

*Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic* by Karen Ng (Oxford University Press, 2020).

doi:10.1017/S0031819121000231

This original, exciting, and beautifully written book does a great deal more than its title might suggest. It is not a study of one concept among others, that of life, as handled by Hegel. Given the role that Ng assigns to life in Hegel's thought, her remit turns out to be no less than a study of Hegel's philosophical method. Hegel notoriously, and for principled reasons, refuses to tell us what his philosophical method is upfront, and this gets revealed only at the culmination of his *Logic* (the first part of his tripartite system).<sup>1</sup> In effect much of what makes Ng's book valuable is its detailed reading of the last part of the *Logic*, which Hegel calls 'Subjective Logic'.

It has been thought scandalous that life should turn up as a concept for treatment in Hegel's *Logic* at all. But the role that Hegel accords life is of much greater import even than its appearing in the *Logic* in this way suggests, on Ng's account. Life is the 'original judgement' that is the ground of the entire *Logic*. It is at the basis of what Hegel insists on calling (picking up an occasional usage in Kant) 'the concept' (standardly written in English, 'the Concept', although of course in German all nouns are capitalized). As a result Ng provides us with much more than an interpretation of what Hegel has to say about the concept of life. Indeed, as she herself says, her book 'aims at the overarching goal of providing an account of Hegel's Idea in the conclusion of the *Logic*', which she takes to be 'the key to his entire philosophical system' (p. 16).

The book is in two parts. Part Two, which constitutes the philosophical heart of the book, offers a detailed study of Hegel's Subjective Logic. Part One builds up to Part Two by laying out the route by which Hegel arrives at what Ng presents as his 'critique of judgement' (and his answer to what Kant presents under this title). This route starts out from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and proceeds via Hegel's 'speculative identity thesis' as expounded in his *Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy* and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>1</sup> Whenever I leave mentions of Hegel's 'Logic' unitalicized, I intend to refer to the two parallel expositions of this part of the system that he provides (his magnum opus *The Science of Logic*, and the first part of his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* – likewise entitled *Science of Logic*) indifferently.

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Ng begins from a detailed reading of the role of 'inner purposiveness' in Kant's third *Critique*. Unlike the external purposiveness exhibited in artifacts, where the purpose is introduced from outside, the idea of inner purposiveness is that of the interdependence of organs in a living body. While Kant always falls short of identifying the unity of a system of judgements with the unity exhibited in inner purposiveness, and he continually shies away from claiming that organic nature really is purposively structured, Ng emphasizes the ways in which he gets close to both claims. Ng now pursues the German idealists' inheritance of what she calls 'the purposiveness theme'. Fichte was unable to do justice to the 'reciprocity between judgment and purposiveness' (p. 65) because he had no way of accounting for the purposiveness of nature. Ng argues persuasively, in a subtle and elaborate account of Hegel's 'speculative identity thesis', that Hegel drew on Schelling in his attempts to iron out this deficiency. Hegel now claims that 'the principle of speculation is the identity of subject and object' (quoted by Ng, p. 71). As Ng will eventually claim, 'the identity and non-identity of the *subjective subject-object* and the *objective subject-object*, interpreted as expressing the internal, structural, and essential reciprocity between self-consciousness and life, should be understood as the foundation and method of Hegel's idealism' (p. 119).

While talk of the 'subjective subject-object' and 'objective subject-object', and their 'identity and non-identity', inevitably remains obscure, matters become clearer when Ng picks up on this idea in Part II and demonstrates its much fuller working out in Hegel's Subjective Logic, which culminates in the 'Idea' as the place where Hegel's philosophical method finally comes into view. Hegel places what Ng calls the 'genesis of the concept' at the transition from his Doctrine of Essence, which culminates in a treatment of 'Actuality', to the Doctrine of the Concept. Ng persuasively links this to Kant's dictum in the third *Critique* that 'the concept of an object ... contains the ground for the object's actuality' (quoted by Ng, p. 125). This allows her to say that for Hegel, as for Kant, 'the purposiveness of form' is 'constitutive of the Concept' (p. 126). Furthermore, Ng is able to present the entirety of the Doctrine of the Concept as Hegel's alternative 'critique of judgement', since, as she powerfully demonstrates, for Hegel concept, judgement and syllogism must be understood together (they 'constitute one, unified operation of thought', p. 201). Concepts, we might say, are such as to figure in judgements, and judgements such as to figure in syllogisms. The issue of their 'organic unity and form' (p. 19) applies to them univocally and indifferently.

A crucial contribution made by Ng's book is her account, clearer than any I have seen, of how the relation between the four forms of judgement in Hegel's *Logic* is to be understood. The final in Hegel's succession of forms, what he calls the 'judgement of the concept', most fully exhibits the purposive structure implicit in judgement as such. Here the relation between subject and predicate is one of exemplarity, with the subject counting (in language Hegel lays great emphasis on) as an *individual* (as distinct from, and mediating between, particular and universal). Ng demonstrates particularly clearly how Hegel's conception of *Gattung* (which she rightly insists contains an internal flexibility that means its translation is not to be limited to one of 'genus', 'species', or 'kind' – but also importantly bears the connotation of 'life-form') is in play throughout as an ultimate 'horizon'.

With the Idea, we return to the subject-object. (Hegel himself in *The Science of Logic*, in a passage Ng cites (p. 243), identifies the Idea with what he had earlier called the 'subject-object'.) The Idea is, again, double: there is 'the Idea as life (the objective subject-object) and the Idea as self-conscious cognition (the subjective subject-object)' (p. 244). Ng makes two crucial interpretative claims in the complex discussion of the Idea with which the book ends. First, the ground of the Idea is the 'original judgement of life'. Second, the philosophical method that now gets to be exhibited is to be understood as 'the ongoing dialectic between life and cognition'. In the course of the argument, Ng makes a compelling case that life as immediate Idea plays something like the role that intuition plays for Kant, in the latter's insistence that intuitions and concepts require each other.

Among the many virtues of the book is the freshness with which it approaches Hegel's texts, in particular in its exemplary exposition of the Subjective Logic. One result is that we are able to see crucial features of Hegel's approach – such as the indebtedness of Hegel's 'actuality' to Aristotle's *energeia* and the deep connection between this and the 'purposiveness theme' – that have been insufficiently appreciated by others. There is here an almost ideal marriage of argumentative rigour and scholarly insight.

It is largely in those places where the book makes its most interesting and philosophically consequential claims, however, that it is also at its most challenging. In particular, Ng's claim that life must be understood as appearing at one specified place in Hegel's *Logic* but then as, from that place, grounding the *Logic* as a whole, is bound to engender puzzlement. As she points out, 'Hegel not only includes the category of life in his *Science of Logic*', but it is supposed, from this location in the text, to indicate that it itself 'plays a foundational role for his entire philosophical system' (p. 3). In Part

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One of the book life tends to appear firmly on the objective side of the subject-object. It continues to appear in this configuration in Part Two, but it must now also ground the subject-object. Ng claims that Hegel advances beyond Hölderlin's conception of the *Ur-Teilung* ('original division'), in which Being figures as the obscure ground that can never be reached (p. 177). But Ng's reading of Hegel's advance beyond Hölderlin involves saying, perhaps no less mysteriously, that in Hegel's original judgement 'original division' and 'original unity' are 'equiprimordial' (p. 170). One may wonder what assures us of this equiprimordiality. It would seem that Ng's answer will have the shape of insisting that Hegel 'changes the very meaning of ground' (p. 177). Ground cannot be specified in advance, but is something like a form-giving that awaits its own actualization for its specification. But now this seems to shift the issue back to just why we should take on Hegel's idea that form does indeed play such a role.

Ng herself raises a related concern about an apparent circularity between judgement and life in both Kant and Hegel: 'we must presuppose the concept of life in order to judge life [...], and [...] the concept of life that we presuppose is objectively exhibited in the living thing that we mean to judge' (p. 173). Ng provides two distinct answers. One answer is that the relevant relation is one 'between actuality and actuality' (p. 174). This again makes form do fundamental work: the relation is such because of a unity of form underlying the relata. The other, to my mind unpromising, answer resorts to portraying life as an 'immediate and more primitive mode of judging activity' that is 'the necessary enabling condition of any possible system of rendering intelligible' (p. 174) – a ground that is 'immanent, naturalized, non-mysterious' (p. 175). I doubt whether such appeals to primitiveness or non-mysteriousness really do much to dispel the question of *how* and *why* life gets to play this enabling and grounding role. The space of reasons is 'opened up' by life (p. 175). But how can we get beyond the metaphor of 'opening up' to a comprehension of how this is so?

This book takes us to the heart of some of the most fundamental questions about Hegel. In doing so, it greatly improves our understanding of Hegel's texts. I hope it will both have a formative influence on the scholarly literature, and help to make Hegel's project compelling to a wider philosophical audience.

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This review first published online 7 June 2021