



# HEGEL'S NATURALISM

*Mind, Nature, and  
the Final Ends of Life*

TERRY PINKARD

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## PREFACE

Since Hegel developed his own very specialized vocabulary for carrying out his program, interpreting his works poses special problems. Not the least of the problems posed by Hegel's rigorous use of his nonetheless arcane terminology is the way it almost naturally fosters the suspicion that taking the trouble to understand Hegel's sometimes dense vocabulary may simply be too much work for too little payoff. Several dead ends appear in the attempt to devote so much time to it. If one talks just like Hegel in talking about Hegel, then, at least among a good many Anglophone philosophers, the response is often something along the lines of "Fine and good, but what you just said made no sense at all." On the other hand, if one does not talk like Hegel, then the response of quite a few Hegelians is often something along the lines of "Fine and good, but what you just said isn't Hegel."

There is something to be said for both these types of objections. If one is to do justice to them, one thus has to steer a middle course between a mere recitation of the texts in their original terms and a reconstruction of Hegel's views in non-Hegelian language. This means that one has to combine a sense of historical accuracy mixed with a good sense for anachronism—that is, a way of sometimes reading Hegel in light of terminology that was not his own that is nonetheless faithful to his texts and contexts.

I also happen to think that this also amounts to taking Hegel's own advice about at least one way of approaching the history of philosophy:

But this tradition [of the history of philosophy] is not merely a house-keeper who preserves faithfully what she has received and transmits it unaltered to her successor. It is not a motionless statue; it is alive, swelling like a mighty river which grows the further it is pushed on from its

source. The content of this tradition is what the world of *Geist* has produced, and the universal *Geist* does not stand still.<sup>1</sup>

### Notes

I have slightly altered the translations of almost all the citations to preserve a certain consistency.

1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), viii, 193 pp., p. 10. This is from the 1823 notes on the lectures. I added the *nicht*, which is present in the 1820 notes and makes more sense. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Walter Jaeschke, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Philosophische Bibliothek; Hamburg: F. Meiner Verlag, 1993), 7.

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# Hegel's Naturalism



# Introduction

What we look for in philosophy, as Kant said, is orientation. In Kant's metaphor, it is as if we are in a dark room where there are nonetheless some familiar landmarks, and we use those landmarks to make our way around the room.<sup>1</sup> ("If this is the desk, then the door has to be in this direction.") When we look at our lives from a vantage point removed from the contexts of our more immediate concerns, and we turn to pure reason for help, we find ourselves in a similar darkness. However, we are without any assurance there even are such landmarks, and we then look to many other activities—philosophy among them—to offer us points of orientation. That is, we look to them to offer us something like metaphorical objects we can grasp in the dark to get our sense of direction and some kind of grip on where we are and in what direction we are going. In this kind of darkness, when we are looking for such orienting points and we turn to philosophy, we are engaged in a distinctive form of inquiry that Kant called "speculation."<sup>2</sup>

For Kant, all such "speculation" leads to four questions. What can I know? What ought I do? For what can I reasonably hope? Answering all three, as Kant said later in his career, amounts to answering a fourth question: What is man?

As he announces in the first paragraph of the first *Critique*, in submitting itself to "speculation," pure reason inevitably goes in search of the "unconditioned." We start with a series of conditions, and we seek to know if the series has any end. Unfortunately, once uncoupled from empirical constraint, pure reason's speculative impulse can only lead to what Kant called irresolvable antinomies, that is, basic contradictions among the terms that are candidates for the "unconditioned." It encounters a whole array of conceptual dilemmas that admit no empirical answer but seem to appear and reappear and whose only limits seem to be those of human cleverness in devising new arguments for one side or the other of the antinomy. The traditional name for the deepest of those conceptual dilemmas was "metaphysics," but, in keeping with Kant's spirit, we could also call it, simply, "philosophy."

The short versions of Kant's answers to his four questions are easy enough to state, although, as even the most lackadaisical readers of Kant rapidly discover, each of these calls out for a fiendishly elaborate set of qualifications.

What can we know? We can know a lot about the world under the conditions with which we can experience it but nothing about the world as it exists in itself, apart from those conditions. What ought we do? We ought to do what reason commands any rational being to do, which is to act in terms of universal principles and to respect the infinite dignity of all those creatures who have that capacity. However, to believe we can actually do that, we must presume that we are free, but we have no good reason for thinking that in the world as we can possibly know it we really are free. For what can we hope? We can rationally hope for a world where our happiness marches along proportionately hand in hand with our virtue, although there is no good reason to think that must happen in the world in which we live. Who are we? We are natural creatures who are also rational and who must think of themselves as possessing a capacity for self-causation that defies everything else we know about the world.

One of the arguments that Kant gives for why we cannot know the world as it exists in itself is that when we try to think of the way the world is apart from the complicated set of conditions under which we can experience it, we inevitably run into those antinomies. Even though the natural sciences provide us with a breathtaking knowledge of the world as it must appear to us, we must nonetheless conclude that the natural world so understood is not equivalent to the world in itself.

In short: We are thus metaphysical mysteries to ourselves even if, in putting the problem this way, we do at least understand the terms of the mystery—the mystery arises out of our own metaphysical limitations.

On the one hand, this might look rather bleak, as if it were to say: At one point, many people had hoped that “pure reason” unburdened with empirical study—namely, “philosophy”—would make the world and our needs intelligible to us, but we can no longer reasonably expect any such thing. Since “philosophy” in that traditional sense would always amount to a collection of unsolvable conceptual puzzles, the enterprise of philosophy could only consist in creating proposed solutions to those puzzles so that other philosophers can come up with crippling criticisms of those solutions. The enterprise of philosophy itself would keep going, but it will most likely be sustained by the postulate that at some indeterminate time in the future, these problems will have been solved, even though in human time, they never will.<sup>3</sup>

Kant called the process in which such conceptual dilemmas are endlessly generated “dialectic.” So did Hegel.

Like Kant, Hegel also thought that the history of metaphysics was at least in one important sense a failed enterprise. It had failed at least in the minimal sense in that what it had produced could indeed be construed, as Kant had done, as a series of philosophical positions that boiled down in effect to sets of antinomies. Like Kant, Hegel also thought the detachment of conceptual thought from empirical grounding was part of the diagnosis of this limited failure.

In terms of its ultimate ambitions, philosophy had thus failed to resolve most of its problems. However, like Kant, Hegel did not think that this implied that such problems were therefore meaningless or that, as insoluble puzzles, we need not worry about them. The very production of these antinomies itself had a deeper meaning to it that was already implicit in Kant's own rejection of the possibility of a pure metaphysics in the traditional sense.<sup>4</sup> Especially when the Kantian antinomies are used to draw a line between what thought can know and what is "beyond" thought's capacity to provide knowledge, on which side of the line is the thinker standing?<sup>5</sup> Some of Hegel's contemporaries concluded that wherever it was that they were standing, it could not be expressed in any direct way but only be "seen" through some kind of special faculty of something like "intellectual intuition."

Hegel disagreed with that and thought that what Kant had actually showed us in his doctrine of the antinomies is that what we are seeking in those dilemmas is a way of characterizing our own "mindedness" (to render Hegel's term *Geistigkeit* into uncomfortable English). More specifically, in our status as human agents, precisely because we are animals conscious of ourselves, we are also—to appropriate a term that Charles Taylor made famous—self-interpreting animals.<sup>6</sup> One of Hegel's more succinct versions of that claim occurs in his lectures on the philosophy of art, where he states his conception of "mindedness" in unmistakable Hegelian terms:

Man is an animal, but even in his animal functions he does not remain within the in-itself as the animal does, but becomes conscious of the in-itself, recognizes it, and raises it (for example, like the process of digestion) into self-conscious science. It is through these means that man dissolves the boundary of his immediate consciousness existing-in-itself, and thus precisely because he knows that he is an animal, he ceases to be an animal and gives himself the knowledge of himself as *Geist* [spirit, mind].<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, because of this, the self-conscious animal produces itself. In Hegel's terms, spirit "gives itself" its own reality. Or as he also puts it, "spirit is essentially only what it knows itself to be."<sup>8</sup> If we are only as we know ourselves to be, and this kind of knowing is itself historical, then we are indeed "self-interpreting animals."

In a nutshell, this is also Hegel's view about the context of the final ends of life: We are natural creatures, self-interpreting animals, and our final ends have to do with how we are to give a rational account—or, to speak more colloquially, to make sense—of what, in general, it means to be a human being and what, in the concrete, it means to be a parent, child, friend, warrior, tribe member, employee of a corporation, medieval serf, and so on. Everything hangs on that. On the other hand, left merely at that, Hegel's thesis sounds altogether

implausible, as if it were saying that if we merely interpreted ourselves to be angels, we would therefore be angels, or that there are no limits to our interpretations, and we can therefore interpret ourselves as we like. Much therefore depends on how that thesis is to be interpreted if it is to be more convincing than its initial statement makes it out to be.

In that light, the history of metaphysics, of philosophy itself, is the history of our attempts to come to grips with what it means to be, to use that uncomfortable translation of a Hegelian term, "minded" (*geistig*)—that is, what it means to *be* a human being, or, in Hegel's slightly denser jargon, what it means for *Geist* (spirit, mind) to arrive at a full self-consciousness. Unlike so many people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who came after him, Hegel did not think that metaphysics was in some strict sense meaningless—that it somehow supposedly violated some kind of basic or transcendental boundary on the meaningfulness of statements, such as "verifiability" or "criteria" of use. The conceptual dilemmas of metaphysics do indeed result in contradictions, he thought, but they are not, for all that, meaningless. Rather, they are essential to who we are. We cannot avoid dealing with such antinomies.

To summarize Hegel's views in some general terms that will require much more elaboration: Like Kant, Hegel holds that these kinds of conceptual dilemmas can never be finally solved in the way that other problems can be solved by appeal to a proof or appeal to a fact. "Why does ice float in nonfrozen water?" poses a problem that can be solved, but metaphysical or conceptual dilemmas are not like that. Like Kant, Hegel thinks that there is something special about such problems that makes their resolution seem pressing to those who reflect on them, but, like the later Wittgenstein, he is open to the idea that the impossibility of their resolution is not the threat to reason that it at first seems to be.<sup>9</sup> For Hegel, the "dialectic" consists in a movement from a set of conceptual dilemmas (or antinomies) in one way of speaking and experiencing to a different, more determinate context from which those antinomies cease to be as threatening to the very rationality of the system as they had originally seemed to be. The puzzles are not solved, seldom dissolved, but they are tamed.

To characterize this kind of move, Hegel notoriously puts the German term *Aufhebung* to use so that he can play on its two meanings of "canceling" and "preserving."<sup>10</sup> The threat is removed once the antinomies are viewed in the light of a different context in which their opposition no longer is the self-undermining threat it originally appeared to be. Since there is no good translation for the German term that captures its sense in English, Anglophone translators revived an older word that had gone out of use, *sublation*, to render Hegel's term into English. There are problems with this—it is, after all, an obviously artificial and rather nonintuitive solution—but reasons of economy recommend its continued employment.

It is a relatively separate, although important, issue, but Hegel also thought that he could give an account of how all these antinomies hung together. He

thought he could show that the collection of all the classical conceptual dilemmas that are identified as “philosophical” dilemmas in fact have a kind of deeper logic to them, such that one can demonstrate how these dilemmas incite each other and how various groups of dilemmas both belong together and themselves incite the construction of other groups of dilemmas. Hegel’s own demonstration of this came in the various versions of his *Science of Logic*, but even he expressed a certain modesty about how successfully he had carried out such a wildly ambitious program.

If so, then there can be within Hegel’s own terms no a priori method that can state in advance whether any particular conceptual problem will in fact turn out to generate such antinomies. Although it is by now a widely discredited view that Hegel thought that everything proceeded along the lines of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, if in fact he had held anything even like that view (that is, that there was an a priori “method” that could be applied to all the material at hand), he would have put himself into a direct contradiction with everything else he held. The innovation that a new context brings with it cannot be predicted from or literally deduced from the dilemma that provoked it. One cannot predict conceptual innovation, since to predict the innovation is just to make it. Hegel’s view was that there is a logic to the kinds of antinomies that philosophy in its history has put on display, but this logic itself can be demonstrated only after the fact, after the problems have already gathered themselves into what seems at first like an inchoate heap but can then be given an intelligible order—only after, to use his famous metaphor, the owl of Minerva has already flown.

Ultimately, following Hegel in his line of thought will take us to what Hegel at an early point in his 1807 *Phenomenology* claims is his central thesis: that the central claim that his philosophy seeks to develop is just that the truth must be comprehended “not merely as *substance* but also equally as *subject*.”<sup>11</sup> For Hegel, to be an agent is to not to be made of any particular stuff (say, “mental” as distinct from “physical” stuff), since agents are, after all, natural creatures. To be an agent is to be able to assume a position in a kind of normative space, which, so it will turn out, is a kind of social and historical space.<sup>12</sup> To be able to do this, the natural creatures who are human beings are brought up within a form of life, and in doing so, they acquire an array of social skills, dispositions, and habits that function for them as a “second nature.” In becoming “second nature” and not simply a nonnatural capacity to respond to norms, a form of life remains a form of “life,” that is, part of the natural world but different from the forms of life of other natural creatures. In acquiring the ability to move within such a normative social space, each agent emerges as an organic animal “substance” reshaped into a self-conscious “subject” capable of guiding her actions by norms. This also turns out to involve what Hegel calls “recognition.”<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, to comprehend the truth “also” as subject is also to comprehend the way in which the presentation of the dialectic up to this point in the story is itself one-sided. (Here, too, there is once again a rather cursory resemblance to some of

the ideas of the later Wittgenstein. Like Wittgenstein, Hegel holds the view that "what people accept as justification shows how they think and live."<sup>14</sup> To be an agent is to be an organic human animal who has a normative status conferred on her that she must then sustain through her own acts. As an agent moves around in this social space and learns to negotiate it, she also commits herself to making sense of what she is doing, and that involves giving and asking for reasons from others moving around in that social space.

This is part of yet another aspect of Hegel's conception of dialectic as that of an experiential and practical affair, a way in which an entire form of life can generate tensions within itself because of the way it collectively commits itself to certain conceptions of what for it counts as the "unconditioned." Such tensions can ultimately make the statuses that one occupies in such a social space only barely inhabitable or, in the extreme case, fully uninhabitable. For a status to be fully inhabitable is for one to be able to "settle into it" or "invest oneself" in the status.

One of the most well-known Hegelian metaphors is that of having the world as a home.<sup>15</sup> One of the few places where Hegel offers an extended explicit discussion of "being at home" is the introductory sections of his discussion of Greek philosophy in his lectures on the history of philosophy. Hegel raises the rhetorical question of why the Greeks are so important for us, and he answers his own query by remarking that it is only in recent times that "European humanity," after having passed through centuries of "the hard service" of the church and Roman law, has finally been "rendered pliable and capable for freedom." In this way, European humanity had therefore finally come to be in a position where it might be both "at one with itself" and "at home" with itself.<sup>16</sup> What therefore attracts contemporary—that is, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century—Europeans to ancient Greek life is that it was at that point that not only for the first time did "humans begin to be at home . . . they themselves made their world into a home, and it is the shared spirit of being-at-home that binds us to them."<sup>17</sup> Contemporary Europeans, Hegel thought, in the 1820s saw their own aspirations as having been actualized in some way or another in ancient Greek life.

For Hegel, what was particularly attractive about the way in which the Greeks (at least to the gaze of cultivated nineteenth-century European tastes) were "at home" with themselves had to do with how their own agency and nature existed for them in a kind of spontaneous harmony and thus beauty.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Hegel's imaginary "Orientals"—whom he mistakenly confused with real inhabitants of what Europeans call Asia and imagined had an overly monistic, stalled conception of their own agency in nature—and unlike the "moderns" (whom he describes as embodying the principle of "abstract subjectivity" characterized as "pure formalism," as empty, or as "having made itself empty"), the Greeks had both a naturalistic understanding of themselves and a normative understanding of their



own “mindedness,” spirituality, *Geistigkeit*. On Hegel’s view, what is finally most attractive about them is that they not only thought of themselves as both free and as part of nature but also seemed to be actually free and to be actually at home in their world.

Moreover, so Hegel thought, after almost 1,800 years, European life was finally drawing itself closer to a more authentic understanding of Greek life than had been possible since the end of antiquity. Now, this idea that the Greek world was something of a model for the modern European world had been part of Hegel’s repertoire since his student days at Tübingen, and it had become even part of a generational aspiration to show that in contrast with the Roman humanist tradition, the roots of the European form of life were in fact not Roman but Greek.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Europe’s roots were not primarily Christian but pagan. Unlike some others, Hegel also thought that he could show how Christianity was in fact, when properly reinterpreted and recast, compatible with this Greek idea of the world, but the central idea remained of revivifying the Greek idea by means of a full reinterpretation of it.<sup>20</sup>

However, Hegel’s other key idea—that the truth must be grasped not merely as “substance” (which is the Greek mode) but also as “subject”—meant that the Greek model cannot simply be revived or newly applied or even serve as an object of nostalgia. Greek ideas must be reargued, rearranged, and reinterpreted, and, despite their exemplary status for us, a hard look at them must make us realize just how irretrievable some key parts of their common life were and why trying to “retrieve” the Greeks is itself a hopeless and possibly dangerous fantasy.

To jump immediately to the end of the story: The truth of what first appears only as an endless procession of metaphysical dilemmas is that such dilemmas are the result of *Geist* grasping the way it is not at one with itself by virtue of its own activities of taking up positions in social space.<sup>21</sup> We try to make a home in the world, we fail at it, and the story to be told about this is not a purely psychological or austere historical story but something else. Oddly, for a philosopher whose best known saying is “the true is the whole,” Hegel thinks that this conclusion should be taken as a warning about the mistaken drive for certain kinds of wholeness.

Ultimately, the final end of our lives is self-comprehension, that is, knowing what it is to be a self-interpreting animal and knowing what follows from that. On its face, the sweeping feature of that claim surely is not likely to strike very many people as being very plausible. Whether it can be made plausible at all depends on how we construe Hegel’s defense of that claim. That will take two parts. The first part concerns Hegel’s conception of nature and his reworking of Aristotle to make his case. The second part concerns what Hegel takes this to imply about the conditions under which we are to realize that final end that is necessary if we are to lead satisfying, even if not happy, lives.