary purposes and the processes through which organisms achieve them. Therefore, the judgment of life is only a primitive form of structuring the world. The second mode of judgment, derivative and mediated, is self-conscious cognition. Human beings, as cognitive agents, conceptualize the world through the logical space of reasons and its categories. To inhabit the space of reasons in a self-conscious way means that when one makes a claim, one is immediately committed to it and should be able to justify it and being reason-responsive. Now, Ng’s idea regarding this two modes of judgments is that the judgment of life is both a condition,

for “it enables anything to be presented as an intelligible object” (Ng 2020: 257), and a constraint, for it limits the logical processes (Ng 2020: 258). Self-conscious cognition cannot, therefore, abandon the structure provided by life.

That structure is the originary judgment of life itself. Recall that the Idea is the adequacy of subjectivity and objectivity to each other. In the Idea of Life, this adequacy is not a static one-to-one relation but a process whereby the living subject (subjectivity) shapes the environment (objectivity). The *judgment* of life is, accordingly, not only a proto-cognitive faculty of the human mind but an activity of living beings themselves. This activity is characterized by an originary division [*ur-teilen*] and a reintegration into unity. The individual distinguishes itself from the environment through self-feeling and then reintegrates with the environment through a series of vital processes (which I address in Section 3.2). In conclusion, the Idea of Life is an all-encompassing (another Hegelian synonym for “universal”) process that brings together subjectivity and objectivity, as well as singularity and universality, through the activity of an individual. According to Ng, this means that the logical structure of life is both universal and singular at once.

3.3.1 Life as immediate singularity

Although Hegel depicts the Idea of Life as being both universal and singular at once, he also claims that “[life is] essentially a singular” (GW 12.181). I offer three pieces of evidence which show that the logical form of life is better understood as immediate singularity.

The first evidence is found in the initial paragraphs of the Idea section (GW 12.177-178). There we find the three-fold distinction of the Absolute Idea, the Idea of Cognition, and the Idea of Life. First, the Absolute Idea is the complete identity of subjectivity and objectivity as a

universal in which there is neither opposition nor singularity but complete self-equality and self-identity (GW 12.177, 4-7). Notice that here, where the Idea is described as complete adequacy of the subjective and the objective, Hegel makes exclusive use of the term universality (which in this case means, again, “totality”). Second, the Idea of Cognition is described as subjectivity and objectivity standing in reference to each other, that is, as being different from each other (so their identity is no longer total). Subjectivity is the impulse to overcome such difference, and objectivity is an indifferent substance upon which the impulse is directed (GW 12.177, 8-22). I take this claim to be a description of how theoretical and practical cognition work. Theoretical cognition’s drive for truth renders the world conformable to conceptual comprehension, and practical cognition’s drive to realize the good transforms the world in accordance with will (Ng 2020: 281). Third, the Idea of Life is the identity of subjectivity and objectivity but in a very limited sense. According to Hegel, life is a soul that, because of its immediacy and singularity, is actually soulless (GW 12.177). Hegel’s Aristotelian use of the term “soul” intends to capture the fact that the Idea, as life, is an all-encompassing and self-constitutive totality. However, Hegel’s qualification that such soul is soulless points to a deficiency. Life is only an initial stage (hence immediate) and it is confined within the limits of a single individual (hence singularity). Thus, this first evidence shows that when Hegel summarizes each form of the Idea, the Idea of Life is depicted as immediate singularity rather than as universality. The summary also suggests that Hegel considers the movement from the Idea of Life to the Absolute Idea as a progress in which singularity is transformed into universality.

The second piece of evidence is Hegel’s claim that “the idea, on account of its immediacy, has singularity for the form of its concrete existence” (GW 12.177). Hegel seems to deny to life the universality its unrevisability would require. One could object that, in the quote, Hegel draws

a distinction between the *concrete existence* of life (for example, in nature) and the *logical* idea of life. In that case, immediate singularity would not be the logical form of life. However, I think we need not read the passage that way. First, the logical categories are themselves described, against the usual prejudices, as concrete insofar as they are not merely formal (*EL* §19). Thus, second, when referring to non-logical life, Hegel does not speak of the concreteness but rather of the “externality of [its] existence” (GW 12.180). We should read “concrete existence” as a synonym for a category’s “specific appearance” at a given instance: life is the Idea as it initially appears. Thus, when Hegel describes how the Idea appears under the specific form of life, he emphasizes immediate singularity and not universality as its distinctive logical form.

The third evidence is that, when universality does appear in the description of the Idea of Life, it is downplayed. As Hegel puts it: “in life, the reality of the idea is *singularity*; *universality* (...) is the *inwardness*” (GW 12.196). I consider life’s inwardness to be a deficiency in Hegel’s view. As sketched at the beginning of the Idea section, the Idea is supposed to be the complete identity of subjectivity and objectivity, that is, a universal in which no difference and singularity is left. In the Idea of Life, such universality is not yet attained and thus remains something underdeveloped. That is why, it seems to me, Hegel claims that “*life* (...) is the idea, but at the same time, it has shown itself not to be as yet the true presentation or the true mode of its existence” (GW 12.196). For the Idea to attain its true presentation (complete self-identical universality), immediate singularity must be left behind. Thus, immediate singularity appears again as the distinctive logical form of life, which must be further transformed into universality.

In conclusion, the three previous pieces of evidence show that the Idea of Life is better understood as immediate singularity rather than as both universal and singular at once. If my

interpretation is right, and the Idea gets rid of singularity to attain complete universality in later stages, then the transition from life to cognition should be framed in those precise terms.

3.3.2 *The overcoming of the idea of life*

Ng denies that the transition from the Idea of Life to the Idea of Cognition is a real transition because the three processes of the living –that is, corporeality, externality, and the genus– are constraints on knowledge (Ng 2020: 260-278). Those constraints make up the originary judgment of life and they are supposed to show that life is already a successful unity of singularity and universality. Ng’s use of “constraint” does not mean that life is an obstacle that must be overcome by cognition. On the contrary, she claims that if cognition abandons the structure provided by life, the former becomes something arbitrary and supernatural (Ng 2021: 468). However, I want to suggest that the *Science of Logic* and some additional Hegelian remarks on cognition actually show that cognition’s dependence on life would amount to a relapse into Kantian subjectivism. The reason would be that, if cognition is dependent upon the form of life that we, human beings, are, then cognition is something merely relative to us. What is distinctive of cognition is not its dependence upon life constraints but its power to get rid of them.

Let us consider the first process: corporeality. In this section of *Science of Logic*, Hegel considers the living being in abstraction from its environment. A living being is embodied, and its body is a self-constitutive system divided into further sub-systems. In Ng’s interpretation, Hegel does not talk about any particular body (singular) but about the body in general (universal) and its decisive role in cognition (2020: 264-265). However, such a view of the body is problematic because Ng emphasizes “self-feeling”, the immediate sense of the self that the living being has, as

the distinctive capacity of the body (2020: 266). Hegel insists that such power is intrinsically singular (an individual can only feel what he himself feels) and an obstacle that cognition (something that is shared and not the private experience of an individual) must overcome. The reason is that self-feeling forces living beings to remain enclosed within subjective limits, namely, those of their bodies (*LPR I 273/GW 29,1.149*). Our senses can never carry beyond our own person. Moreover, self-feeling lacks the discursive structure that is distinctive of knowledge. If feeling becomes the justificatory element, then any significant distinction comes to naught and normativity vanishes (*LPR I 395/GW 29,2.39*). Unsurprisingly, therefore, Hegel claims in the Idea of Cognition section that the “entirely corporeal constitution, (...) external influences and particular circumstances” (*GW 12.197*) should be left out of consideration. Despite our embodied condition, when we know in certain ways, we establish a relationship with a lawful order that is independent from our bodies. Thus, it is unlikely that the body constitutes a non-pejorative constraint on knowledge. On the contrary, the logical form of the body is singularity, and knowledge implies a transition to universality.

The second process is externality. In this section, Hegel considers the living being’s relation to the environment. As the name of the process implies, the embodied individual shapes the external world and renders it conformable to its purposes. The living individual is not only a self-relating totality that remains enclosed within itself but one that relates to its environment as the condition of its existence. The dynamic between the inner and the outer is grounded in the individual’s struggle to preserve itself by assimilating elements from the milieu (e.g., breathing and digesting). Ng claims that the second life process solves the limitation of the first one by allowing the individual to abandon its subjective standpoint and form an objective and shared world (Ng 2020: 269-270). However, the purposes that the individual pursues arise out of the

feeling of a lack and are, more or less, commanded by self-preservation. If the process of externality constitutes a constraint on logical cognition, then Hegel's idealism becomes subjectivistic. The objective world would always be interpreted through individual and contingent interests. Even though our first contact with the world is undoubtedly motivated by needs or interests, attaining the universal space of reasons is made possible by overcoming such particularities. Thus, it is unlikely that Hegel expects externality to constitute an unsurmountable constraint on cognition.

The third process is the genus. In this section, Hegel considers the relationship between the living individual and the species to which it belongs. The genus would be a constraint on knowledge insofar as "all cognitive capacities are fundamentally shaped by the corporeal reality and the relation to the environment actualized in particular species" (Ng 2020: 277). The previous means that an individual's embodiment and relation to the environment are dictated by its belonging to a particular species. The implication of this claim is that cognition is dependent upon natural kind. Although such intuition does not seem problematic, Hegel is unsympathetic to that view. First, he claims that "this universal [the genus] is the third stage, the truth of life in so far as life is still shut up within itself" (GW 12.190). The genus possesses some degree of universality and constitutes, therefore, the more developed form of life. However, such degree remains insufficient due to the "the particularity that constitute[s] the living species" (GW 12.191). We may understand the particularity of the genus as the existence of a plurality of different species (e.g., "dog", "cat", "human"). If the genus is understood as a constraint on knowledge, its intrinsic particularity would lead to the Kantian species relativism that Hegel rejects. There would be a split between "how the world really is" and "how the world appears for us (humans)". The objective knowledge of the world, whose most comprehensive framework the Logic is supposed to provide,

slips away. Thus, the genus is not free from the immediate singularity of life, and to take it as a legitimate constraint on knowledge faults Hegel's view on cognition.

Finally, the overcoming of the Idea of Life is explicit in Hegel's account of procreation and perishing, which conclude the genus process. Those two phenomena show the supra-individual fate of the individual (Siep 2018: 680). Through them, life's singularity is transformed into cognition's universality, and nature becomes spirit (GW 12.191). The first phenomenon, procreation, shows the inadequacy between subjectivity and objectivity in life. As in everyday language, parents "live through" their offspring and shape the world through their lineage. However, this is a weak form of persistence and universality. Natural beings have no assurance that the offspring will survive or that an obstacle (disease, sterility, or death) will not put an end to the reproduction process. Moreover, Hegel depicts reproduction as the mere repetition of individuals whose unavoidable destiny is death. This picture leads to the second phenomenon: perishing. Not only is death the necessary counterpart of procreation, since the offspring lives and the parents die (GW 12.190), but it points to the unsurmountable limit of life. No matter what, the individual will perish, and its relation to the environment will cease. Hegel understands death as the elimination of the singular individual by objectivity. The individual fails to keep the boundaries between itself and objectivity, between the inner and the outer. The very nature of the singular provides the basis for natural death. The living individual is a type of unity that, because of its embodiment, is grounded in chemical processes that both sustain it and make it perish. As Hegel claims, "the living body is always on the point of passing over into the chemical process (...) [but] only at death or in disease is the chemical process able to prevail" (PN 274, ¶337). To die is to become mere flesh and bones, or a bundle of chemical processes in which life is no longer recognizable. The very nature of the living, that is, immediate singularity, prevents it from living

forever. That is why, according to Hegel, what dies is the “immediate concrete existence” (GW 12.191) of the “single individuals” (GW 12.191) and “the isolated singularities of individual life” (GW 12.191).

For the Idea to become the complete adequacy of subjectivity and objectivity with each other, it needs to become more than immediate singularity, that is, than life. It needs to attain a domain in which life is no longer a constraint: knowledge. Hegel frames the transition from life to cognition as a process whereby the Idea gives “itself a reality, which is itself simple universality” (GW 12.191) and attains “universality as its determinacy and existence” (*ibid.*). Although not yet the true presentation of the Idea, the Idea of Cognition constitutes a real transformation of the Idea of Life. In the reflexivity of cognition and intentional action, our immediate singularity no longer matters. That is why Hegel speaks of the attainment, via cognition, of something not only more “universal and free” (GW 12.182) but of a “higher form of existence” (GW 12.191).

4 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explained how to understand Ng's claim that the Idea of Life is never overcome and offered reasons to resist such claim. I have also shown that, although philosophically appealing and textually supported, the project of drawing on resources from the Logic to make a stronger case for a naturalist interpretation of Hegel's thought is problematic. Some passages from the *Science of Logic* and from other Hegelian work show that the Idea of Life, and natural life, do not play the role that Ng wished to ascribe to it. To conclude, I shall consider two objections to my position.

First, Ng may reply that to take life as singularity, and cognition as universality, introduces a weird division of labor in the Idea. After all, Hegel shows at the beginning of the second book of *Science of Logic* that universality, particularity, and singularity conform a unity (GW 12.35). I have two responses to that worry. First, we need not understand life as *exclusively* singular and cognition as *exclusively* universal. As mentioned earlier, despite being universal in some way, Hegel claims that the Idea of Life is "essentially a singular" (GW 12.181). Second, to take the Idea of Cognition and the Absolute Idea as *essentially* universal would be consistent with a methodological feature of *Science of Logic* that Ng's interpretation cannot fully make sense of. The ending of the Logic must go back to its beginning so that logical science turns out to be a circle (GW 12.57-58/*EL* 45, ¶17). I omit Hegel's reasons for holding such a commitment. He claims that the Absolute Idea is somehow the "pure being" with which the Logic began: "we have now returned to the concept of the idea with which we began (...) what we began with was being, the abstract being, and now we have the idea as being" (*EL* 303, ¶244; see also GW 12.239). The identity between those two categories is explained in terms of their simple universality, which contrasts with singularity.²⁵ However, if the immediate singularity of life is built into the Absolute

²⁵ "We spoke of this beginning at the very beginning of the Logic (...) its content is an immediate, but one that has the meaning and form of abstract universality (...) the immediate of sense intuition is a manifold

Idea, the latter's universality cannot be as pure as it is required to be identified with pure being. Ng is forced to admit that *Science of Logic* has two beginnings (2020: 291).

Second, Ng may reply that Hegel's description of the Absolute Idea as "imperishable life" (GW 12.136) shows that the former is just a variation of life. However, the life involved in the Absolute Idea is, contrary to any naturalist interpretation, metaphysically loaded. Ng emphasizes Hegel's debt to Aristotle's naturalism (Ng 2020: 256), according to which there is a strong continuity between non-human and human animals. The virtue of this interpretation is the downplaying of theological-sounding characterizations that Hegel gives of logic.²⁶ However, Aristotle's philosophy also has anti-naturalist aspect: notably, the intellect's separation from the body and the idea that God's divine self-thinking is a form of life. Hegel speaks of the Logic as being God's self-thinking before creating nature and spirit (GW 21.34) and as the Idea's self-knowledge (*EL* 299, ¶236). The close relationship between God and the Logic is important because Hegel's philosophy of religion contains passages with the most anti-naturalist tone.²⁷ When it comes to the cognition of the divine, life does not undergo sublation [*Aufhebung*], in which something is always preserved, but elevation [*Erhebung*], in which something is totally overcome.

and a singular (...) cognition, on the contrary, is a thinking (...) its beginning, therefore (...) is a simple and universal" (GW 12.239).

²⁶ For a recent account of those characterizations, see Tolley (2018).

²⁷ For example: "spirit is precisely this self-elevation above nature, this self-extrication from the natural; not only is it liberation vis-à-vis the natural but the subjection of the natural to itself (*LPR* II 518/GW 29,2.74); "the human being is essentially spirit (...) to be free, setting oneself over against the natural, withdrawing oneself from immersion in nature, severing oneself from nature (*LPR* II 525-526/ GW 29,2.18); and "humanity as it is by nature is not what it ought to be; human beings ought to be what they are through spirit" (*LPR* II 527/GW 29,2.80).

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