

The recent vicissitudes of Hegel's philosophy of nature: life, organisms and norms
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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the recent revival of Hegelian reflections on nature, in order to shed light on questions such as: What are aspects of Hegel most promising for current debate? What are the issues to which Hegel's philosophy of nature is seen as an interesting answer? To answer these questions, I will proceed in two steps.

First, I will reconstruct the history of the *disappearance of nature* in Hegel's scholarship in the last decades, illuminating how and why was nature not in the radar of scholarship. Answering this question is important to grasp from which angle Hegel's philosophy of nature has been newly taken up by current philosophers. Second, I will scrutinize more in detail the recent conversation on Hegel's conception of nature. In light of the arguments presented in part one, I will highlight the themes that have propelled it. I will highlight how and why Hegel's theses on living beings, in particular, are enjoying a distinct philosophical relevance today.

Keywords: Hegel, Philosophy of Nature, life, organism, normativity

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Introduction

The notion of «nature» elaborated in the philosophical tradition immediately after Kant has been traditionally considered hopelessly flawed from a philosophical point of view, as well as utterly outdated from an empirical perspective. For this reason it has been probably the most neglected element in recent the scholarship on Classical German Philosophy. This applies also to Hegel, whose ideas on other topics have otherwise enjoyed renewed attention and interest in various philosophical circles. Over the last decades, such a wave of interest in Hegel– which in English-speaking scholarship was so unusual that it has famously gained the name *Hegel Renaissance*¹ – has focused mainly on texts such as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and later the *Philosophy of Right* and *Science of logic*. The *Philosophy of Nature* has long remained off the radar of critics: with a few exceptions, it has never been particularly discussed among Hegel scholars and it has been practically absent by any philosophical discussion not restricted on Hegel².

¹ For the use of this expression cf. F. Beiser, *The Puzzling Hegel Renaissance*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by F. Beiser, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 1-14; L. Corti, *Ritratti hegeliani. Un capitolo della filosofia americana contemporanea*, Roma, Carocci, 2014; P. Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; deVries, W.A., *Hegel's Revival in Analytic Philosophy*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. by D. Moyar, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

² On this point, cf. S. Rand, *The Importance and Relevance of Hegel's "Philosophy of Nature"*, in «The Review of Metaphysics», 61, 2007, n. 2, pp. 379-400. This does not mean that there has not been some important studies on Hegel's conception of nature, which include the following: S. Houlgate, ed., *Hegel and the Philosophy of*

This has produced a peculiar situation in the current scholarship: whereas Hegel's philosophy has inspired numerous positions in areas such as philosophy of action, social and political philosophy, it has not been considered adequate to answer questions such as the following: What is nature? What place rationality and subjectivity play within it?

In recent years, however, this narrative has begun to change. Thanks to a new wave of research, a new picture started to emerge, leading to a reassessment both of Hegel's insights on nature and their philosophical relevance³. A growing number of contemporary scholars do not simply acknowledge that nature and naturalism are topics in the tradition of classical German philosophy. In fact, they see compelling reasons to regard the investigation of 'nature' undertaken by thinkers such as Hegel as constitutive of his thought and interesting not only from a historical point of view, but also in light of current debates on a number of topics. Furthermore, the reevaluation of Hegel's philosophy of nature has interestingly inspired a broader reassessment of the notion of nature in classical German philosophy as a whole⁴.

One might ask why and how scholars started to dig into Hegel's conception of nature. In particular: What are the pathways that have led to the recent reevaluation of not only the historical, but the philosophical significance of Hegel's philosophy of nature? What are the issues to which Hegel's philosophy of nature is seen as an interesting answer?

The aim of this paper is to answer these queries. In particular, by reconstructing the recent revival of Hegelian reflections on nature, I will try to shed light on the question such as: what are its stakes? What are aspects of Hegel most promising for current debate?. To answer these questions, I will proceed in two steps.

First, I will take a few steps back: in order to understand the emergence of recent interest in Hegel's philosophy of nature, it is necessary, I think, to reconstruct the history of the *disappearance of nature* in Hegel's scholarship in the last decades. The question that needs to be addressed first is: How and why was nature not in the radar of scholarship? Answering this question is important not only to shed light on some key aspects of the recent reception of Hegel's thought, but also to grasp from which angle Hegel's philosophy of nature has been newly taken up by current philosophers, originating a conversation that started relatively recently and is far from being exhausted. In part one of this paper I will highlight what I take to be one of the main paths that has contributed to marginalizing nature in recent Hegel scholarship. This is linked to how the ideas of Kant – and especially Hegel – have been interpreted by certain dominant perspectives in the Anglo-Saxon debate. These perspectives share a common philosophical focus, as they all revolve around the same philosophical issue: that of normativity – which is the most significant philosophical problem that has driven the resurgence of Hegel's philosophy in the last 40 years. Understanding how the debate was framed and what problems became central can explain not only the waning of interest in nature but also the subsequent direction of the revived conversation around it.

Nature, Albany, SUNY Press, 1998; M. Petry, ed., *Hegel and Newtonianism*, Boston, Kluwer, 1993; M. Petry, ed., *Hegel und die Naturwissenschaften*, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1987; L. Illetterati, *Natura e Ragione. Sullo sviluppo dell'idea di natura in Hegel*, Trento, Verifiche, 1995; A. Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2004; C. Ferrini, *Scienze empiriche e filosofie della natura nel primo idealismo tedesco*, Milano, Guerini, 1996; C. Spahn, *Lebendiger Begriff—Begriffenes Leben. Zur Grundlegung der Philosophie des Organischen bei G. W. F. Hegel*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2007.

³ In addition to the article by Rand mentioned in the previous footnote, cf. also A. Gambarotto and L. Illetterati, *Hegel's Philosophy of Biology? A Programmatic Overview*, in «Hegel Bulletin», 41, 2020, n. 3, pp. 349–370; A. Stone, *Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2018; T. Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature and the Final Ends of Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁴ L. Corti and J.G. Schülein, *Nature and Naturalism in Classical German Philosophy*, New York, Routledge, 2022; R. J. Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes Of Nature – From Spinoza To Freud*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Second, I will scrutinize the recent revived conversation on Hegel's conception of nature more in detail. In the second part of this paper, I will highlight the themes that have propelled it: I will demonstrate how and why Hegel's reflections on the natural domain are becoming significant again, in various contexts. In light of the arguments presented in part one, I will highlight how and why Hegel's theses on living beings, in particular, are enjoying a distinct philosophical relevance today.

1. Leaving nature behind

The first claim I would like to defend in my reconstruction is that in the last decades Hegel's perspectives on the natural dimension have remained largely understudied, for good measure, due to the significant influence of certain interpretations of Hegel and Kant that emerged in the Anglo-American scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s. Historically, these readings have their origins in the golden years of analytic philosophy, and in particular in the views defended by one philosopher, namely Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars's views, I claim, acted as the bridge through which a series of anti-naturalistic or non-naturalistic conceptions concerning «normativity» and «rules» got to bear first on Kant's and subsequently Hegel's thought. I would like to briefly argue for this claim by presenting Sellars' ideas and highlighting how they contributed, among other things, to the disappearance of any interest in Hegel's conception of nature. (The same ideas, I will later show, are key to understand the current potential of Hegel's idea on nature). Sellars' very influential insights about the nature of rationality are crucial in this respect. In short: in Sellars' account, rationality (i.e., conceptual thought and language), is essentially a normative phenomenon, which as such is distinctly non-naturalizable⁵. Historically, Sellars is an early proponent of a view labeled *normative functionalism*, according to which the content of thoughts, as well as the content of assertions, is determined by the rules of their use. These rules are of a special kind: they have an essentially normative dimension, which makes them analogous to the rules governing games. In this context, Sellars notably takes up and formalizes, in an inferentialist sense, some intuitions from the later Wittgenstein⁶, providing an influential image of what it means to speak and think. According to this perspective, both linguistic and conceptual activity (which is modeled upon it) are constitutively dependent on a normative dimension, that is, on the speaker's and thinker's ability to evaluate things in terms of correctness/incorrectness. In Sellars' own words:

There is no thinking apart from common standards of correctness and relevance, which relate what I do think to what anyone ought to think. ... It is current practice to compare the inter-subjective standards without which there would be no thinking, to the inter-subjective standards without which there would be no such a thing as a game; and the acquisition of a conceptual framework to learning to play a game⁷.

Sellars' idea of human beings as rational *insofar as* they follow rules is central to his thought. For him, the ability to follow rules consciously and provide reasons based on these rules is the mark of rationality.

⁵ On the thesis of the logical irreducibility cf. J. O'Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.

⁶ S. Brandt, *Sellars and Wittgenstein on Following a Rule*, in *Wilfrid Sellars and Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, edited by S. Brandt, and A. Breunig, London, Routledge, pp 75-92; deVries, W. A., *Wilfrid Sellars*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005; G., Bonino and P., Tripodi, *Sellars and Wittgenstein, Early and Late*, in *Sellars and the History of Modern Philosophy*, ed. by L. Corti & A. Nunziante, New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 216-232.

⁷ W. Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*, in *Science, Perception and Reality*, Atascadero, CA, Ridgeview, pp. 16-17.

To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of habits, but of rules. When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, «In all contexts of action you will recognize rules, if only the rule to grope for rules to recognize. When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet»⁸.

Sellars combines these ideas on the nature of rationality with another claim, which is crucial for our purposes, namely that this normative dimension cannot be captured by – or reduced to – the conceptual framework of the natural sciences. It cannot be made intelligible by scientific description. The normative, for Sellars, has to be conceived as a particular «logical space», which cannot be naturalized⁹.

While developing these claims from a philosophical standpoint, Sellars also put them to work in his reflections on the history of philosophy, putting forth a particular interpretation of key classical texts that produced an original and influential intersection of vocabularies. In particular, this perspective on rules inspired by Wittgenstein constitutes the key to his understanding of certain elements of Kant's philosophy.

The understanding, Kant tells us, is the faculty of rules. He further tells us that concepts have the character of rules. It seems appropriate, then, to begin these remarks on the concept of rules and of following a rule¹⁰.

When Sellars approaches the concept of «rule» in Kant, he tends to conceive of it from a perspective such as the one described above. He strongly emphasizes the normative dimension involved in Kant's practices of judgment, highlighting specifically that «Kant's revolutionary move was to see categories as concepts of functional roles in mental activity»¹¹.

From this perspective, Sellars promotes a distinctly normative image of rationality, in which norms are conceived as something not naturalizable, *and* he applies it to the Kantian doctrine of the understanding and categories. This type of non-naturalistic philosophical conception paved the way for subsequent philosophers to extend these insights to other figures of the classical German tradition, especially Hegel, further elaborating these views in a particular direction.

This further step was already taken in the early 1980s, but it will gain strong prominence in the early 1990s, when the problem of *normativity* gained a momentum in the philosophical discussion making the Anglo-American Hegelian interpreters inspired by this perspective an important voice in the debate. It is in this context that Sellars's theory of norms served as a bridge for interpreting the Hegelian concept of *Geist* (Spirit). While Sellars spoke of «common standards of correctness» in defining his paradigm for rationality, his successors interpreted

⁸ W. Sellars, *Language, Rules and Behavior*, in *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. by J. F. Sicha, Reseda, Ridgeview, 1980, p. 137.

⁹ For a set of Sellarsian arguments against the reducibility of normative vocabulary to descriptive vocabulary cf. M. Lance, *Placing in a Space of Reasons: Sellarsian Philosophy in the 21st Century*, in *Oxford Companion to American Philosophy*, ed. by C. Misak, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 403–30. For the distinction between logical spaces cf. J. McDowell, *Sellars and the Space of Reasons*, in «Analysis. Claves de Pensamiento Contemporáneo», 21, 2018, n. 8, pp. 1-22; J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA, 1994; J. McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, Cambridge MA, 2009. Sellars was driven by a commitment to scientific naturalism; he believed that the space of reasons was logically irreducible to the space of norms, but causally reducible, cf. J. O'Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars*, cit.. However, it is the thesis of logical non-reducibility that has led to interpretations of Hegel.

¹⁰ W. Sellars, *Ontology the Apriori and Kant*, in *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. by J. F. Sicha, Atascadero, Ridgeview, 1980, p. 261.

¹¹ W. Sellars, «...This I or He or It (The Thing) Which Thinks...», in *Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics: Sellars' Cassirer Lecture Notes and Other Essays*, ed. by J. F. Sicha, Atascadero, Ridgeview, 2002, p. 346. On this point cf. L. Seiberth, *Intentionality in Sellars: A Transcendental Account of Finite Knowledge*, London, Routledge, 2022; D. Landy, *Kant and Sellars on the Unity of Apperception*, in «Philosophical Inquiries», 10, 2022, n. 1, pp. 49-72.

these standards socially and historically, becoming the cornerstone for understanding the Hegelian conception of *Geist*.

In short, the notion of *Geist* in Hegel began to be read in light of the notion of «rule» mentioned above, and it became synonymous with a normative realm endowed with a particular status (a specific logical space), which is the conditions for the conceptual intelligibility of the elements placed within it – objects, events, and especially actions. The rules that articulate such space are essentially social and, as such – following a strand in Sellars– distinctly not naturalizable. It is not difficult to find formulations that highlight these aspects in the current debate on Hegel. Robert Brandom, for example, writes:

I understand the *geistig* as the realm of conceptually articulated norms, of authority and responsibility, commitment and entitlement. Spirit as a whole is the recognitive community of all those who have such normative statuses, and all their normatively significant activities¹².

Robert Pippin echoes this position, at least in its general direction, when he claims that

spirit is nothing but ways of actively holding each other to account by the demanding and giving of reasons for beliefs and actions in a social community . . . the most generic name for such a realm could simply be ‘the normative’¹³.

The same applies to Terry Pinkard’s reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which locates the main point of Hegel’s work in

Understanding that to be rational does not consist in expressing some natural property, . . . , but in acting in terms of the norms of one’s «social space» is thus to come to understand rationality itself as *Sittlichkeit*, that is, as a way of acting and thinking in terms of how «things are done», understood as a set of background norms¹⁴.

The focus shifts to the notion of «spirit» as *Geist*, a social space, whose categories are not graspable by natural sciences. This is a non-naturalistic perspective that has brought new attention to Hegel’s conceptual framework also in the broader philosophical arena. In the debate around the genesis of normative authority, for instance, the Hegelian view that roots normativity in the notion of «recognition» (*Anerkennung*) has been quite debated. In philosophy of action, on the other hand, Hegel’s philosophy has offered new tools for understanding key issues in expressive theories of agency¹⁵.

At the same time, the common (and relatively unquestioned) assumption regarding the non-natural constitution of norms was foundational for all these Hegelian views. For all these Hegelian interpreters, the genesis of norms occurred precisely through a process of departing from the dimension of naturalness. According to a famous formulation by Robert Pippin, which is paradigmatic in this respect, the constitution of the spiritual domain – that is, the logical space which is the condition of intelligibility for thought and action – occurred precisely by

¹² R. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 227.

¹³ R. Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 122, 128.

¹⁴ T. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 124.

¹⁵ R. Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, cit.; C. Yeomans, *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; M. Quante, *Hegel’s Concept of Action*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

«leaving nature behind»¹⁶ Within this perspective, nature, understood as the physical or bodily constitution of natural beings, including human beings, plays no role in determining our social rules and roles.

3. Bringing nature back into the picture

It is not particularly surprising that the interest of these Hegelian philosophers has turned to works such as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*, while Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* has been left off the radar. Issues related to the natural dimension – such as the biological constitution of the human being as a living being, the role of corporeality in structuring social practices, and the analysis of the conceptual framework of the natural sciences – do not enter into the discourse on norms. They are not central to properly understanding human rationality from a Hegelian perspective.

However, the philosophical and exegetical removal of nature does not come without costs. The first and most important issue is that this overall perspective implies a particular kind of *dualism*, arising from the fact that norms constitute a *logically separate* realm from the natural realm. The distinction between *the logical space of reasons*, on the one hand, and *the logical space of laws*, on the other, opens up a gap that is conceptually difficult to close. The risk is to define human beings as amphibious beings that are caught up in two different dimensions – the realm of natural explanations on one hand, and simultaneously the realm of normative justifications on the other – without there being any mediation between the two. This kind of dualism raises a series of problems, not limited to Hegelian thought, that are widely discussed in the literature. In order to address them, however, one needs to closely examine and discuss various conceptions of «nature», as well as different ways to spell out the relationship between the natural dimension and the social-normative dimension of the spiritual. It is under this philosophical pressure, among other things, that a renewed interest in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* has arisen, with scholars that are reconsidering the ways in which Hegel's reflections on nature can change our conception on normativity. I will mention two lines in these recent developments before drawing some conclusions.

The first concerns our general understanding of «nature». One way to work on the aforementioned dualism between nature and norm is to extend our understanding of what is «natural» beyond a restrictive interpretation that identifies «nature» with the object of description of the natural sciences. This form of scientific naturalism has been seen as leading to problematic dualistic outcomes¹⁷. In this respect, conceptual resources from Hegel have been mobilized to challenge the scientific naturalistic assumptions, instead advocating a «relaxed naturalism» or «liberal naturalism»¹⁸, namely, a conception of «nature» that doesn't solely encompass the possible objects of natural science. In this case, the initial strong dualism would be dissolved. Within the liberal naturalist framework normativity doesn't necessarily have to be regarded as non-natural and non-naturalizable, but rather as fully natural (albeit in a sense of «natural» that needs to be reconceptualized).

There is, however, a second interesting element in the recent resurgence of Hegel's *Philosophy*

¹⁶ R. Pippin, *Leaving Nature Behind, or Two Cheers for Subjectivism*, in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 186-205.

¹⁷ For a discussion regarding how this kind of criticism applies also to Sellars' views cf. W. De Vries, *Wilfrid Sellars and Liberal Naturalism*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*, ed. by M. De Caro and D. Macarthur, NY, Routledge, 2022.

¹⁸ P. Giladi, *Liberal Naturalism: The Curious Case of Hegel*, in «International Journal of Philosophical Studies», 22, 2014, 2; J. Peters, *On Naturalism in Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit*, in «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 24, 2016, 1, pp. 111-131; A. Stone, *Hegel, Naturalism and the Philosophy of Nature*, in «Hegel Bulletin», 34, 2013, 1, pp. 59-78.

of Nature that has impacted discussions of normativity: it consists in the claim that, for Hegel, the notion of «norm» is not limited to the social dimension. On the contrary, there are forms of normativity that, according to the Hegelian perspective, manifest themselves already *within* nature. When considering natural phenomena that exhibit normative properties a central role is notably played by the notion of «life» and the «living», which takes a central role throughout post-Kantian philosophy. Hegel offers his views on the topic in the last part of his *Philosophy of Nature*, which therefore has been among the most commented upon in recent discussion¹⁹. Where does its relevance come from?

Recently, the literature on Hegel has put forth two types of reflection in this regard. On one hand, there has been a tendency to focus on the concept of *Gattung*. The idea of *Gattung* is associated with the thought that the individual animal is always a particular *type* of animal, as it belongs to a *species*, and the *species* represents, for Hegel, an element of universality in nature that already carries a certain normative implications. The idea is that the animal organism exhibits certain behaviors and structures because it belongs to a certain *Gattung*. Belonging to a species can thus be understood as something that sets certain normative standards for the animal – which «ought» act in a certain way by virtue of being a certain type of animal or belonging to a certain species.

This idea has been popularized by a series of philosophers belonging to the neo-Aristotelian tradition, some of which are strongly influenced by Hegel. Michael Thompson is among the most influential ones and provides the philosophical groundwork as well as basic arguments for this perspective²⁰. According to Thompson, judgments that concern living beings are never merely descriptive judgments, but they have a special logical form with prescriptive implications. When we think about the domain of life, Thompson argues, we think thoughts that have *particular form*.

Through a tight logical and conceptual analysis, Thompson isolates the distinct logical form of judgments about living beings: he notably calls them «natural-historical judgments» and presents arguments in favor of the thesis that these types of judgments cannot be reduced to quantifications about individuals. The statement «bobcats breed in spring» is true even if not all bobcats do so, and it would remain true even if most bobcats did not engage in such behavior. The point that Thompson seeks to defend with such examples is that statements like «Bobcats breed in spring» are neither quantifications over elements of a set nor statistical generalizations about some instances. The statement, to use Thompson's vocabulary, always implicitly refers to a *form of life*. The form of life becomes a normative unit, enabling inferences about what is good or bad, or what is defective²¹.

¹⁹ K. Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020; T. Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*, cit.; T. Khurana, *Das Leben der Freiheit: Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2017; M. Haase, *Life and Mind*, in *The Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, ed. by T. Khurana, Berlin, August, 2012.

²⁰ M. Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008.

²¹ According to Thompson, «life-forms are implicit objects of thought in much of what we say and think about individual organisms as we come upon them in experience—indeed, in almost everything we say and think about them», M. Thompson, *Life and Action*, cit., p. 201. Judgments involving reference to life-form exhibit a distinct form of generality and involve a normative dimension: «like a practice, a life-form is of course associated with a standard or measure of good and bad—here, typically, of sickness and health, of deformity and defect, of what is missing and what is there in excess, and so forth. The deployment of such concepts is an essential part of the representation of things as alive, but the application of any of them to an individual organism once again presupposes a look to its species or to the natural form of life it realizes: legs that are perfectly sound in one kind of animal would be grossly deformed in another, body temperatures that are “normal” in one would be feverish in another, and so forth», Ibid. 201-2.

The structure of Hegel's *Gattung*, as a universal encompassing specific types of individuals, can be understood in this way: this would open up the idea of forms of normativity in nature, embedded in particular types of judgments and thoughts about natural entities.

Thompson himself associates this perspective with a form of Hegelianism²² and other recent readings of Hegel, such as Terry Pinkard's revised one, point to the same direction. Pinkard attributes to Hegel a form of «disenchanted Aristotelianism»

In the Hegelian view, there is a normativity already at work in nature in the sense that for organic life, there can be goods and evils for plants and animals—and thus reasons for plants and animals to respond in one way or another²³.

Other interpreters also tend to regard this position as Hegelian and defend it against other views on norms²⁴.

At the same time, I would like to argue that Thompson's perspective appears reductive as a reading of Hegel: it disregards some key views about natural normativity that are presented in the *Philosophy of Nature* and could significantly impact the current debate on norms. I will try to briefly highlight this before reaching some conclusions.

According to Thompson, the notion of life-form is central and alternative to another notion that is often used to understand living entities, namely the notion of «organization». The latter, Thompson argues, is not capable of capturing the specificity of the living, as it is a constitutively vague term²⁵. However, this rejection of the notion of «organization» seems to be too hasty and prevents us to see some interesting Hegelian conceptual tools for understanding normativity in nature. Notably, «organization» is a central term in the post-Kantian debate on the living and plays a prominent role in the conceptualization of the organism.²⁶ This applies also to Hegel's philosophy, where «organization» plays a central role in understanding the living being and its constitution, including its normative implications. In Hegel, «organization» takes on a defining character already from the Jena period, when he defines the animal organisms in terms of organization – by claiming that «this organic unity and perfect organisation is the animal» (*Diese organische Einheit und vollkommene*

²² Ibid.,12.

²³ T. Pinkard, *Hegel's naturalism*, cit., p. 26.

²⁴ «[Thompson's] project has yielded important results, especially in showing that the species universality of living beings cannot be understood in the post-Fregean understanding of universal quantification», R. B. Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in the Science of Logic*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 275. Hegel's notion of *Gattung* has generated quite an interesting debate, cf. D. Lindquist, *On Origins and Species: Hegel on the Genus-Process*, in «Hegel Bulletin», 41, 2020, 3.

²⁵ «Any attempt to mark the character of organisms in general by an employment of such prefixes as “self-” or “auto-” —as in, say, “self-reproduction”, “self-organization” or “auto-regulation”—is for the same reason completely empty», M. Thompson, *Life and action*, cit., p. 45.

²⁶ It has been noted by many scholars that the term "organization" emerged in the 18th century as a key notion for understanding living phenomena. It was at the core of many research programs of naturalists in France and Germany, cf. T. Cheung, *Die Organisation des Lebendigen. Die Entstehung des biologischen Organismusbegriffs bei Cuvier, Leibniz und Kant*, Frankfurt a. M., Campus, 2008; T. Cheung, *What is an “organism”?* *On the occurrence of a new term and its conceptual transformations 1680–1850*, in «History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences», 32, 2010, 2-3, pp. 155-194; G. Toepfer and F. Michelini, eds., *Organismus. Die Erklärung des Lebendigen*, Freiburg, Karl Alber Verlag, 2016; F. Duchesneau, *Organisme et corps organique de Leibniz à Kant*, Paris, Vrin, 2018; J. H. Zammito, *The Gestation of German Biology: Philosophy and Physiology from Stahl to Schelling*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2017. Indeed, «organisation» became a technical term in various disciplines, and starting from 1770s, the notions of «Lebendigkeit» and «Organisation» became increasingly intertwined – to the point that «organisiert» und «lebendig» were understood as synonyms, cf. G. Toepfer, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Biologie. Geschichte und Theorie der biologischen Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2011, vol. II, pp. 757 ff.

Organisation ist das Tier)²⁷. Hegel makes the same point in his later *Philosophy of Nature*, when addressing the defining properties of living beings that he groups together under the notion of «reproduction». In this context, Hegel appeals to the Kantian conception of an organism as a functional unity in which all the parts are interconnected for mutual maintenance. In his 1828 *Lectures on the philosophy of nature*, Hegel presents this view in the following way:

Every organ secretes and what is secreted is taken up from other organs, the other organs nourish themselves from the secretions, every organ is *Zweck und Mittel*... so is the life of an organ in itself this activity. ... Through this process every organ is maintained as a member of the whole²⁸.

The structure of the living being *qua* organized entity exhibits a particular kind of arrangement in which each part is both means and end. Such a functional unity determines the «norms» the «oughts», that is, identifies the correct functioning of the activities that enable the persistence of the functional unity of the living being. Hegel's account of this form of unity – as the active maintenance of a closed system thanks to the work performed by single parts on some material – precedes his discussion of an individual reproducing itself as a member of a particular species (*Gattung*) and, in an important sense, seems conceptually independent from it. Many passages show that, starting from the Jena period, Hegel's recurring discussion of animal organism as «producing itself» («*sich selbst hervorbringende*») or a «purpose that creates itself» («*es existiert als Zweck, der sich selbst hervorbringt*»)²⁹ should not primarily be understood as the production of another individual of the same *species* or kind or *Gattung* – via sexual reproduction – but rather in terms of the self-maintenance of a closed system of activities. If this is the case, then one could identify a Hegelian thought – derived from Kant – that allows for the identification of a normative dimension preceding the *Gattung*, already within the natural horizon, linked to the structure of functional unity of organisms. This natural structure, linked to the notion of organization, enables a distinct Hegelian understanding of both the concept of organic function and its normativity. This is another important way of conceptualizing living beings that resonates from Hegel in contemporary discussions: various scholars have highlighted its potential, stressing its affinity with current positions in theoretical biology³⁰.

The question regarding how these two dimensions – that of *Gattung* and that of organization – can be combined to produce a comprehensive picture of living beings and the natural normativity they embody remains open. This, in turn, is the precondition for attaining, with a following step, an adequate understanding of how these forms of natural normativity translate into (and relate to) higher, socially structured forms of normativity. Achieving this overarching perspective could constitute an important step in articulating a Hegelian viewpoint capable of transcending the latent dualism into which contemporary interpretations have fallen due to their anti-naturalistic presuppositions. It can simultaneously demonstrate how the *Philosophy of Nature* can offer tools for better understanding the role of subjectivity within the natural horizon, extending beyond strictly Hegelian debates.

²⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe I*, in *Gesammelte Werke* 6, ed. by K. Düsing and H. Kimmerle, Hamburg, Meiner, 1975, p. 139, cf. also *ibid.* p. 143.

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Natur 2. Nachschriften zu den Kollegien der Jahre 1825/26 und 1828*, in *Gesammelte Werke* 24.2, ed. by N. Hebing, Hamburg, Meiner, 2014, p. 1153, my translation.

²⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, in *Gesammelte Werke* 8, ed. by R.P. Horstmann, Hamburg, Meiner, 1976, p. 138.

³⁰ On this point, cf. L. Corti, *The 'Is' and the 'Ought' of the Animal Organism: Hegel's Account of Biological Normativity*, in «History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences», 44, 2022; A. Cooper, *Do Functions Explain? Hegel and the Organizational View*, in «Hegel Bulletin», 41, 2020, 3, pp. 389-406; E. Maragat, *Hegel's Organizational Account of Biological Functions*, in «Hegel Bulletin», 41, 2020, 3, pp. 407-425.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to trace one of the major lines of influence of Hegel's philosophy within the contemporary philosophical debate – an influence that extends beyond the narrow circles of Hegel scholarship. As I have shown, this line of influence revolves around the central theme of *normativity* and can be traced back to the golden age of analytic philosophy. While Hegelian insights were used to defend a social and «non-naturalizable» conception of normativity and rationality – bringing texts like the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* into the spotlight of discussion – more recently the very challenges posed by this perspective on norms have led to a reevaluation of the *Philosophy of Nature*. These debates justify giving the new attention to a text that has long been overlooked within the studies of classical German philosophy. In particular, Hegel's philosophy of the organism has proven to bear rich in implications for the contemporary discourse on norms. The slogan «leaving nature behind» that characterized the initial phase of the so-called Hegelian renaissance can be reversed to «leaving nature within» our perspectives on rationality and the human being.