

# Spiritualized Nature: Hegel on the Transformative Character of Work and History

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## Abstract

It is argued that one of Hegel's main strategies in overcoming the opposition between nature and spirit is to recognize a realm of "spiritualized nature" that has a distinctive ontological character of its own, one that, though it is rooted in nature, must be understood in essentially historical terms. It is argued that for Hegel the activity of work is premised upon a commitment to the independent standing of such spiritualized nature and its historical character, and a detailed reading of Hegel's account of the slave's work in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is developed to show just how it is that work transforms nature into something of historical import.

*Keywords:* Hegel, History, Naturalism, Master/Slave Dialectic, Work.

## 1. Introduction

There are various points in Hegel's writing in which nature is conceived as something fundamentally distinct from and opposed to spirit, where the term "spirit" is generally meant to capture what is distinctive about us as free, self-conscious, thinking, and willing beings, and which more broadly includes the various legal, moral, economic, political, aesthetic, and religious ideals or norms to which we as subjects are uniquely responsive.<sup>1</sup> I will go on to lay out this opposition in what I take to be its most extreme form, but my aim is ultimately to show that the opposition, and the way nature and spirit are defined so as to give rise to it, are not Hegel's final word. Concerned to develop an overall conception of reality in which the fundamental opposition is overcome, and so in which nature and spirit, though maintaining their difference, come to be conceived in light of a more fundamental unity, Hegel would have us recognize a distinctive domain of reality for which neither nature nor spirit in their one-sided forms can be appealed to as providing the ultimate terms for analysis. This realm is not simply *both* natural *and* spiritual, some sort of hybrid dimension which contains distinct elements,

<sup>1</sup> Among others, see Hegel 1977: par. 381 and *Zusatz*, and Hegel 1975: 53-55.

some of which are explained as one-sidedly natural, others as one-sidedly spiritual. This would only be to defer the issue of how these distinct elements can come to cohere into a unified account of reality. Rather, Hegel has in mind a realm populated with realities that have a distinctive logic and ontological character of their own, and that as such arguably require a distinctive set of conceptual terms to render them intelligible.

I propose that this distinctive ontological realm can be fruitfully conceived as the domain of “spiritualized nature”. I call it *spiritualized* nature to highlight the fact that it only comes to be as a result of a concrete, transformational process, a process whereby otherwise natural processes or events or objects come to take on a distinctive, new character that makes them such that they are *no longer* natural beings in the narrower, oppositional sense. As I will go on to discuss, another name for this domain overall is, simply, “history”, for history is, for Hegel, arguably nothing other than this unique transformational process.

The arc of history in its broadest outlines is for Hegel the gradual progression from purely natural, prehistoric forms of reality, including prehistoric forms of human life that are dominated exclusively by natural forces and laws, towards forms of living that are to increasing degrees free and self-determining in character—which is to say, forms of living that are not just the blind instantiations of fixed and permanently existing natural laws, but that in some sense *generate their own laws*, laws that had no real purchase on things until they were actually recognized and put into play by the historically evolving ways of life that concretely embody them. In other words, history is the gradual development of distinctive kinds of reality that are increasingly determined, not by nature, but by ideals and norms—by the forces of right, beauty, truth, and, more generally, by meaning and rationality.<sup>2</sup>

While this gradual, transformational process is, in one sense, the victory of freedom and spirit *over* nature, it is crucial to note that on Hegel’s account it takes place only *in* and *through* the concrete terms of the spatio-temporal world of nature. So, in another sense spirit and its self-determining character only enter the scene, become actual, and evolve, by being *naturalized*—but in such a way that spirit thereby transforms and surpasses what would otherwise be *merely* natural in character, rendering it into spirit’s embodiment. Nature on its own is insufficient to explain or necessitate the rise of history and so of nature’s own spiritualization process. For instance, there seems to be good reason to think that Hegel would not accept any evolutionary account that tried to reduce all that was distinctive of human spiritual life to the same sorts of natural processes that underlie the evolution of plants and other animal life. For Hegel there is something exceptional about spiritual reality and its freedom, and Hegel conceives of historical reality as something that actively *distinguishes itself from* and *works against* nature as such, affirming itself only in and through a suspension or negation of what would otherwise be natural.<sup>3</sup> But, on the other hand, spirit’s realization, in its historical inauguration, also renders nature *necessary* to it as its condition or presupposition:

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hegel 1956: 20-27, where Hegel lays out his claim that history is the gradual realization of freedom by way of action’s turning of nature to freedom’s ends.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Hegel’s discussion of how history realizes itself through natural forces that, in their conflicts with and limitations of one another, give rise to a significance that exceeds them (Hegel 1956: 26-28).

we see—retrospectively, on the basis of spirit’s actual, historical development—how nature afforded it what it needed for its self-realization.<sup>4</sup> It is essentially this spiritualizing/ naturalizing process, as something that exists in its own right and that has a distinctive ontology of its own, that, I suggest, Hegel brings to the forefront as offering us a way of getting beyond the bare opposition between nature and spirit.

I maintain that, on Hegel’s account, we bear witness to the distinctive ontological status of this process and its transformational character above all by directly participating in it: that is, it is precisely insofar as we are ourselves the active agents of history, concretely engaged thereby in the process of rendering nature spiritual and thus meaningful, that we find ourselves committed—committed *in practice*, as it were—to the distinctive reality of spiritualized nature, and so to the surpassing of the fixed nature/spirit dichotomy. For Hegel, action, and particularly the activity of *work*, affords us an indispensable perspective on the nature of reality, one that a purely theoretical consciousness, wholly devoid of any concrete will and of any situatedness within the natural world, would not have access.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I will go on to offer an extended account of work, particularly as Hegel conceives it in his famous discussion of the master and slave dialectic (Hegel 1977, par. 194-6). This discussion, I suggest, affords us with an exemplary opportunity to explore how both the natural world, and ourselves as natural, desiring beings, are transformed by work into something that, though still fundamentally situated in and drawing upon our character as embodied, natural beings, is no longer natural in the narrower, oppositional sense. I begin, however, by drawing out the opposition between nature and spirit in what is arguably its most extreme form, for the sake of putting into better perspective the account of spiritualized nature and of work that follows.

## 2. Nature vs. Spirit

To identify the most basic contours of the opposition between nature and spirit, let’s take nature in its most non-spiritual form to be defined generally as the spatio-temporal domain in which finite things and their various properties exist, interact, and change in such a way as to instantiate fixed causal laws of the sort that science uncovers. In his *Logic*, Hegel points to a kind of mechanistic physics as offering us a sense for what reality totally devoid of spirit, or of “subjectivity” and its associated processes, would be like (Hegel 2010: 631-34). In Hegel’s thinking, such a conception of nature is rooted in an ontology that is characterized by privileging externality and external relations: to the extent that things are individuated and extended in space and in time, they are typically conceived in terms of discrete units that are at bottom outside of and relatively independent of one another in their basic features, such that they act upon one another in an essentially external

<sup>4</sup> This, I take it, is how Hegel comes to conceive of nature as spirit’s *presupposition*, while at the same time maintaining that spirit is nature’s “truth” (Hegel 1971: sec. 381 and Remark). Spirit enables nature to reach a form that surpasses nature’s inherent limitations, and in that sense spirit is logically *prior* to nature, something that cannot be accounted for solely in natural terms.

<sup>5</sup> See Ciavatta 2016 for a more elaborate case for appealing to the resources that the distinctive perspective of practical life offers for the development of an idealist ontology.

manner.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for instance, a spatially distinct body causes some change in another spatially distinct body by exerting some kind of external force on it, a force that is contingent with respect to the latter's essential nature. And, if causal laws are conceived in temporal terms, where "X causes Y" amounts to something like "if state X is present, state Y will follow", this typically involves conceiving two successive episodes of time that are essentially distinct from and external to one another, in that each has its own set of positive features that do not expressly refer to those of the other episode, whether in the prospective or retrospective direction.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, spiritual reality in its "purest" form—that is, in the form in which it is most distinct from and opposed to natural reality—could be taken to be exemplified by the sort of pure ideality or intelligibility we associate with rationality and its essentially internal relations, as when one idea or claim presents us with a reason to affirm another.<sup>8</sup> Such logical or rational relations, or relations rooted in the meaning of things, are not fundamentally causal in nature, and do not concern the sorts of individuated things or events that take place in space or time and that alone admit of causal connection, but rather concern intelligible realities that, as such, are essentially universal and so are not individuated in time or space. The relations between otherwise distinct ideas and meanings are not merely external, as they would be in the case of mere empirical association, where thinking one idea merely reminds one of another idea, but are essentially internal, and are discovered precisely by our "entering into" the content of an idea. For instance, the meaning of the term "cause" does not just remind us of the meaning "effect" by association or by some sort of mechanical memory,<sup>9</sup> but is intrinsically linked to it, for it seems impossible to make sense of what it would mean to cause something if we could not think, or were not already thinking, something like an effect. The very content or intelligibility of the idea "cause" thus bears an internal reference to content "effect", and in that sense cannot be what it is without it.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that we come to recognize or think such intelligible realities and their relations, and when our thinking is compelled to commit itself to one idea or claim on the basis of an intellectual grasp of other ideas to which it has already committed itself, this actual compulsion and this transition of thought are, in a way, individuated events that, as such, can be said to take place in nature. At the very least they take place in time, such that we can typically differentiate between the time before and after which we cottoned on to some implication, and take our thinking to have changed in some way in the event of doing so. But we do not

<sup>6</sup> See Hegel 2010: 631; Hegel 1970: sec. 247-48; Hegel 1971: 381Z.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Hegel's discussion of the externality of moments of time to one another in Hegel 1970: sec. 259 Remark, where he argues that, in nature, any prospection or retrospection is posited as merely subjective.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hegel's discussion of pure logical thought in Hegel 2010: 736-37.

<sup>9</sup> Though it should be noted that Hegel's does acknowledge the importance of mechanical memory in the overall development of spiritual reality (Hegel 1971: sec. 463), and as Julia Peters has argued, this is particularly revealing of the naturalist strain informing Hegel's account of spirit (Peters 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Hegel's dialectical account of the cause/effect relation hinges precisely on the fact the cause is beholden for its intelligibility on the effect, where this eventually leads to the realization that *reciprocity* is more basic than the one-way causal relation (Hegel 2010: 500-503).

typically take *our concrete act of thinking of them* to be *constitutive of what is being thought* and of the *necessity* that is borne witness to by our thinking. Rather, our thinking grasps relations and necessities that, it seems, exist *in themselves* whether we, as particular thinkers with the particular psychologies we happen to have, think them or not.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the sorts of pure, logical relationships Hegel takes up in the *Science of Logic*—as, for instance, the sort of internal relation I pointed out earlier between the concepts of cause and effect—concern matters that were presumably true before Hegel (and any of the previous thinkers he draws from) demonstrated them to be true, and that would in some sense persist as true even if we as a species forgot them. Arguably we can say the same thing of aesthetic and moral norms: while the actual recognition of their force or their implications—the recognition of the demands their meaning places on us—may take hold of us at particular times and in reference to the here and now of the particular situations we face, we typically take what we bear witness to in such cases to hold independently of our actual bearing witness to them at the time, to have a sort of independent weight and reality that is, in itself, atemporal and universal.

If nature and spirit are conceived exclusively or primarily in terms of this, their most extreme, opposition, the prospects of conceiving how they could ever be brought together into a unified account of reality seem dim indeed. Moreover, we can see how such a stark opposition between nature and spirit could lend fuel to anti-idealist forms of naturalism. For the further away spirit is from nature, and so from the metaphysical or ontological commitments that underlie modern natural science and its purported successes, the more mysterious spirit seems to become from an ontological point of view. Likewise, any attempt on the part of an idealist to challenge the contemporary hegemony of nature-oriented ontologies, by offering an alternate ontology that would make room for the distinctive way of being of this ideal realm, is bound to seem, to modern ears at least, hopeless, something akin to a summarily dismissed “Platonism”—even if it is sometimes granted that the domain of ideality *does* seem to be irreducible to nature in basic respects.<sup>12</sup>

Whether Hegel himself attempts to defend the idea that pure ideality has a reality and ontological status of its own, independently of any account of concrete nature, is a matter of some controversy. But I propose to side-step that issue to explore another side of Hegel’s approach to the nature/spirit relation, one that focuses, not on spirit in its separation and its pure ideality, but on the way spirit comes to inhabit the natural world, in effect transforming nature into a material

<sup>11</sup> See Hegel’s discussion of philosophical thought as freeing itself from its “historical outwardness” (Hegel 1991a: sec. 14). Though it should be noted that some have read Hegel’s account of pure thought in the *Logic* as depending in essential ways on the concrete movement of thinking (see Burbidge 2006) or on concrete language (McCumber 1993).

<sup>12</sup> For an insightful overview of the core tensions and attempted reconciliations between modern naturalism and idealist metaphysics, see Sebastian Gardner 2007. I share Gardner’s view that so-called “soft naturalisms”, which acknowledge the irreducibility of the normative sphere to nature, but which nevertheless continue to regard nature, narrowly conceived, as setting the ultimate ontological standard for what counts as real, cannot ultimately evade idealism’s insistence on the need for an ontology that does justice to the distinctive character of normative reality. Though Gardner does not single out McDowell’s focus on second nature, Gardner’s worries about soft naturalism arguably plague McDowell’s approach as well (McDowell 1996).

manifestation of the norms and meanings to which spirit bears witness. From this perspective, not only spirit, but nature itself, need to be reconceived so as to overcome the starkness of the opposition between them: on Hegel's account we must recognize, not only that spirit can and does draw upon and reconfigure the natural world—that spirit's self-determination and self-realization occurs precisely *in* and *through* what has been afforded to it and set in motion by nature—but also that “nature” is revealed, precisely *by* spirit's self-realization in it, to be irreducible to an inherently meaningless domain of spatio-temporal things and occurrences exhausted by physical laws. On the contrary, natural forms and processes come to show themselves as providing the concrete ground or condition of spirit's own self-realization, which suggests that the meanings and norms to which spirit comes to embody and bear witness in its concrete existence, must themselves have some sort of basis in natural reality, and so cannot be wholly foreign to it.<sup>13</sup>

If the standing norms of beauty or good or truth are not *merely* ideal, but can have an actual weight and motivational pull on us—if they *make a difference* for us—then at the very least there must be temporally-individuated episodes in which such norms are actually felt, affirmed, or heeded by our subjective experience at some specific moment in history. But more than that, in the case of some of these norms at least, what is required is not just an internal, subjective recognition of their weight and implications, but an *actual transformation of the world*, one that is informed by and grounded in such norms. For instance, moral norms are such as to demand that some specific action be taken, and aesthetic norms, when guiding the hand of the artist, exist as demanding that an object being generated by the artist take a certain form and not others. Were it impossible for such norms to ever enter into and shape the spatio-temporal world at all—if everything in the spatio-temporal world were, by definition, norm-free or without meaning, for instance as wholly exhausted by meaningless instantiations of natural laws—then such norms, in their demandingness, would in effect be demanding the impossible. Every attempt to enact them or make them effective would be to betray them. Hegel sees this tension as plaguing Kant's (and arguably also Fichte's) moral philosophy, for in his view Kant subscribes to too sharp an opposition between nature and ideality which in effect renders the moral good into an “infinite ought” that can never be concretely realized in time or in practice (see Hegel 1991a: sec. 60 and Remark). In contrast, Hegel is committed to recognizing a sort of middle terrain in which not every concretization of an ideal is its betrayal, but where there can actually *be* concrete realities that are themselves the living embodiment or

<sup>13</sup> While I will be focusing specifically on action and history, a broader defense of this claim could also turn to the “Anthropology” section of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, where the natural and corporeal roots of spirit's distinctive capacities are explored. However, it is worth noting there is still an implicit historical trajectory underlying Hegel's account in the Anthropology, for Hegel seems to suppose that historically more evolved humans (that is, those whose reality is more determined by their own agency and will) are *less determined* by the specific limits of these natural roots than less evolved humans, and so that history plays a role in mediating and cultivating the concrete character of even the most corporeal phenomena Hegel discusses here. Thus, for instance, though all humans have corporeally-expressed emotions, the content and shape of the emotions of more historically evolved humans will be more “spiritualized and the materiality of their expression diminished” (Hegel 1971: 83).

presence of a norm or a meaning—realities that are not reducible to the meaningless stuff of a one-sided nature, but are themselves the direct, material manifestations of spirit.

*Actions* themselves are what constitute the most basic “objects” populating this middle realm on Hegel’s account, for Hegel seems committed to regarding “acting bodies” or “action events” as of a different ontological status than mere natural bodies or natural events (though we will see, as we turn to Hegel’s account of work, that action also enables things otherwise external to the agent’s body to take on this distinct status as well). Generally speaking, action is conceived by Hegel as a process of enabling the norms whose meaning we bear witness to as spiritual subjects, to actually inform and in some sense govern the objective goings on of the concrete, spatio-temporal sphere: action sees to it that these otherwise ideal norms are no longer *merely* subjective and ideal, having purchase *solely* in our thoughts or intentions or interpretations, but actually *make a concrete difference* in the world, gaining a real purchase and explanatory force in the here and now.<sup>14</sup> The very project of acting hinges on the notion that it is not enough merely to *interpret* or *be conscious of* a certain given state of affairs as the embodiment of a certain norm’s meaning—as though this were merely a matter of subjectively projecting meanings onto a realm that, in itself, was essentially meaningless and indifferent to whatever meanings it might take on—but that some sort of concrete *event*, some sort of real *transformation* in the here and now of the spatio-temporal world—that is, the action-event itself—must actually take place if we are to be *warranted* in regarding the relevant state of affairs as the successful embodiment of meaning. That is, the action takes itself, its actual changing of the world, to be essential in bringing meaning into play. From the point of view of the engaged agent, then, the difference between a merely given, natural state of affairs, and a spiritualized, or “accomplished”, state of affairs—that is, one that is in itself marked by the embodiment of meaning or by answering to norms—is not merely a difference in interpretation, a difference “in us”, but a difference rooted in *actual events* and their unfolding in the here and now. And the agency of the agent, her power to make a real difference in the here and now, consists in nothing other than the capacity to give rise to such a transformational event: her agency is, then, not simply a matter of being an efficient cause in the stream of law-governed, natural events, nor is it a matter of somehow letting some norm act as such a natural cause, but rather a matter of letting *meaning actually happen* in the world and thereby *come to inform* what would otherwise be a meaningless domain of natural events. In effect, her agency consists in giving rise to a different sort of event altogether—a *historical* event. I will be arguing that it is particularly in Hegel’s account of *work* that this transformative character of human activity is brought to the forefront. Before turning to the nature of work, however, I will briefly lay out some of the most basic features of historical reality, with a view to setting up the contrast between it and nature that will underlie the account of work.

### 3. History and the Essential Place of Concrete Individuality

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Hegel 1971: sec. 484, where Hegel speaks of the will’s need to realize itself in an external objective form, thereby “making the latter a world moulded by the former”. For similar formulations, see Hegel 1991b: secs. 8, 109-10, and 1956: 22.

Part of what distinguishes us as humans, on Hegel's account, is that we are historical beings, and everything that is distinctively human is arguably marked by its essentially historical character in his view. To say that we are historical is to say, among other things, that *who we actually are* is determined, at least in part, by *what happens* in the course of our existence—by what we experience and actually undergo in life, and most especially by what we do in response to these experiences and events.<sup>15</sup> It is to say that our identities are not already fully fixed and written into the nature of things in advance, but are perpetually in question and develop in the temporally unfolding course of things, such that, not only our knowledge or consciousness of ourselves, but also who we actually are, can be fully settled only in retrospect, once our “stories” are decisively *over*, or once we have said and done the most essential things we are going to say and do.

It is arguably due to this fundamental historicity of human life that processes like work and education, or life-changing decisions such as getting married or heroically standing one's ground in a high-stakes ethical crisis, play such crucial roles in Hegel's account of human or spiritual life. For these are all essentially historical processes in that they transform the overall self-identity and sense of agency of the individuals who are engaged in them, and transform them in ways that could not have been fully predicted or affirmed in advance of their actual occurrence—such that the actual, temporal unfolding of what we put into play comes to have a bearing on determining and revealing who we are.<sup>16</sup>

To say that what happens in the course of a self's life can play a role in determining the identity of that self is to recognize the irreducible character of the self's spatio-temporal situatedness and individuation. It is to acknowledge that, though I have a past and a future, though I essentially occupy different “nows” and “heres” in the course of my life—that is, though I am *universal*, in the sense that my identity stands beyond every *particular* situation I may be in, and is not exhausted by any one of them, or perhaps even by the totality of them<sup>17</sup>—there is nevertheless a sense in which, when I am in some individual situation in the here and now, the *whole* of me is potentially at stake, such that what occurs in this particular, concrete situation can have a bearing on my whole life, my identity as a whole. For, not only is death possible at any moment, threatening to short-circuit and thereby shape the contours of my overall biography, but there are also such things as decisive turning points, as a result of which I am never quite the same the person. For instance, events can arise which finally bring to a point of resolution my deepest commitments, commitments that, until that point, had perhaps been somewhat indeterminate and had no occasion to fully articulate and pronounce themselves, but that, under the unique circumstances of the moment, were allowed to shine through in a decisive and unmistakable way, thereby setting

<sup>15</sup> Thus Hegel can say that “what the subject *is*, is the series of its actions” (Hegel 1991b: sec. 124; Hegel's emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> See Hegel 1956: 27-29, where Hegel takes up the theme of how historical action typically realizes more than what was intended by the agent. I take this account of the retrospective nature of action to be generally consistent with that put forward by authors like Robert Pippin (2008: 147-79), though my suggestion in what follows that there is a distinctive historical ontology implied in such a conception departs from Pippin's account.

<sup>17</sup> I am invoking here the specific sense of universality that Hegel develops in his account of sense-certainty in the *Phenomenology*; see Hegel 1977: pars. 98-99.



up a new standard against which all my subsequent actions (and, indeed, perhaps even my previous actions) will now be measured.

These are the sorts of heightened events that Hegel regards as especially well-suited to the manifestation of beauty on the stage, as he considers them to be among the most successful embodiments of spirit in its concreteness.<sup>18</sup> And in his account of world-historical individuals, Hegel acknowledges that such decisive events can even have a role in determining the overall shape of history (Hegel 1956: 29-32). Not every moment of a life is of such fateful significance, for, after all, much of the time we do what is typical given who we already are, and, indeed, in some respects our most prosaic actions are hardly distinctive of us as individuals and share much in common with those of others. But that there can be such formative events (or periods), suggests that our concrete situatedness in time and place is not merely the anticipatable instantiation of standing universals (as the events in nature instantiate pre-existing, standing causal laws), but rather the concrete institution of new or modified universals or norms.<sup>19</sup>

That our concrete situatedness matters in this basic way is also expressed in the fact that we as spiritual beings cannot help taking our own individual lives to be of absolute or final importance in the grand scheme of things: that is, we cannot help demanding that our individuality—this, our one and only life—be recognized as important in and of itself, rather than being taken up merely as substitutable instantiations of the general form “human” or “person”. Unlike plants, for instance, which on Hegel’s account are less fully individuated, and are more like temporary passing phases of one and the same ongoing genus cycle—the individual plant generating the seeds that lead to it being supplanted by new individuals that instantiate essentially the same processes that it instantiated, making it and its predecessor each just repetitions of the same one generic reality<sup>20</sup>—we as individuals are not simply substituted and replaced by the next generation, but can in principle make our individual mark once and for all, such that our individuality stands on its own account and is not merely one among many repetitions. The distinctiveness of history seems premised precisely on giving individuality its due in this way, whereas nature presents itself to us, in contrast, as the domain in which individuality is obliterated and forgotten for good, or in which individuals are wholly subsumed under the standing universals they instantiate, with the result that there is no fundamental difference between one natural individual and the others, each being of equal status in being fully accounted for as the instantiation of the same laws. As we will see, this way of framing the contrast between

<sup>18</sup> See Hegel 1975: 217-44, for Hegel’s general discussion of how beauty places demands on what sorts of actions are worthy of artistic presentation, and for his defense of the aesthetic superiority of the sorts of decisive, character-disclosing events typical of tragic collisions.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Hegel’s description of the beautiful individual as being “a law to itself”, rather than being beholden to existing laws (Hegel 1975: 185). Hegel’s description of the world-historical individual similarly emphasizes the fact that great historical actions cannot be adequately understood according to existing norms, but look forward towards the institution of new norms; see Hegel 1956: 29-32.

<sup>20</sup> See Hegel 1970: pars. 343-44 and 348. In elaborating on the lack of individuation in plants Hegel also notes that certain parts of plants can be cut and replanted to form other individuals, as though the original plant were only a superficial unity of many rather than a full-fledged individual in its own right.

nature and history will provide a useful backdrop to Hegel's account of the slave's working relation to the world, to which I will now turn.

#### 4. Hegel on Work and the Generation of History

Work, or formative activity, plays an important role in several of Hegel's discussions. For instance, as in Locke's view, work for Hegel transforms otherwise natural, external things into our property (Hegel 1991b: secs. 56-57); work transforms our immediate, natural desires into a spiritualized second nature, and in doing so allows us to participate in, and achieve the recognition of, the collectively-generated social order in the civil sphere (Hegel 1991b: secs. 196-98); the "spiritual" work of the artist brings about inspired artworks that give voice to the community as a whole (Hegel 1977: pars. 698-704). In each case what is at issue is the distinctive capacity of spirit to realize itself by rendering what was formerly natural and immediate into something that embodies it. I will focus in particular on Hegel's account of the slave's work and the way this work comes to transform, not only the world, but also the slave's own sense of agency: here the actual event of transformation arguably reveals to the slave something that he could not have realized inwardly, simply through reflection, and so the irreducibility of the concrete, historical event of his action comes to the fore in an especially striking way.

##### 4.1 The Fear of Death and the Unsettling of Nature

To provide the appropriate context for understanding the nature and function of the slave's work, it must be noted, first, that the slave is characterized by Hegel as subsisting in a deep-rooted fear in the face of death, a fear that permeates all of his interactions with himself and the world (Hegel 1977: par. 194). Hegel conceives of slavery as evolving out of a struggle in which self-conscious agents each seek to affirm their own freedom in its independence from nature, by risking their lives in a battle to the death (Hegel 1977: par. 187). The idea here is that the self seeks to declare that it takes its individual freedom to be more valuable than the natural life it has been given, and wants the other self to recognize this daring affirmation of freedom, and so actively puts its life, and so its very attachment to nature, on the line. This stance in effect embodies a kind of dualism between spiritual freedom and nature: by placing one's natural life at risk, thereby suspending life's claim on one's concerns and actions, one in effect declares freedom to be somehow beyond the natural realm altogether. The fear of death arises here, in response, as the realization that freedom (and so, spirit) *requires* nature as its condition, that freedom can *only* be realized *in and through* one's individual and concrete life, and so that one's individual life becomes something that needs to be preserved at all costs—thus the openness to slavery.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note here that the slave's mortal fear is not the blind, instinctual fear that any animal might possess in the face of some specific danger, but is a fear founded upon a kind of rational realization of universal scope, the realization of freedom's necessary dependence on natural life.<sup>22</sup> That is, the slave's dread is already a primitive form of "spiritualized nature": as a feeling, it

<sup>21</sup> As Hegel puts it, "self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness" (Hegel 1977: par. 188).

<sup>22</sup> As Hegel writes, "this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread" (Hegel 1977: par. 194).

is still an immediate, and so presumably corporeal, phenomenon, one that manifests itself in a particular disposition of the body; but the specific character of this feeling that overtakes the slave is grounded in an appreciation of something that only a self-conscious being, concerned with its life as a whole and specifically in its prospects of realizing freedom, can have.<sup>23</sup> And we can already see that what this fear presumes, in its moving beyond the sheer *separation* of spirit from nature, is some kind of unity between spirit and nature. In effect, the slave's fear is a kind of immediately felt, embodied recognition of the need for a spiritualized nature, and we will see that this is precisely what the slave's actual work brings about in practice.

Hegel conceives of this distinctively spiritual fear as providing the essential backdrop for understanding the specific character of the work the slave does for his master. It is not that, out of a fear of dying, the slave consciously chooses to submit to the master and to the work the master would have him do, in the belief that this is the only way of staying alive. There is no question here of the slave having an internal capacity to size up his situation on his own terms, a capacity to hold his life in his own hands and to decide for himself how to save it. On the contrary, this is precisely the sort of self-possessed agency and sense of independence that the slavish consciousness has been dispossessed of by his fear of death. The master directly embodies the power that death has over the slave, and so the slave experiences his life as being wholly in the master's hands. Thus seized with this utterly unsettling dread of the master's control over his very existence, he finds himself immediately compelled to do as he is told; heeding the master's commands is quite literally a matter of life and death, and so these commands are immediately equivalent, in his experience, to what life itself demands. Thus the slave's work for the master is based, not ultimately on his own desires, not even strictly speaking the desire to spare himself from death—for this presumes he still regards his life as being in his own hands and under his own control—but precisely on the unsettling character of the fear that disrupts any sense of self-possession. It is out of this fundamentally unsettled state—out of the slave's complete loss of control over his own life, and so from a sense of having no stable guarantees or reliable points of reference to turn to in his attempt to affirm himself, the sense that “everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundation” (Hegel 1977: par. 194)—that the slave approaches his work and the world upon which he is to undertake his work.

Interestingly, Hegel claims that the slave's fear is essentially an implicit or subjective expression of what, in his work, becomes outwardly expressed and realized in a concrete, objective form. That is, Hegel conceives of the event of work as bringing about, within the actual world, an unsettling of existing, stable forms, a disruption that in effect undermines the way things are in their natural givenness. Upon entering the natural world, work in effect introduces the very real prospect that *things can be other than they in fact are*, that what things happen to be now, in their current, natural form, is not the final word; for instance, trees can

<sup>23</sup> Hegel's account of emotion (Hegel 1971: sec. 401 and *Zusatz*) hinges on the notion that spirit must be corporealized, that the “inner” only realizes itself in and through the “outer”. For an excellent account of Hegel's theory of emotion, see Russon 2009.

become a table.<sup>24</sup> It is as though nature itself came to experience the unsettling “absolute melting-away of everything stable” (Hegel 1977: par. 194) that the slave himself experiences in the face of his own death.<sup>25</sup>

Work does not simply leave things in this unsettled, indeterminate state, however, for it is also essential to the nature of work that it bring about a certain “settling” or resolving of its situation, insofar as it gives rise to new objects that stand there on their own account as concrete, *stable* manifestations of its capacity to negate the existing form of things. As Hegel puts it, “the negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence” (Hegel 1977: par. 195).

#### 4.2 Historical Permanence in the Face of Nature

The worker’s capacity to appreciate the worked-over object’s independence is conceived in contrast to the movement of *desire*, which Hegel associates with a denial of anything independent of it and with a process that perpetually undermines itself and so is doomed to repeat itself again and again, much as natural cycles do. On Hegel’s rendering, the desiring being attempts to gain an *unlimited* feeling of self—attempts to gain satisfaction for itself in affirming itself as the only being of any real ontological stature—but can do so only by destroying whatever would claim to limit or be other to it, for instance by consuming it.<sup>26</sup> This act of self-affirmation-through-negation is satisfying in a temporary way, but because it obliterates the object upon which it exerted itself, and thereby denies this object’s very otherness or independence from it, it eliminates anything that could serve as an attestation of its self-affirmation. The process of satisfying oneself, as involving the *actual negating* of something that would claim to be other, obliterates the very thing, to negate which, offers it satisfaction in the first place; that is, the desiring self needs the other to *be* precisely in order for its *negation* or *erasure* of it (that is, its satisfaction) to *be*.<sup>27</sup> So, upon satisfying itself, the desiring being finds itself desiring yet another object through which to affirm itself, which it in turn obliterates, giving rise to yet another desire, and so on.

While the desire for self-affirmation is distinctive of free selves, and so is not straightforwardly natural in Hegel’s conception, in a way the problem with desire is precisely its rootedness in nature and in its inability to escape nature’s repetitive,

<sup>24</sup> That an agent’s practical stance in relation to the world itself reveals something about the ultimate character of the world, and in particular that the way things are is not reducible to their given form, is a recurring theme in Hegel’s thought. For instance, Hegel thinks that the practical orientation of desire offers a kind of refutation of realism, in that, in devouring things, it reveals that the apparent independence and self-contained character of natural things is false; see, for instance, Hegel 1991b: sec. 44, Remark; Hegel 1977: par. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel links this “absolute negativity”, which unsettles all given determinacies, with the essential character of free self-consciousness itself, and so this encounter with death’s disruption of everything fixed and stable is, in a way, just a deeper experience of what it is to be a self in the first place; see Hegel 1977: par. 194.

<sup>26</sup> “Certain of the nothingness of this other, [desire] explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*” (Hegel 1977: par. 174, Hegel’s emphases).

<sup>27</sup> As Hegel writes, “self-certainty comes from superseding this other; in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other” (Hegel 1977: par. 175).

cyclical character. The desiring being eats, for instance, only to be faced with the prospect of having to eat again, and then again. And while each episode of desire/satisfaction may be compelling in its own right, the feeling of satisfaction disappears, without a trace, along with the consumed object, and is simply supplanted by another discrete episode that is wholly external to and independent of the last one. It is precisely this externality that above all characterizes this process as a natural one, in Hegel's sense. Note that there is essentially no possibility of historical development here—in which one episode of time carries forward and builds on the results of episodes that are no longer present—and likewise there is also no prospect of any individual episode of desire distinguishing itself from other individual episodes, or of making any lasting mark on the desiring being's overall orientation towards itself and the world. For, with the immediately compelling pull of each new desire, the desiring being is right back where it started last time—namely faced with the need to affirm itself as the only being that matters, at the expense of anything other than it. Similar to the plant's reproductive cycle mentioned above, or any other cycle in nature for that matter, the concrete, individual moments do not matter in and of themselves and in their differences from one another, but exist primarily as substitutable instantiations of the same ongoing process or law that exceeds them and that is itself is unaffected by any of its particular instantiations. The self, here, is the natural universal that claims to be in no way limited or defined by its concrete encounter with anything other, and it does this precisely by negating what is other, and along with it the potential ontological weight of any such encounter.

In conceiving of work in contrast to this desiring process—as “desire held in check” (Hegel 1977: par. 195)—Hegel is proposing that work be defined precisely in terms of its capacity to affirm and bear witness to what is other to it, and thereby to somehow interrupt and overcome the externality and recurrent cyclicity of nature. Rather than simply negating, and thus obliterating the natural object altogether, thereby leaving nothing that stands as an independent, objective attestation of its active engagement with it, work transforms its object into something that, while it is no longer natural, is nevertheless still *there*, still *present* in the world, and so into something that attests to its engagement with it. Presumably the worker experiences the worked-over object's independence most of all once the object is *finished*, and so when the work is done; for, until then, the object keeps calling for further intervention from the worker, and so keeps announcing that it is not yet ready to stand on its own account.

I take it that, in speaking of the worker's recognition of the created object's independence and permanence (in contrast to desire's simply consumptive attitude towards it), Hegel does not mean that the object retains an enduring physical integrity. Perhaps some of a slave's products will endure in this immediate, physical sense, but of course some of them will be immediately consumed by the master, and presumably even those products that do endure will undergo a more gradual consumption, eventually to disappear. What strikes the worker as permanent must lie in the *significance* this concrete object has attained through having been worked on, in the way its concrete form, precisely in its non-naturalness, directly attests to the worker's basic capacity to make a real difference in the concrete world. What ultimately *lasts* in the work, then, is not its material presence, but the fact that what this object actually is, was determined by the work that went into it, or, we can also say, by the way this individual thing embodies, once and for all, its formative past.

We can see this more clearly if we consider that whatever happens to the produced object is, in a way, also something that happens directly to the worker. Even if this object is accidentally destroyed by natural forces, this destruction is now a *significant event*, something that cannot be a matter of indifference to the worker who has been invested his work into this individual thing. For work cannot affirm its own undoing, and cannot help willing that its work stand, where this standing functions as a kind of norm that the rest of reality ideally ought to respect. Whereas, from the point of view of nature and its standing laws, an earthquake's leading to the destruction of a delicately wrought vase is nothing more than a rearrangement of fully present matter—each configuration of which was just as necessary an instantiation of nature's causal laws as every other—from the point of view of the worker who made the vase (and presumably for those others who recognize the work that went into it, who recognize it *as a vase* rather than as mere bit of natural matter), there is a substantial, irretrievable loss here, a *real infringement* of something that, in its individuality, claimed a final place in the real. If nature denies the irreducible importance of individuality by treating every configuration of matter as an equally necessary instantiation of law—like so many meaningless modes of the same one substance, or, as in our previous example, so many iterations of the same one cycle—there can be no such thing as real loss or absence, for there is no individual configuration of matter that stands on its own as a persisting reference point against which subsequent configurations could be measured. Upon its completion, however, the work in effect transforms these subsequent configurations of reality into something other than just further, equally necessary presences in themselves, wholly external to what came before, but instead into *negations of what was there*, as presences that in themselves *mark an absence*, insofar as they bear a reference back to that which they have supplanted.<sup>28</sup> It is true, nature can take back what the process of work allowed to stand out from nature, as when an abandoned house is gradually reclaimed by the forest in which it stood. But even here something of the eerie presence of past living persists in its broken remains, at least until there is nothing left that is recognizable as having the distinctive mark of the human hand. This example also shows how the work of maintaining or preserving a house (or any worked object) is essentially a matter of keeping the persistent forces of nature at bay, of continuing to suspend the hold it would otherwise have on things, so as to keep open thereby a domain in which distinctively human existence can take place.

Thus work defies the meaningless iterations of nature precisely by letting individual things matter as such and stand on their own as indelible reference points in the real. Given the link I made earlier between history and the appreciation of the irreducible role of individuality, we can see that what work does, in effect, is to suspend nature's ultimate hold on things so as to make *historical reality* possible.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> I am in effect arguing here that Hegel account of work foreshadows Sartre's account of the ontological irreducibility of negation; see Sartre 1996: 6-12.

<sup>29</sup> In linking work with the rise of history I am here coming to essentially the same conclusion that Alexandre Kojève did in his ground-breaking lectures on the *Phenomenology* (Kojève 1969: 37-52), though in focusing on the irreducibility of individuality, and the contrast to nature's downplaying of individuality, I come at this link from a rather different angle. I acknowledge, however, Kojève's argument the intersubjective dimension of the

Hegel's account of the slave's relation to his product suggests, further, that, in investing itself in the worked-over thing, and in thus rendering *its* individuality as something that matters, the slave in effect realizes something about *his own* individuality, his own individual agency.<sup>30</sup> The worker, working on the world, cannot help regarding the concrete product produced by the work as mattering in itself, in its independent individuality: work *is* nothing other than the rendering-significant of what would otherwise be meaningless nature. But the product's independent individuality and its mattering is, at once, a standing index of what the worker himself can do, of the difference the worker makes in the world, and so of the fact that the worker himself, as a concrete individual engaged with the world, matters. If work cannot but treat the product of work as mattering, holding open a domain—the domain of historical reality—in which individuality itself can stand as a final reference point, then the worker cannot but treat himself, his own individual meaning-giving capacity, as mattering in its own right and thus as an independent reference point that must be recognized by all things.

In spite of his unsettling anxiety in the face of death, which revealed the slave's very life to be in the hands of forces over which the slave himself had no ultimate control, the slave comes to find, in and through his own work, the concrete realization of his own individual capacity to make a lasting difference in the order of historical reality—a difference that natural forces, including death itself, cannot simply wipe away for good. Rather than identifying himself simply with his *natural* life, then, in working the slave comes to identify with a *life of his own making*, a life that takes the shape it does due to his own work and that is, in that sense, in his own hands. This “spiritualized life” can only take root in and through natural life and through the slave's interaction with otherwise natural things and processes, but it is only to the extent that the slave does not leave things in their natural form, and ceases to be governed by natural processes—interrupts and transforms them through work—that he comes to realize his own individual agency as such. In this sense, then, the actual, concrete event of working on the world, and so of giving rise to objects that matter, becomes a meaningful, spiritual event, a turning-point that serves to transform the working self's very identity as a self.

## 5. Conclusion

On Hegel's account, the very agency of the worker is itself realized precisely in the event of working, and so does not precede it in a straightforwardly naturalistic, causal way. The agency of spirit, in its giving rise to a meaningful nature, arises hand in hand with the meaningful work produced, and it seems we must say that *its* reality is in this sense bound up with the reality of the *work qua* work. Thus, it is not simply that the worker, standing over against nature, imposes a form upon

master/slave relationship is also crucial for understanding the reality of history here, and a fuller account of the relation between work and history would need to develop this dimension.

<sup>30</sup> As Hegel puts it, “in fashioning the thing, the bondsman's own negativity, his being-for-self, becomes an object for him only through his setting at nought the existing *shape* confronting him. ... [H]e destroys this alien negative moment, posits *himself* as a negative in the permanent order of things, and thereby becomes *for himself*, someone existing on his own account” (Hegel 1977: par. 196).

it from without. For, this way of conceiving of the matter posits the worker's distinctively spiritual agency as fully formed, prior to his actually entering into the work process. Rather, on Hegel's conception it seems that it is only once there is *work actually happening*, only in the actual, transformative activity itself, that there is *both* spiritual agency *and* work. Spirit as such only arises and becomes actual in and through the process whereby work renders the world meaningful—that is, in and through the process whereby nature, unsettled by work, gives itself over to meaningful form, to being spiritualized. This transformational process itself—the spiritualizing of nature or, what is the same, the advent of a distinctively historical reality—presents itself here as the core reality, one that is irreducible to either spirit or nature conceived in their one-sided, oppositional form, and that, indeed, attests to a deeper unity between them.

Of course, the vase and the table sit in the natural world, are exposed to the natural elements, and are themselves composed of physical and chemical materials that, as such, are fully compliant with existing natural laws. But to conceive of these objects in this way is to fail to recognize the vase or table *as such*, or in their distinctive character as works. It is in effect to refuse the privileged perspective of the worker, for whom the work stands out as an independent reality that embodies in itself the significance that his transformative work allowed it to take into itself, and instead to presume that only what is conceivable in narrowly naturalist terms and according to existing natural laws gets at its basic reality. Indeed, for the worker making a vase, there is a sense in which the primary “law” being answered to in the work is the very form or meaning of the vase qua vase, as this form is what guides her work throughout and what must be appealed to in determining that the work is complete, such we can at some point say that *there is now a vase standing there*, where there used to be only meaningless clay. Insofar as the work-process is above all sensitive to this real distinction, and in practice treats the vase as something fundamentally different from, indeed a supersession of, the bare clay, we can say that the worker's perspective is in practice committed to the refutation of the narrow naturalist's view, and has a living stake in maintaining the independence and irreducibility of what we have been calling a spiritualized nature.

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