

# Is *life* sufficient to ground moral consideration, according to Hegel?

## Abstract

In this paper, I consider the moral relevance of life within Hegel's systematic philosophy. The contextual motivations for addressing this problem are twofold. First, the issue of arguments for *biocentrism* within environmental ethics, »biocentrism« being the position establishing »life« as the key trait for determining the moral worth of natural entities. Second, the motivation to address an underlying assumption within certain contemporary interpretations of Hegel's concept of life, namely that emphasizing *life* within Hegel's theoretical philosophy might aid in the broader project of articulating the relation between nature and *Geist* in a less »anthropocentric« manner. I aim to show that, although the category of life indeed involves irreducible exceptionality, this exceptionality (i) cannot be understood in line with a »naturalistic« approach; (ii) it does not grant any immediate ethical salience for living organisms. Nonetheless, I highlight the positive consequences of my arguments.

## 1. Introduction

*Life* is undoubtedly a central notion in Hegel's philosophy. In the presentation of his Logics, it is the first moment of the Idea, which, as the final section in the Logic, Hegel describes as the »truth« of the concept and the whole logical development.<sup>1</sup> The centrality of

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1 GW 12:176 All references are to Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1968): *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag except in the case of the Encyclopedia of the Philo-

life, both in its logical and natural iterations, has deservedly been the subject of extensive discussion and commentary in the secondary literature. In the last decades, the interest in Hegel's notion of life often comes hand in hand with a perceived need to de-centralize the role of *Geist* in Hegel's system, and argue that forms of agency, purposeful activity and subjectivity are not exclusive to »mind« but are rather likewise present and operative in nature. Decentralizing »cognition« or »mindedness« for subjectivity or agency is often implicitly or explicitly motivated by ethical concerns. The suggestion, though often underdeveloped or merely hinted at, is that showing forms of normativity, subjectivity, or other concrete anticipations of agency and freedom in nature helps counter the anthropocentric, logocentric, intellectualist or otherwise hyper-cognitivist tendencies which permeate European philosophy, and which are often deemed to have played a role in the devaluation of the non-human environment.<sup>2</sup>

If, as I suspect, the concerns and motivations underlying at least some interpretative shifts are grounded in or motivated by ethical worries, then it seems worthwhile to address the issue more directly:

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sophical Sciences (E), which refers to the paragraph numbers of the third edition, and the Philosophy of Right (PR), which references the paragraph number. A is for Remarks, Z for the Additions. References to Kant are to the Akademie Edition of Kant's complete writings (AA: Kant, Immanuel (1900ff): *Gesammelte Schriften*. Hrsg.: Bd. 1–22 Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bd. 23 Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, ab Bd. 24 Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Berlin.). The English translations consulted can be found in the bibliography. Other translations are my own.

- 2 Ikäheimo enlists the reasons for the »naturalist« turn in Hegelian scholarship against the »normativist« interpretation, reading Hegel's concept of spirit as the historically-instituted space of reasons. Alongside »need for ontology« to make sense of the spirit nature distinction, as well as the »general rehabilitation« in ontological and metaphysical questions within Anglophone scholarship, he finally alludes to: »(c) the urgency of the environmental crisis which makes vocabularies such as us deciding whether or not to treat nature as normative for us sound uncomfortably hubristic, and the image of frictionless spinning worrying in ways that are not merely theoretical. Whatever the motivations of particular authors, there is currently a steadily growing interest in Hegel's account of nature in general and his account of animal life in particular, and in the textually obvious suggestions of a continuity or overlap, rather than a simple break, between living nature and »spirit« in his work«. (Ikäheimo, Heikki (2021): »Spirit's Embeddedness in Nature: Hegel's Decentring of Self-Legislation«. *Hegel Bulletin* 42(1), 57–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.33>, 59.)

does *life* involve moral consideration according to Hegel? Do we have sufficient elements to consistently claim that Hegel's considerations regarding life entail attributing life an ethical standing?

In this paper, I argue for a negative answer. To understand the elements of the question as well as the proposed answer, we must first understand what it would mean for life to involve moral consideration in a substantial sense. In environmental ethics, the meaning of this as an ethical position has been developed, defended, and systematized under the label of »biocentrism«. It is in light of the biocentric position that I will approach the question as it pertains to Hegel. In section 2, I introduce the biocentric position as it pertains to the question of ethical standing. I likewise introduce the unifying notion tying biocentrism to the contemporary interest in the notion of life in Classical German Philosophy: a *teleological* view of living organisms. In part 3, I problematize such an interpretation of the attribution of teleology to organisms in Hegel, yet suggest another avenue which might prove fruitful for the prospects of a defense of biocentrism: the exceptionality of life as a result of life's status as an elevated moment in the pure movement of thought. Although this move might remain questionable, something akin to this view could aid the biocentric case by rejecting the terms of the debate by which teleological biocentrism is often challenged: by refusing the premise that life's purposive wholeness could only be valid if teleology can be »naturalized«. In part 4, I return to the issue of ethical salience in Hegel. I show how, from the Hegelian perspective, even considering the philosophical necessity to articulate living beings as teleological, this teleological form is insufficient for the immediate attribution of »welfare« or possessing morally relevant interests. Yet this rejection of immediate moral salience is not due to an insufficiency proper to life, in contrast to, say, sentience or sapience. Rather, I argue, the form of determinateness required for ethical salience still demands *another* mediation: the spiritual atmosphere of ethical life. Finally, in section 5, I propose some possible positive conclusions following from the present analysis.

## 2. Biocentrism

As a position in environmental philosophy, »biocentrism« emerges as an answer to the question regarding the determination of moral considerability beyond human beings. In the context of the development of environmental philosophy during the last decades of the twentieth century, one (if not *the*) central philosophical problem consisted in establishing operational criteria for moral considerability.<sup>3</sup> Such is the so-called »demarcation problem« of demarcating the entities, beings, or wholes which deserve, and thus command, moral respect.

The biocentric position proposes that living beings command ethical respect in virtue of *what they are*: that *life* (in contrast to humanity, reason, sentience, or ecological wholeness) is the morally relevant element or trait which demands, from those beings who instantiate it, moral considerability. Consequently, the biocentric position faces the significant task of demonstrating what is exceptional about »life« that marks it as the morally significant feature. This, since in the case of non-cognitive, non-sentient living organisms such as plants, it is not immediately clear that they possess the capacity to be benefited or harmed simply in virtue of being alive.<sup>4</sup> It thereby becomes necessary to provide arguments showing that these organisms possess the kind of interests that would be morally relevant for the prospect of an environmental ethics.

In light of the lack of agreement surrounding the claim that non-sentient living beings can be benefited or harmed in a morally significant sense, biocentrists are faced with the need to offer an explanation of *life* itself that shows it to be constituted in such a way that it necessarily involves *interests* whose obstruction causes a morally relevant damage to the being.<sup>5</sup> We can provisionally bracket

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3 See Goodpaster, Kenneth E. (1978): »On Being Morally Considerable«. *The Journal of Philosophy* 75(6): 308–25.

4 Peter Singer making the case for sentience, characteristically claims: »If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account«. (Singer, Peter (1976): »All Animals Are Equal«. In: Regan, Tom/Singer, Peter (ed.): *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 154.)

5 Steve Sapontzis argues: »While »need«, »want«, »lack«, »harm«, »benefit«, and »good« are all commonly applied to plants, artifacts, and so on, »inter-

the question of, were the project of showing living beings to have possessed a good or a welfare to succeed, moral considerability or any other form of ethical salience would in fact follow.<sup>6</sup> For now, the »subjectivism challenge« consists of providing an account that exhibits non-sentient living beings as possessing purposes *of their own*; that they *themselves* have an interest in their existence and wellbeing independently of the good they might serve rational or sentient beings in an instrumental or otherwise derivative capacity. According to the traditional landscape of the debate, it must be shown that non-sentient living beings have objective, intrinsic ends, unconditional or non-instrumental value.

In the Western tradition of environmental philosophy, the attribution of »teleology« tends to do the work of accounting for the existence of the purposiveness of life. On the one hand, it involves the »realist« component of an end or telos, which is not dependent on an external artificer. On the other hand, it involves the »internal« aspect of claiming that living organisms embody a non-mechanistic type of causality where the whole accounts for, conceptually anticipates, or determines the purpose of the parts or members. An early example of a biocentric position is Albert Schweitzer's famous claim that living beings share a »will to live«; such a will to live introduces the need to respect such interest. Following Schweitzer, Paul Taylor proposes to conceive of the organism as »a teleological center of life, striving to preserve itself and realize its good in its own unique way«<sup>7</sup>. He continues:

To say it is a teleological center of life is to say that its internal functioning as well as its external activities are all goal-oriented, having the constant tendency to maintain the organism's existence through time and to enable it successfully to perform those biological operations whereby it

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ests« is not. »Interests« is commonly reserved for the people and animals who will benefit or be harmed by the needs of the plants, artifacts, and so on being met or unmet». (Sapontzis, Steve (1987): *Morals, Reason, and Animals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 117.) For a more recent defense of holistic biocentrism and against the understanding of living beings as individuals, see McShane, Katie (2014): »Individualist Biocentrism vs. Holism Revisited«. *Les Ateliers de l'éthique* 9(2), 130–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026682ar>.

6 See section 4.

7 Taylor, Paul W. (2011): *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 121.

reproduces its kind and continually adapts to changing environmental events and conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Taylor therefore argues that it is in virtue of being »teleological centers of life« that living organisms have morally relevant interests. Being *teleologically structured* implies that organisms seek their own good, which in turn displays that consciousness, intentionality, or even awareness are not prerequisites for possessing an interest in existing.<sup>9</sup> Although machines could also be seen as teleologically structured, living beings differ in morally significant ways from machines since living beings have goals of *their own*, goals belonging to their *own nature*. Similar teleology-based defenses of the interests of living beings can be found (albeit with different degrees of sophistication) across environmental thinkers such as Wetlesen, (who proposes the notion of autopoiesis, »the capability of self-organization and self-reproduction«<sup>10</sup>, Attfield, Varner and Sandler.<sup>11</sup> According to both critics as well as some proponents, a teleology-based justification of biocentrism needs to be able to meet the following criteria: (a) show or explain how teleology is a valid and adequate explanation or description of nature; (b) show or explain the exclusiveness by which teleology captures empirical living beings, in contrast to other entities who we might want to deny morally-relevant interests or moral status such as self-regulating artifacts like thermostats. Additionally, as Varner<sup>12</sup> considers, it must be able to (c) address the epistemic challenge of how to adequately discern what the interests of non-sentient beings (such as plants) would be; (d) answer to the challenge that teleology, even if a legitimate and a valid description

8 *ibid*, 121–122.

9 Cf. *ibid.*, 44–45.

10 Wetlesen, Jon (1999): »The Moral Status of Beings Who Are Not Persons: A Causistic Argument«, *Environmental Values* 8(3): 287–323. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327199129341842>, 308.

11 See Sandler, Ronald L. (2007): *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press; Varner, Gary E. (1990): »Biological Functions and Biological Interests«, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 28(2), 251–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1990.tb00545.x>. In contrast to Wetlesen and Taylor, Agar's approach admits that intrinsic value is closely related to the psychological states of a being (Agar, Nicholas (2001): *Life's Intrinsic Value: Science, Ethics, and Nature*. New York: Columbia University Press).

12 Varner 1990, 253.

for living beings which naturalizes wellbeing, might not be sufficient for moral relevance (the »normative claim«).<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Hegel and life's ideality

The temptation to approximate Hegel to the biocentric view would stem from a determinate reading of his concept of life and the objectivity of teleology: its capacity to fulfill at least some of the desiderata by providing us with a »realist« account of the presentation of teleological organization in real living beings. Indeed, an alleged »realism« regarding purposiveness in natural organisms has led some to argue for the value of Hegel's account of organic nature. This, in turn, often aligns with the broader project of a »naturalization« of normativity.

In recent decades, certain interpretations start from the notion that Hegel's project in the philosophy of nature must be read as providing a »theory« of living organisms in the sense of an adequate description of their natural reality, a theory which is or would be at the same explanatory level as contemporary organizational accounts in philosophy of biology, and therefore could classify as »naturalist« or »realist«.<sup>14</sup> This is often coupled with interpreting Hegel as doing away with the *merely regulative* element of Kant's original for-

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13 For discussion of these aspects, see Holm, Sune (2012): »Biological Interests, Normative Functions, and Synthetic Biology«. *Philosophy and Technology* 25(4), 525–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-012-0075-6>, *ibid.* (2017): »Teleology and Biocentrism«. *Synthese* 194(4), 1075–87. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-016-1300-0>; Varner 1990; Dussault, Antoine C (2018): »Welfare, Health, and the Moral Considerability of Nonsentient Biological Entities«. *Les Ateliers de l'éthique* 13(1), 184–209. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1055124ar>.

14 See Ikäheimo 2021; Kabeshkin, Anton (2021): »Hegel's Anti-Reductionist Account of Organic Nature«. *Intellectual History Review* 31(3), 479–494. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2021.1956073>; Gambarotto, Andrea/Illetterati, Luca (2020): »Hegel's Philosophy of Biology? A Programmatic Overview«. *Hegel Bulletin* 41(3) 349–370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.21>; Corti, Luca (2022): »The ›Is‹ and the ›Ought‹ of the Animal Organism: Hegel's Account of Biological Normativity«. *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 44(2), 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40656-022-00498-8>; Maragat, Edgar (2020): »Hegel's Organizational Account of Biological Functions«. *Hegel Bulletin* 41(3), 407–425. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.17>.

mulation of the teleology of organisms as developed in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. According to this reading, for Hegel, organisms must be judged as teleologically organized, thereby subject to the attribution of objective norms. Organisms are teleological »in themselves«, in contrast to being so only for our faculty of judgement. Hegel's move beyond Kant is thus read as proposing a realistic alternative that would locate Hegel's philosophy of nature closer to a »naturalized normativity«. As one defender claims, this »help[s] move us towards a perspective in which a particular kind of »normativity« is involved in at least some sorts of biological complexity.«<sup>15</sup>

It is not difficult to see how the naturalistic interpretation could bring us closer to the conclusion granting living beings some form of exceptionality, in turn to be mobilized for justifying moral standing. Naturalism entails the presence of *interests* and *purposes* in living beings as an objective feature. Yet, in my view, such reading proves to be at odds with Hegel's own understanding of philosophical truth and justification underlying the methodology of a *philosophy* of nature. While I cannot fully substantiate the claim here,<sup>16</sup> I want to suggest an opposite strategy when it comes to justifying the exceptionality of life. Hegel's (and Kant's) contribution, paradoxically, would come from their allegiance to qualified forms of philosophical *idealism*, not from a realist reading.<sup>17</sup> The upshot for the biocentric position is that rather than accepting the traditional terms of the debate, the biocentric argument could benefit from the rejection of

15 Corti 2022, 18.

16 See Gottschlich for similar questioning of this manner of interpreting Hegel's step beyond Kant: »After we have reached the critical standpoint of Kant's transcendental philosophy, we cannot simply raise normative claims regarding human action from the presupposition that human conduct has to acknowledge a natural being as an existing end in itself. Inner purposiveness can, after we have reached Kant's standpoint, only be understood as an *As if*. The standpoint of reflection cannot be transcended by merely asserting that inner purposiveness would be a possible object of (even scientific) experience. Only by the means of reflection on the logical presuppositions of Kant's critiques can we overcome this standpoint.« (Gottschlich, Max (2020): »Domination and Liberation of Nature«. *Synthesis Philosophica* 35(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21464/SP35208>, 396)

17 For discussion on realist versus idealist approaches to teleology, see Cooper, Andrew (2018): »Two Directions for Teleology: Naturalism and Idealism«. *Synthese* 195(7), 3097–3119. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1364-5>.



the presupposition that life's exceptional status is to be explained by recourse to an observable feature, a trait to be found within the scope of possible empirical measurement. In line with some proponents of metaethical neo-Aristotelianism, a promising line would rest in challenging the premise that demands that the exceptionality of life be established by proving teleology's »naturalist« credentials, turning instead to the mediation of thought (in Thompson's terms, the especial »form of synthesis' done by intellect<sup>18</sup>) which allows us to integrate the experience of nature in a determinate manner, which, arguably, legitimizes judgements concerning intrinsic goodness and interests. This would suggest that the need to account for life's inner purposiveness in terms of something within its empirical constitution is a prejudice failing to appreciate the kind of determinacy *life* enjoys.<sup>19</sup> When systematically considered, Hegel's treatment of life offers significant resources to appreciate the conceptual or formal exceptionality of life in a manner which could, in principle, aid the case against the prejudice that biocentrism stands or falls with a naturalistic account of the biological organism.<sup>20</sup>

For Hegel (as for Kant), what makes life exceptional, thereby irreducible to mechanical determinations, cannot be grounded by a pure empirical feature of it, or anything to be represented by pointing at its »external« mode of existence. The possibility of identifying biological organisms as having ends (bracketing for now the question of their moral relevance or lack thereof) will rely on their concept as a *complex self-referential, self-determining* whole, where the parts work for the benefit of such a whole. For Kant, who considered natural teleology (»objective inner purposiveness«)

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18 Thompson claims: »If an intellect loses the capacity for the latter sort of »synthesis« it must also lose the former, and with it, I think, the capacity to experience things as alive. It can no longer »look to a wider context«. (Thompson, Michael (2008): *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 77)

19 Another alternative is pursued by Muraca, who suggests a Whiteheadian ontology to accommodate actual inner purposiveness and remain broadly »naturalistic«. (Muraca, Barbara (2014): »Teleology and the Life Sciences: Between Limit Concept and Ontological Necessity Life and Process«. In: Koutroufinis, Spyridon A. (ed.): *Life and Process. Towards a New Biophilosophy*. Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter, 37–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110352597.37>.)

20 For example, Basl, John (2019): *The Death of the Ethic of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 90.

to be a regulative principle of the power of judgement, our power of judgement *must* account for certain natural entities (organized beings) through the idea of an *end*.<sup>21</sup> This generates a conflict: we cannot but judge some aspects of nature as internally purposive, and yet, given the constitution and limits of our cognitive faculties, we can never affirm the objective reality of such purposes. Departing from Kant, for Hegel, the *idealistic* element of the specific form of determinacy of life marks its *truth*: it is the result of its expression of a moment of the concept where it has determined itself as idea, and thus displays a certain form of »subjectivity«<sup>22</sup>.

Understanding Hegel's position on the »objective« teleology of living beings encompasses, on the one hand, a meta-philosophical element regarding how Hegel sees the *kind of account* which philosophy must provide. On the other hand, it involves a conceptualization of life as achieving a novel logical form, to be contrasted with the logical moment immediately preceding it: the three moments of »Objectivity«. Although a proper defense of these points goes beyond the scope of the present paper, let us briefly consider both elements, beginning with the meta-philosophical.

While Hegel does consider philosophy must bring forth (*hervorbringen*) the necessity and rationality in the world, the method of such »bringing forth« of truth marks a radical break with truth as the empirical validity of the sciences, as well as Kant's notion of the mode of »deducing' the validity of categories by showing them to be necessary for possible experience. For Hegel, such a mode of validation through appeal to experience amounted to seeing which predicates agree with »perceived facts«, or the unexamined content of sensible representation.<sup>23</sup> For example, in considering the »former metaphysics« of the soul, Hegel criticizes the method of drawing determinations of the soul from *empirical* consciousness: »and the question then was which predicates agreed with the perceived facts. But this was a procedure that could go no further than the proce-

21 Cf. AA 5:372.

22 E §337, §215.

23 For a development of this critique of »testing« the categories, see Alznauer, Mark (2023): »Untrue Concepts in Hegel's Logic«. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61(1), 103–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2023.0004>.

ture of physics, which reduces the world of appearance to general laws and determinations of reflection.«<sup>24</sup>

For Hegel, the method at work within the form of empirical validation took an »impoverished abstraction« for the standard of the real: »to regard the given material of intuition and the manifold of representation [*der gegebene Stoff der Anschauung und das Manigfaltige der Vorstellung*] as the real, in contrast to what is thought and the concept, is precisely the view that must be given up as condition of philosophizing.«<sup>25</sup> For him, the goal of philosophy was not to represent a presupposed sensible reality. Rather, »philosophy provides the conceptually comprehended [*begriffene*] insight into the status of the reality of sensuous being.«<sup>26</sup> This leads him to reject any form of empirical validity as the criterion for philosophical truth: »philosophy ought not to be a narrative [*Erzählung*] of what happens, but a cognition of that which is *true* in what happens, in order further to comprehend on the basis of this truth what in the narrative appears as mere happening [*ein blosses Geschehen*].«<sup>27</sup>

Such a shift away from empirical validity remains essential for understanding Hegel's philosophical treatment of nature. As we can see, if Hegel is to follow his own understanding of philosophical truth, the success of the account cannot depend on if and to what extent such a theoretical account corresponds with perceived external content, or content reducible to the »finite categories« of empirical science.<sup>28</sup> As a *philosophical* consideration of nature, it rather ought to amount to a *translation* of the empirical material such that it expressively displays a form of unity which corresponds to the »necessity of the concept«.<sup>29</sup> This material is not a bare »sensuous« set of observations, but rather material which has already been elevated to thought by the empirical sciences, which in philosophy undergoes a further elevation into the necessity of the *concept*.

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24 GW 12:192.

25 GW 12:22.

26 GW 12:21.

27 GW 12:22.

28 Cf. E §246, +A.

29 On the need to differentiate between a properly *philosophical* account of nature in Hegel in contrast to scientific and practical forms of engagement, see Martin, Christian (2021): »Three Attitudes Towards Nature«. *Hegel Bulletin* 43(1), 1–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2021.17>. E §246 A.

Now, regarding the second point above, the Logic has shown life to be idea; the »highest« kind of logical category that enjoys the particular form of *correspondence* between its concept and its reality.<sup>30</sup> In the case of *life*, such a correspondence with the concept has to do with the formal overcoming of a still external need for achieving determinateness, exemplified in the externally purposive object (say, the tool). In contrast, within the category of life, as the immediate idea, »the concept is immanent in it, [thus] the *purposiveness* of the living being is to be grasped as *inner*, it is present in it as a determinate concept, distinguished from its externality but, in thus distinguishing itself from it, pervading it thoroughly and self-identical«.<sup>31</sup> It is in virtue of its truth that organic nature, despite belonging within the realm of »externality«, allows itself to be conceptually grasped by the philosophical account. Thanks to a display of the idea in organic nature (the »highest« form achieved by nature before passing over to spirit), nature itself becomes a proper object for the philosophical science.

To cognize something as living is to make a judgement regarding its *form*: its form is the immediate idea. Or, at least, this is what it would be from the perspective of a philosophical account of the concrete reality of life. Thus, since life is true, and philosophy seeks that which is true, the philosophy of nature has a certain kind of predilection towards life and its constitutive organic form.<sup>32</sup> The insufficiency or relative deficiency of inorganic nature is the retroactive product of life's higher truth, similarly to how the relative deficiency of conceptual life in the Logic is the product of the higher truth of idea as Cognition and as Absolute Idea. In the philosophy of nature, the question regarding life would be: how can our rational account *elevate* the results of the empirical investigations on living organisms in such a way that these results display the form of the concept in its proper »living« conceptual truth? Since we know life to be a high, complex moment in the logical evolution of the self-de-

30 GW 12:175.

31 »Da ihm der Begriff immanent ist, so ist die Zweckmässigkeit des Lebendigen als innre zu fassen; er ist in ihm als bestimmter, von seiner Aeusserlichkeit unterschiedener, und in seinem Unterscheiden sie durchdringender und mit sich identischer Begriff«. GW 12:184; 12:177.

32 Cf. E §247 A; §249.

termination of the concept, life in nature would have to represent an equally high stage in the process of the sublation of nature's externality. This is especially the case in animal life, which, according to Hegel, »reveals to us the omnipresence of the one soul at every point of its corporeality, and so the sublatedness of the asunderness of matter.«<sup>33</sup>

To summarize: the internal-teleological articulation of the empirical material in the philosophy of nature is grounded in the logical concept itself, not on anything *found* for empirical observation. In the philosophical account, the concept (the category proper to the realm of subjectivity) has priority for the determination of externality, which marks a clear contrast to the scientific approach to nature. For philosophy, the fact that we must *articulate* living organisms as teleological centers of self-determining, form-preserving unity is the work of an »a priori« shift in thought. This leads further away from the objectivity of mechanism, chemism and external purposiveness, and towards *life* as the concept that has given itself its own objective standing: the self-determining reality of internal purposiveness. Lacking the conceptuality of life, we would lack the ability to sensibly perceive the teleological self-unifying determinateness natural organisms display, and where »naturalist« accounts aim to find the confirmation of the existence of natural ends and purposes.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Ethical salience of life?

I have suggested that there are reasons to suspect the usual forms in which the argument for the exceptionality of life tends to be presented. On my reading of Hegel, life would not be considered as a self-standing presupposed external object to be adequately represented, but first and foremost as a *movement of thought* warranting the articulation of specific natural beings in accordance with inner purposiveness. Life is the truth of teleological objectivity in that it can unify what still appeared as an external relationship: while in the teleological object the purpose and the means remain separated, such that the purpose can never be fully realized, the living *is*

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33 E §389 Z.

34 Cf. Thompson 2008, 43, 56–57.

the self-realized purpose. In this manner, I consider Hegel to be closer to the Neo-Aristotelean »formal« or »a priori« approach to justifying the exceptionality of life, rather than to the »realist«-naturalist accounts, which seek to ground the irreducibility of life in an encountered feature. The rejection of this form of realism does not mean that we are not referring to something real when we consider material living beings, but rather that the truth within experiencing and cognizing entities *as living -i.e., wholes of internally self-organizing activity*, obtains due to a complex movement of thought which requires going beyond a feature discernable at the empirical level.

The irreducibility of life to representative empirical features suggests that *philosophy* is the proper standpoint to apprehend the conceptual truth of life in nature. Turning to the ethical implications, this might align with Alison Stone's argument for the need of a philosophical, rather than scientific, conception of nature as necessary in order to »see nature in itself as anything other than value-neutral.«<sup>35</sup> Yet even with the logical outlook on nature, which validates the categories of teleology and internal purposiveness for organic nature, we should proceed carefully when pursuing an ethical implication to Hegel's claims. We must first ask: do we have sufficient elements to grant life *ethical* salience in virtue of such irreducible form? In virtue of demonstrating logically earned higher truth of life«, does life's ethical salience follow?

There are strong textual and philosophical reasons for rejecting the implication. From the Hegelian perspective, I consider a further mode of mediation is needed for ethical salience, one requiring the resources from the »higher« realm of *spirit*. We can see how this broadly applies beyond Hegel by considering the structure of the arguments aiming to advance the ethical conclusion. Let us consider a few examples. Taylor saw the feasibility of the project of respect for nature as relying on the development of a *biocentric disposition* among human valuers, claiming that the value of life depends on »our *conceiving* of them [living organisms] as teleological centers of life.«<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Wetlesen<sup>37</sup> starts his »casuistic« argument for

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35 Stone, Alison (2005): *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 163.

36 Taylor 2011, 125.

37 Wetlesen 1999, 292.

the ethical relevance of life by the assumption that there is a *world of developed moral salience* where life legitimately belongs. We can identify comparable moves in the critiques of Hegel by those demanding his practical claims or political philosophy to be consistent with his account of living beings in the philosophy of nature, with one defender claiming: »If the way we treat living beings empirically is to be consistent with the ontological character of what life is in itself, we cannot regard living beings as if they are nothing more than mechanical processes [...].«<sup>38</sup> And furthermore:

What is indicated here is that insofar as I am bound to follow the necessity of thought and am thereby bound to the practice consistent with it – or better, insofar as I am bound to the practice that is the self-determining structure of thought – I am bound to avoid acting upon living organisms in the truth of their universality as if they were nothing more than mechanico-chemical objects.<sup>39</sup>

As we can see from these quotes, what is supposed to *bind* my practical attitudes to a respect for living species is *not* a metaphysical trait of the object. It is rather a form of *willingness* to be consistent with the accepted value of being rational or thoughtful, or »following the necessity of thought«. These arguments exhibit how the normativity or »bindedness« is not arising from a pure trait (say, »teleological organization«) found in the objects (»living beings«) themselves, but rather from such entities' being placed in a world of value, or – as acknowledged from the argumentative methodologies of environmental philosophy – at least hooked onto something presupposed as valued, such as moral inclinations, rationality, or one's own practical identity. Minimally, the capacity for the ethical recognition of a content or principle hooks its normativity on rationality itself, by claiming the demand to be consistent *as in itself authoritative*, as if this demand did not also likewise belong to a spiritual world of value, an »atmosphere of ethical life which we breathe in and out.«<sup>40</sup>

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38 Kisner, Wendell (2014): *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel's Logic: The Middle Voice of Autopoietic Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 7.

39 Ibid., 171.

40 This quote is in the context of differentiating the »purity« of Geist in the logic from other forms of engagement with content. It reads: »Es giebt überall letzte Bestimmungen, principien, aus denen man herausgeht, es sind die gemeinen Grundsätze, die man nicht beweist. z.b. der Mensch soll kein Slave sein, das

This suggests that an appeal to a presupposed world of value is inevitable for ethical salience. As I read him, this is consistent with Hegel who, in contrast to Kant, rejects that anything immediate could be absolutely binding for the practical will. For Hegel, ethical salience is the result of a spiritual mediation. This is incompatible with the traditional metaethical search for an ultimate moral point. In this sense, the legitimization of the normative demand for subjects cannot be provided through any cognition of determinate content, but rather by such content being recognized as fitting within the realm of spiritually accepted values.

That ethical salience (»right«) requires spirit encompasses both (»subjective«) spirit understood as a human self-determining capacity – freedom –, as well as (»objective«) spirit as a *world of value*, a historical achievement. To understand this, we read from Hotho's transcript added to the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (PR):

The human being does not stop short at the existent [*dem Daseienden*], but claims to have within himself the measure of what is right; he may be subjected to the necessity and power of external authority, but never in the same way as to natural necessity, for his inner self always tells him how things ought to be, and he finds within himself the confirmation or repudiation of what is accepted as valid. In nature, the highest truth is that a law exists at all; in laws of right, however, the thing [*Sache*] is not valid because it exists; on the contrary, everyone demands that it should match his own criterion. Thus a conflict may arise between what is and what ought to be, between the right which has being in and for itself, which remains unaltered, and the arbitrary determination of what is supposed to be accepted as right. A disjunction and conflict of this kind is found only in the sphere [*Boden*] of the spirit, and since the prerogative of the spirit thus seems to lead to discord and unhappiness, we often turn away from the arbitrariness of life to the contemplation of nature and are inclined to take the latter as a model.<sup>41</sup>

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ist vollkommen fest[.] Die Beschaffenheit solcher Punkte characterisiert ein Land, ein Volk, ein Zeitalter. Es ist eine atmosphere des sittlichen Lebens, die wir ein und ausathmen. Die wirkliche Reinigung des Geistes ist erst dann wenn man sich von den festen Bestimmungen losreißt[;] damit daß man zugiebt, ist etwas noch nicht vollbracht. Alle die Bestimmungen sollen erst untersucht werden«, GW 21,1: 477.

41 GW 26,2: 771–772.



The first element to note is the modern point that *freedom* must be understood in contrast to natural necessity, and that furthermore freedom is the animating concept of morality and right.<sup>42,43</sup> In Hegel, this likewise translates to freedom as the denial of the absolute authority of any form of immediacy. But the second point is more interesting, since it allows us to see how Hegel's view of »right« cannot be reduced to the possibility of gaining normative insight from »pure reason«, from an »objective« source detached from the historical world of value. For a specific element of natural life (such as having interests, self-organization, etc.) to rise to a demand for us, it must be shown or felt as coherent within the field of a *presupposed* atmosphere of value. This runs counter to the position that there must be an objective ground for normative bindingness applicable across historical contexts. In contrast, for Hegel, the objectivity of the ethical salience would emerge from its expressive consistency, coherence, and belongingness within such world itself, the world of spirit made objective or *Sittlichkeit*. Since such a world is historically developing, it is not possible to suggest a conclusive determination of the objects to be valued.

We can see this last point at play in the addition to the much-dismayed §44 of the *PR*, where Hegel claims the »absolute *right of appropriation* [*Zueignungsrecht*] human beings have towards all things«. Hegel here adds that »The so-called »philosophy« which attributes reality in the sense of self-subsistence and genuine being-for-and-within-itself [*Für- und Insichsein*] to unmediated single things, to the non-personal, is directly contradicted by the free will's attitude to these things«. This presents a twist to the above-cited criticism of ceding authority to a presupposed realm of facts. Hegel's idealism forbids »truth« and »ultimate reality« to spiritually unmediated things. Controversially, it appears for Hegel not even the human being, arguably the most straightforward candidate for an object in the world with »inherent value«, possesses such value immediately or »by nature«; the human must emerge in the spiritual

42 Cf. Pippin, Robert B. (2005): »Leaving Nature Behind, or Two Cheers for ›Subjectivism‹: On John McDowell«. In: *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 186–205.

43 Rand, Sebastian (2007): »The Importance and Relevance of Hegel's ›Philosophy of Nature«. *The Review of Metaphysics* 61(2), 379–400.

world as *person*.<sup>44</sup> This shows how, from the Hegelian perspective, it is misleading to mobilize the terminology of »inherent value« or of ethical salience as a »property« or a »trait«, as it would amount to an attribution of ultimate reality to »the non-personal«, thereby obscuring that all ethical salience results from spirit.

Based on this, let us establish two provisional conclusions. First: if a normative judgement of spirit does not rely on, neither for its existence nor validation, on an alleged connection with the property or attribute set as morally ultimate (»objective norms«, »fixed moral points«), then the argument would fail on systematic grounds *even if* Hegel had a less anthropocentric account of non-human living beings within his philosophy, such as that offered by some of his Romantic contemporaries.<sup>45</sup> In turn, the recognition of forms of »pro-to-subjectivity« (*drives, urges, self-movement, etc.*) as constitutive of non-human living entities within Hegel's philosophy of nature does not *immediately* entail or grant any »ethical« conclusions.

We can likewise draw a positive implication from the above: if we view ethical or normative salience as the product of a spiritually mediated movement, rather than from a property contained in a self-sufficient world of facts, then this represents the need for a methodic shift in the task of exhibiting the value of nature. The task would be to *produce* such movement, locating the mode of consideration within the ethical atmosphere, rather than isolating a trait and expecting such a trait to rise to a law in virtue of itself. From this perspective, not only is it in principle possible to argue for the ethical standing (*right*) of »life«, but no such ethical standing exists independently of being thus located within the sphere and domain of historically instituted, continuously evolving spiritual values.

44 PR §35+A, §39, Cf. GW 21,1: 236.

45 For the critique of Hegel's political philosophy as insufficiently accommodating to nature, see Lumsden, Simon (2021): »The Problem of Nature in Hegel's Philosophy of Right«. *Hegel Bulletin* 42(1), 96–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2020.34>. For defenses of German idealists and Romanticists as furthering non-anthropocentric understandings of nature, see Nassar, Dalia (2022): *Romantic Empiricism: Nature, Art, and Ecology from Herder to Humboldt*. *Romantic Empiricism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190095437.001.0001>; Wulf, Andrea (2022): *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*. New York: Knopf.

## Conclusion

I have made the following claims: (1) approaching the exceptionality of »life« in Hegel based on a naturalist-realist framework fails to capture that the exceptional unity of life (that it is *true*) is a pure formal achievement of the concept in the process of giving itself completeness in the idea. (2) Even granting the exceptionality of life and the legitimacy of attributing teleology to living beings and nature as a whole (in its *philosophical* truth), this exceptionality does not »ground« immediate ethical salience. Ethical salience (or any attempt to make something »normative« for us), for Hegel, requires being placed within the background of spirit. An ethics adequate to spirit's freedom recognizes this further need for mediation as proper justification, rather than appealing to a given trait characteristic of a determinate set of material entities.

In brief, to the question »is life sufficient to ground moral consideration according to Hegel?«, the answer must be negative. Yet, as I attempted to show in section 4 and anticipated in section 2, the negative answer need not be interpreted as a failure, but as expressing certain inadequacy of the metaphilosophical presuppositions of the question itself when it comes to Hegel. From Hegel's systematic perspective, ethical worth belongs within spirit, thus is always mediated by the reference to the historically instituted, continuously evolving world of value.

Yet it might be objected that the case here made does not contribute to the elements that are of relevance to the environmental debate. One might also object that, even if my analysis is correct, it remains too tied up with an unintuitive account of truth, while realist or naturalist accounts develop from a more intuitive metaphysical perspective. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest three positive implications of my reading of Hegel for the prospects of environmental philosophy.

As anticipated above, the proposal opens a space for the *objective* introduction of natural life's exceptionality and value, which need not hinge on a specific empirical feature, trait, or element as theorized by a scientific program. This would provide tools for the biocentrists to reject the terms of the debate, where the legitimacy of biocentrism bears directly on the perceived »success« of a program for the naturalization of teleology.

Second, it offers philosophical support for the suspicion against the demand for nature's value to be exclusively intrinsic, non-relational value, rather demanding more expansive and creative paths of illuminating or inducing ethical salience. The »idealist' turn suggests the productivity of shifting towards a focus on the *forms* of approaching the objects, the *mediations* by which life expresses distinctiveness and value. I consider this to be broadly in line with contemporary attempts from environmentalist thinkers to move away from the theoretical program of a meta-ethical grounding through necessary moral postulates. These thinkers rather propose a *relational* view of nature's value,<sup>46</sup> which often involves a reconsideration and reappraisal of the Romantic emphasis in the *subject's* form of approaching natural phenomena.<sup>47</sup>

Relating to the last point, the final positive entailment suggests the very idea of a *philosophical* approach to nature as one such non-instrumental form of engaging with the natural environment. Following Stone, Martin and Nassar, the project of a *philosophy* of nature, as distinct from a natural-scientific approach, could itself be shown to be among the mediations enabling a non-instrumental engagement with living beings and nature as a whole, thus incorporable within the broader argument for nature's relational value.<sup>48</sup>

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46 See Ott, Konrad/Reinmuth, Karl Christoph (2021): »Integrating Environmental Value Systems: A Proposal for Synthesis«. In: Beckmann, Voelker (ed.): *Transitioning to Sustainable Life on Land*. Basel: MDPI, 43–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03897-879-4-3>, 72; Muraca, Barbara (2011): »The Map of Moral Significance: A New Axiological Matrix for Environmental Ethics«. *Environmental Values* 20(3), 375–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327111X13077055166063>.

47 Nassar 2022, 162.

48 See Martin (2021); Stone (2005); Nassar (2022); Ott, Konrad (2016): »On the Meaning of Eudemonic Arguments for a Deep Anthropocentric Environmental Ethics«. *New German Critique* 43(2), 105–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-3511895>. See also the following remarks by Ott 2016, 110: »Eudemonic values refer to »meaningful« experiences with nonhuman nature that include leisure, recreation, beauty, sublimity, belonging, place making, listening, restoring, transformation, and spiritual awe. In an industrialized age, such modes of being human within a world of nature have been downplayed, discarded, or ridiculed as »Romanticism«. This is a loss that can and should be reversed.

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