

# Hegel's Jagged Understanding of Self-Conscious Life

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## 1. The State-of-Art of the Hegelian Studies

The Hegelian studies have been recently improved and widened by an approach of analysis aimed at investigating the nature of the human self-conscious dispositions, which represent the core of the Hegel's thought. In the past, analytical philosophy disregarded thinkers like Hegel and other German classical philosophers because of their frequent and very broad use of generalist notions like spirit, history, absolute knowledge and, obviously, absolute. From the point of view of the analytical methodology, resorting to those words prevents the philosophical investigation from being focused and rigorous in the clarification of the human subjective rationality and its faculties such as perception, thinking, using a language, being an agent and evaluating norms and values. In spite of this previous preclusion, the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel presents many characters of a rigorous and consistent investigation about human rationality and agency accounting for several philosophical issues also addressed by the analytical tradition. The present special issue of *Argumenta on Naturalism and Normativity in Hegel's Philosophy* aims at focusing on the analytical aspects connected to the Hegelian philosophy of mind and to his theory of self-conscious life in order to pinpoint his relevant contribution for the understanding of human intelligence and the cultural and political history of human kind.<sup>1</sup> His thought is indeed based on a rigorous analysis of the naturalistic requisites of cognitive and practical disposition and on a systematic criticism towards the transcendental philosophy, which does not link the conditions of knowledge to the empirical and natural constitution of subjectivity. This special issue intends to deal with the affinity of the Hegelian thought to some aspects of the tradition of the analytical and post-analytical philosophy and to focus its naturalistic approach to human cognition and practical self-conscious dispositions.

Actually, Hegel's philosophy has not been totally extraneous to the analytical interest, in fact, W. Sellars inaugurated the analytical reading of this thought by pointing out that the question concerning the empiricism and its fallacy had been already and successfully addressed almost two centuries before him by Ger-

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man thinkers like Kant and Hegel. Particularly Hegel's strategy towards the empiricism does not only entail a robust revision of human knowledge, which he considered as originated from the spontaneous and speculative activity of the self-conscious subject. His criticism also implies a radical revision of rational subjectivity because it takes for granted the assumption that human eagerness to truth and knowledge does not derive from the correspondence of mental contents to external facts, but rather on the development of a frame of concepts and ideas under which reality is explainable and can be grasped. By underlining the spontaneous and inferential character of the conceptual, Hegel like Kant conceives of rationality as a faculty ruled by the internal and autonomous guideline of articulating and defending reasons and concepts, which results independent from the empirical given. Since humans know by means of concepts rather than by means of the information gained from the given and since the given is neither articulated or inferentially grasped, knowledge and cognition have to rely upon this self-ruling disposition of elaborating and evolving concepts and categories of thinking that we can apply onto the empirical data. In this point Hegel's thinking is very similar to the Kantian conclusion about the cooperation of sensitive intuition and intellectual logical deduction of categories for achieving a certain knowledge about reality. It is also very close to Sellars' idea about the logical space of reason as the space in which the normative domain of the ideas shapes our historical and practical dimension and our form of life as rational beings. However, Hegel's approach to the conceptual results to be much wider than those elaborated by Kant and Sellars because he stresses the fact that the conceptual is effective even out of the empirical domain of facts, having no internal border of application. In fact, whereas following Kant and Sellars categories and concepts are inferentially articulated even though their validity is conditioned and limited to the application to the empirical facts, for Hegel the conceptual has no external borders of application since the distinction between thinking and reality is considered by him as a moment of a dialectical development of knowledge (McDowell 1996). In other words, the subject-object opposition is for Hegel the necessary self-distinction of the subject investigating its own cognitive faculty as an autonomous disposition differing from the bare empirical fact. The entire modern philosophy from Descartes onwards gives an account of the different roles of reason and sensibility, i.e. concepts and empirical facts, in achieving knowledge. Following Hegel such distinction has to be conceived as formal and should not jeopardize the identity of thinking and reality when thinking is conceived as a matter of self-conscious life. McDowell (1996) is perfectly right in maintaining that the distinction of mind and world in the Hegelian philosophy is overcome by making recourse to a deployment of the conceptual that is not strictly bounded to the empirical application like in Kant. The conceptual is for Hegel the cognitive tool by which the historical and self-conscious subject grasps the formal and a-priori structure of reality, what makes the reality itself accessible and knowable. In his philosophy *Das Logische*, the substantive of the adjective "logical", is the fundamental normative element characterizing self-consciousness' disposition to understand reality under orders of concepts autonomously and inferentially deduced. The Science of Logic aims at demonstrating that a-priori knowledge is possible even when it is applied to unconditioned and non-empirical objects, what was precluded by the Critique of Pure Reason by I. Kant. In this way, Hegel supplies us with a compelling contribution about the nature of the normative and its elaboration by defining

its extension, role and relevance in comparison to mere empirical facts. His position against both empiricism and naive realism is supported by an analytically well defended conception of the inferential space of reasons in which the conceptual is conceived as the instrument for grasping the logical structure of the relations constituting reality. The *Science of Logic* should not be interpreted, hence, as a metaphysical text about the entire, but rather as a book about the fundamental categories of thinking, their application and validity. The question concerning the ontological status of these categories is just a default question that Hegel answers by underlining that in his system substance is also subject and consequently the truth of the substance is already held in the subjective cognitive stances. Beyond the idealist question concerning the subjective nature of the substance due to the fact that the truth of the substance is the thinking subject itself, the Hegelian philosophy provide a consistent theoretical apparatus by which we understand the nature of the normative, its inferential articulation and how it applies to reality by determining knowledge and the socio-historical dimension.

## 2. Hegel's Moderate Naturalism

Hegel's contribution does not only represent the epistemological defense of the deductive disposition of using and articulating concepts, it also deals with the question of their naturalistic status evolving an original version of naturalism. Since the normative character of the concept is tightly linked to a self-conscious living subject, one cannot understand the nature of the normativity without accounting for the living and biological dispositions connected to the use of the concepts. In this sense, any investigation upon the Hegelian naturalism represents the evolution of the inferential approach to his *Science of Logic* and theory of self-consciousness inaugurated by Sellars and carried on by scholars like B. Brandom and J. McDowell in the '90s.

Naturalism has been often regarded as a pure analytical outlook to the question related to the outset of the human cognitive stances since it accounts for the natural conditions of the mental and linguistic contents. The main question of naturalism is whether any mental content corresponds to a specific and identifiable natural circumstance that can be either an organic and biological property or a physical feature, which can also be investigated by empirical sciences. Some naturalists, often referred to as physicalists, go further and claim that for every mental stance there must be a correspondent physical state that can be exactly localized in the brain and that there would not be any thought without the fulfillment of distinctive and related chemical-physical conditions in the brain. This kind of radical naturalism disregards the importance of non-physical factors both fostering the acquisition and elaboration of linguistic and cognitive dispositions and also specifying the nature of the individual intelligence. Moreover, radical naturalism and physicalism are devoted to a sort of physical causation that enormously undermine the role of the autonomous learning and thinking, which are necessary for human cognition intended as a faculty borne by free and autonomous subjects. They, in fact, maintain a kind of physical determinism in knowledge without accounting for the process itself of cognitive competencies acquisition, which is the result of a progressive integration into a linguistic shared surrounding in which these competencies are fundamentally shared and socially transmitted. Therefore, the localization itself of any cognitive stance by the identification of the related physical status does not explain the constitution itself of

the rational subject able to bear it. This physicalist attitude has repercussions on several natural sciences, among them the human brain and cognitive ones, that are induced to conceive of the neurons activation they can observe with modern devices as the locus and cause of a specific cognitive content or disposition. However, this alters the logical sequence of thought production because it considers thinking as an activity caused by a natural phenomenon whereas it is rather the result of the autonomous elaboration of contents and ideas by a biological and rational subject. In other words, thinking cannot be triggered by something empirically observable because this would jeopardize the fundamental epistemological principle that thinking is the outcome of autonomous learning and elaboration of contents. The egregious mistake of some natural scientists and neuroscientists is indeed based on the idea that the possibility of observing the brain processing or when some neuron fires is equivalent to the possibility of discovering what produces the cognitive activity itself. However, since this activity is logically related to a process of autonomous learning it cannot be externally determined, namely triggered by factors independent from their bearer. The fact that the bearer of a cognitive stance is also the body in which brain processing occurs, does not solve the question of what produces cognition. Firstly because a subject is just not its own body, but rather a very composite entity with social, adaptive, evolutive and above linguistic dispositions. Secondly, cognition cannot be reduced to empirical and observable facts because these are the outcome of external causation, whereas any cognitive capacity is the result of autonomous elaboration, namely something that has to be explained by accounting for the inwardness of some subject. German classical philosophy represents an outstanding contribution to this issue because it is properly based on the investigation of subjectivity intended as the possibility to ground knowledge in a certain basis. As Paul Franks showed in a compelling book (Franks 2005), the entire epistemological struggle of modern philosophy aimed at founding knowledge on sure premises and ended when Kant highlighted that a foundation should start with the investigation addressing the transcendental conditions on which the activity of thinking the object relies. Hegel's crucial contribution to this issue is based on the idea that cognition is the outcome of natural requisites of the subject rather than of transcendental conditions. Relating thinking and true knowledge to the living and natural features of the individual means assuming a form of moderate naturalism that does not disregard the role of the social, cultural and historical surrounding in the development of self-conscious attitudes.

### 3. The Continuity of Life and Mind

Instead of taking for granted a natural causation on thinking, Hegel, in fact, claims that the biological conditions of the living organism render it different from phenomena deriving from external and mechanical causation, which we observe through the empirical sciences. In life there are, in fact, logical requisites of self-determination and inwardness that presume a teleological conceptuality and a vital force determining the living individual as an autonomous agent. Since biological functions cannot be accounted for by making recourse to the principle of cause-effect, they are not caused by some external and independent factor, but rather by means of an enactive principle explaining how any biological organism brings into effect rules and norms determining its form of life. How Hegel correctly describes, life changes the way a system interacts with the surroundings

because it brings into the scene the dimension of self-reference and self-determination. Whereas in a mechanism we always describe something as the effect of some external causation, accounting for life means investigating a system that is based on a self-referential network of living functions aimed at self-preservation. This means that external causation has a minor role in the description of the network itself, for which the external environment represents something useful for the maintaining of itself (oxygen, nutrients and, for evolved organisms, biological niches). The living organism establishes a surplus of significance over the external world because the latter does affect the former in terms of providing nutrients and biochemical substance and not in terms of mechanical causation. In other words, something is not intrinsically nutrient for an organism, but rather by virtue of relational features linked to the organism's characteristics. This means that life is a different kind of relational phenomenon than mechanism, because whereas in mechanism the effect is consequent to the cause, in life the effect is linked to the self-relational nature of the living organism. In fact, the assimilation of nutrients does not change the characteristics of the organism, but rather it is just for sake of the maintenance of its already given network of functions.

The *Science of Logic*, stressing the radical difference between life and mechanism, reminds us that also the cognitive disposition cannot be explained in terms of mechanical causation but rather in terms of attitudes of a living and self-conscious subject. Whereas other living species enact norms for sake of a biological homeostasis, i.e. the maintenance of the organic network of functions, the rational species brings into effect an universal principle of good life due to its self-conscious trait. In self-conscious life the normative does not barely depend on the organic functionality, but it is rather shaped by the inferential articulation and comparison of concepts, which are naturally linked to the self-aware attitude of the individual belonging to this species. Such articulation is socially sustained because the acknowledgement of ideas is a matter of self-conscious life and not simply of individual life, namely it determines our species and the course of the human civilization. Therefore, also having a cognitive stance is primarily a matter of self-consciousness because it is the result of having specific competencies and skills necessary for articulating and defending ideas in the different fields of knowledge. Such skills are socially acknowledged because also knowledge is evolved by means of shared practices, which are part of the history of the human civilization (Tomasek 2014). Self-conscious life is a variation of biological life, which already has elements of self-reference and self-determination in an unaware form. This is the core of what characterizes Hegel's moderate naturalism. In fact, self-conscious life is the form of life able to sustain a self-description, namely the definition of what is good and what is bad for itself by being aware of what it means being humans. This has many points in common with Philippa Foot's philosophy of action particularly when she claims that the good for the humans has to be found in the natural characteristic of their species rather than in transcendental and moral principles of action. Goodness for humans has to do with a specific practical intelligence, called by Aristotle *phronesis*, which defines what has to be called good for humans and what should not (Foot 2001). This means that self-conscious life establishes the nature of its own species by means of a general categorization of what is a good form life, deciding so on the course and development of human culture and civilization. This is possible because it determines the practical dimension by setting up universal principles of agency and thinking and

by evolving the concept of truth, which is independent by particular manifestations of the human intelligence. In other words, it creates a social space of reasons and concept in which ideas, values, virtues, information, knowledge, etc. are assessed and socially acknowledged by the guideline of the force of the better reason (Brandom 1994). Since Hegel's thought explains knowledge, self-consciousness and truth as originating in the naturalistic requisites of our biological species, it accounts for sociality, culture and history as the outcome of the self-conscious attitude of deciding what is good and what is bad for our own form of life. Every expression of human intelligence from the empirical sciences to social interaction, and to the constitution of advanced cooperative institutions like politics and states are explainable by making recourse of that kind of self-referentiality we observe in every living organism that Hegel often refers to as *self-referential absolute negative unity* (Hegel SL: 743). This definition describes the kind of relation a living subject brings into being with the environment: absolute negation of external conditioning by the reference to its own internal network of biological functions. When this self-referentiality is aware we have human intelligence as the premise of social space of reasons and the evolution of the world human history.

#### 4. Hegel's Theory of Self-Consciousness

This kind of naturalism does not conceive of the natural premises as what causes self-consciousness because this would jeopardize the fundamental truth that human consciousness is based on freedom, independence and self-determination. It rather maintains that the biological substratum is like inhabited by what we call consciousness, which is the result of a process of acculturation and acquisition of universal habits and believes that they are socially evaluated and acknowledged. In this sense, Hegel's philosophy of mind is also very close to the modern conception of embodied cognition. The process of formation of self-consciousness is the result of a dialectics of life and sociality in which consciousness faces the condition of being a subject with both material needs and the disposition to experience acculturation and integration within a social context. Self-consciousness is hence not independent from the broader conception of spirit [*Geist*], which is the frame of the social rules, rights, laws and historical identity holding together human cooperation and interaction. This sort of extended mind is what shapes individual self-consciousness in his process of achieving independence and freedom within the socio-historical dimension of its present time. As also P. Pettit (1996) claims, we could not have any human intentionality at all without acknowledging the effective impact this common mind exerts upon the individual one. Human cognitive dispositions are, hence, the result of a process of integration within a social surrounding that determines the brain process itself, namely what can be empirically observed by modern devices. This is consistent with what Hegel claims when he states that "mind has for its presupposition the nature, of which it is the truth and for that reason its absolute prius" (Hegel PM: 381). This passage points out that mind is neither a mere outcome of nature or emergent from the natural dimension, but rather it requires to be understood by investigating the reciprocal dependence and crossed stratification of natural and self-conscious life. In other words, cognitive dispositions are not to be explained as merely separated and caused by natural features of the brain, but rather as shaped by the relation they have with natural prerequisites. This approach is very close to the so called connectivism in the neurosciences that claims that brain's features are steadily being

changed by the cognitive and moral experiences the subject is exposed to because in the brain every change is the change of both the software and the hardware (Goldblum 2001). Mind and brain are not, hence, two different moments of a bottom-up development because this would undermine the possibility to understand their interdependence and permanent connection.

The fact that there cannot be a mind outside the body and that it needs to be embedded in order to have the functions it has, is one of the most important achievements of the Hegelian thinking in comparison to the previous modern philosophical tradition in which soul, mind and thinking are conceived as distinct from the body because of their divine origin. Following Hegel, it is through the relation with nature that spirit can both exist and be the truth of nature for it represents the living activity by which self-conscious beings think the practical achievement of the human life as something different from mere nature (Pinkard 2012: 98-102). Whereas nature is "permanence of the otherness" (Hegel PN: 247) [*Verharren des Andersseins*], spirit is a sort of normative and social substance shaped by the reflexive activity and yielding a "return from otherness" (Hegel PS: 105) of nature [*Rückkehr aus dem Anderssein*]. This coming back represents the characteristic of self-consciousness to reflexively refuse the independence of the external world and to understand it as a framework of normative relations whose focal centre is self-consciousness itself. This kind of reflexion cannot be exerted by pure nature in which otherness persists due to the externality and necessity of the natural law of causality (Hegel PN: 248). It must be exerted by a being having an internal self-regulative system of agency and thinking and a self-sustaining objectivity by which it reproduces autonomously itself. This self-sustaining system of agency and thinking is based on the dynamism of life because only the biological organism has the fundamental natural patterns for attaining this sort of self-related and autonomous characteristic.

Hegel's conception of human cognition originates from a jagged understanding of self-conscious life that is treated as the fundamental feature to understand human civilisation, knowledge, agency, ethics, politics, etc. The constitution of this subject out of natural requisites is the core of its relation to the environment and what explains the history of the human species and the diverse forms of socialization. When we address Hegel's naturalism we have, hence, to deal with several outcomes of his approach to self-consciousness spreading out from epistemological, to sociological, cognitive, moral and historical aspects. This happens because the simple explanation of the kind of natural relation the self-conscious sets up with the otherness entails a concatenation of behavioral results that clarify the nature of our species if they are unitarily grasped. The Hegelian project to derive human intelligence from a natural and empirical requisite such as the desire, rather than to analyze it transcendental and abstract conditions, brings him to deliver a consistent conception of human life with multiple repercussions.

## 5. The Contributions in this Special Issue

All contributions of the present special issue are devoted to investigate how Hegel deals with the relation between nature and normativity in order to understand the social, normative and historical dimension out of natural premises. Deligiorgi's article tackles the epistemological aspects linked to the Hegelian naturalism and particularly it deals with the question about the continuity of thought and nature. Already Kant highlights that the normative dimension of the concepts contributes

to knowledge by distinguishing itself from the natural domain of the given. However, Kant disunites the two domains of normativity and the given by stressing the impossibility of knowing the real substance of the *noumenon*. Following Deligiorgi, Hegel's effort to unify knowledge is centered on the notions of self-knowledge and self-consciousness, what changes the characteristics of the cognitive dispositions, rendering them more natural. Hegel's mindedness appears to be the mark of his project to unify norms and nature by keeping them together as an act of self-reference and self-determination. Elena Ficara's article deals with the question of the naturalness of the Hegelian logics and defends the idea that the validity of the conceptual is strictly connected to the natural character of the categories. The natural character of the logical concepts is a classical epistemological question spreading out from Plato to Russell and representing a crucial point for the foundation of logics and thinking. Hegel's novelty consists in connecting the categories to self-conscious life and to the constitution of a thinking subject out of natural and biological requisites. As also Deligiorgi maintains, the truth of the categories is based on the natural character of their own deduction by means of the synthetic and autonomous disposition of human rationality.

Ciavatta's contribution introduces the question about the relation/opposition between nature and spirit, which represents the core of the Hegelian naturalism. The author claims that Hegel overcomes this opposition by evolving a notion of "spiritualized nature", a domain with a distinctive ontological status that evolves historically and socially. Bird-Pollan's article interestingly deals with the opposing claims that mind (*Geist*) has to be understood out of natural requisites and that it is also self-legislating. The opposition is represented by the fact that whilst a natural element is externally determined, mind is expected to autonomously formulate the principles of its own agency. Bird-Pollan correctly accounts for the idea that the first person perspective should be the starting point for the examination of the relationship of nature and normativity. This can explain the self-unfolding characteristic of self-consciousness, which originates out of natural requisites but evolves normative frames of agency and thinking by means of a first person perspective. In fact, only this perspective can explain the negativity of self-conscious life that conceives of nature as otherness, negates it and sets up a self-referential order of concepts, norms and values.

Barba-Kay's article addresses the relationship self-conscious life establishes with the condition of being alienated from the historical dimensions of accepted and shared norms. Alienation is a distinctive Hegelian topic and this contribution interestingly deals with it from a naturalistic perspective delivering a novel interpretation derived from the transformative character of the theoretical methodology of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Dean Moyer's contribution deals with Hegel's conception of freedom as the result of what he calls "reversal of consciousness", namely the transformative and adaptive character of self-consciousness to evolve a distinctive shape within the historical contexts. This delivers a conception of freedom as the result of a developmental process, rather than as a brute fact like in the transcendental outlook by Kant. Moyer's merit is to highlight that the adaptive and living character of self-consciousness dramatically changes our understanding of what freedom is by organically connecting life and the normative. This entails that the notion itself of liberty is not what is transcendently deduced by reason, but rather something that is socially acknowledged and embodied by the historical becoming of consciousness and social interaction.



Finally, Andrew Werner's article raises objections to the very recent interest in organic life in the Hegelian studies by underlining the fact that the notion of organism requires to appeal to something external to the organism itself in order to understand its development. I personally do not agree with this criticism because it disregards the fact that the compelling aspects of Hegel's idea of organism are based on the assumption that life establishes a distinctive relationship with the external reality, which differs from the relation of cause and effect. The kind of "surplus of significance" (Varela 1979) of life over mechanical world is what makes organisms able to enact the normative principles of their own homeostasis, namely of their own wellness, making this effort the principle of every dialectical relation to the otherness. Therefore, it does not seem to me inappropriate to link the speculative character of reason to the features of the organic life at all because the former already has speculative elements of interaction with the surroundings even though in an unaware form. Nonetheless, Werner's contribution has the merit to point out that we can only understand the living organism if we account for its relational property, rather than if we conceive of it as an independent and isolated unity.

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