Life, Embodiment, and Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶¶162-177

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Abstract

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Michael McCauley

This paper offers a close reading of the transition into the "Self-Consciousness" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this transition, Hegel articulates a concept of self-consciousness that is closely bound up with his concept of life. This paper's central interpretive argument is that life plays an *instructive* role for self-consciousness, demonstrating to it that its most basic concept of selfhood is dependent upon the concrete, finite, embodied activity of organic nature. To this end, this paper asks what is required of Hegel's concept of life such that it may play this role, explicating the concept of the living body presented at the beginning of the fourth chapter as a phenomenological object in which self-consciousness recognizes something of its own minimal conception of itself. In this moment of recognition, self-consciousness also grasps a constitutive difference that separates it from the living body, and this difference is a key condition of life serving its central instructive role. Contrasting this interpretation with recent scholarship on this passage, the paper argues that this concept of the living body and its instructive difference from self-consciousness suggest an approach to this chapter's famous passages on recognition and the struggle of lord and bondsman that is grounded in self-consciousness's recognition of life at the start of the chapter.

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At the start of the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel turns from a discussion of the manner in which self-consciousness, the subject's grasping itself as an "I", is implicated in objective knowledge, to a discussion of organic life as a particular object of self-consciousness. This turn begins with the following claim:

> But *for us,* or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become life. (*PhS* ¶168)[1]

The reasoning behind this claim, and the argumentative role of the concept of life that is developed in the passages which follow it, are the central concern of this paper. Broadly, life facilitates the key transition from consciousness to self-consciousnes, and the ensuing movement of recognition for which this chapter is famous. The simplest way to read ¶168 is to say that Hegel is observing that organic nature provides an objective analogue to the self-reflexivity and self-relatedness which fundamentally characterize self-consciousness.[2] In apprehending this object and grasping its similarities and differences with it, self-consciousness begins to undergo a formative experience of a kind that is typical of the developmental structure of the *Phenomenology.* But owing to the seeming abruptness with which the living object comes to the scene and the obscurity of the prose which follows, it is not obvious what the nature and content of this formative experience amount to.

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[1] Citations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* will appear in the format (*PhS* ¶ [paragraph]), where paragraph numbers are taken from Hegel (1977). I will refer to the text simply as the *Phenomenology.* I abbreviate references to Hegel's *Encyclopedia* as (*Enc* ¶ [paragraph]). Citations of the form (*Enc* ¶[paragraph]Z) refer not to Hegel's own text, but to student notes from his lectures, provided as '*Zusätze*' in Hegel (1971, 2004).

[2] The characterization of this relationship as "analogous" is an oversimplification; the meaning of the relationship will be deepened over the course of this paper. But the term is appropriate as a starting-point, especially given the background of Fichte's assertion that life is the "analogue of freedom in nature" (Ng 2020: 91fn48). Karen Ng's Hegel's Concept of Life offers an interpretation of how Hegel's *Phenomenology* goes beyond the mere assertion of an analogy between self-consciousness and life, and instead presents a transcendental argument that life is a "necessary condition of self-consciousness" (2020: 104). In this paper I present a different account of how Hegel goes beyond the assertion of a mere analogy. Citations of the form (HCL [page #]) refer to Ng (2020).

The central interpretive argument of this paper is that life plays an instructive role for self-consciousness, demonstrating to it that its most basic concept of selfhood is dependent upon the concrete, finite, embodied activity of organic nature. This lesson goes beyond the simple insight that conscious beings are also living beings: it is ultimately a lesson about selfhood and independence in general, as the living object confronts self-consciousness's most basic concept of itself as an "I" by showing that this concept is grounded in the determinate, contingent activity of living things. This notion of the "I" Hegel calls self-certainty or "immediate self-consciousness,"[3] and the living object represents an affront to this basic self-conception because it reflects back to self-consciousness its self-reflexive and self-relating structure in the very determinate activity of its living body. Self-consciousness *recognizes* life, and in this recognitive encounter, life furnishes self-consciousness with a concept of embodied selfhood that will undermine the self-certain, immediate I as the measure and marker of its independence. Self-consciousness is independent not by virtue of an immediate self-awareness, but in and through its very dependence on the determinate sphere of life in which it comes to see itself.

To demonstrate how life can serve this instructive role, I argue that self-consciousness must recognize itself in the living object, and moreover, that a key condition of this recognition is a particular conception of the living body that Hegel articulates in the introduction to the fourth chapter. Self-consciousness recognizes life only if the living object displays a certain formal resemblance to the abstract "I." Yet this resemblance also carries with it what I call an "instructive difference," and it is this difference which transforms our understanding of the formal categories by which the "I" has come to grasp itself. That is, the merely *formal*

[3] *Enc,* ¶416. While my textual focus is on the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit,* I occasionally supplement my argument with quotes from the 1830 "Berlin Phenomenology" in the third volume of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, which follows the general shape of the first four chapters of the *PhS* in ¶¶413-437.

resemblance or analogy between life and self-consciousness is not enough for life to serve its instructive role. A key feature of Hegel's discussion of life is in the way that the processes of the living body not only reflect back the abstract self-reflexivity of self-consciousness but transform our understanding of that self-reflexive activity as such by showing that in the sphere of nature, such activity is both cause and consequence of the finitude of the living body.

This concept of the living body will be clarified in due course. For introductory purposes, let me simply note that my central argument draws upon a reading of Hegel's articulation of sphere of organic nature that is closely attuned to its constitutive difference from the sphere of the abstract "I". Moreover, this difference can only be appreciated if we understand the phenomenological character of the apprehension of life: the living object displays itself to self-consciousness as a concrete object of experience, which self-consciousness in turn describes in a way that will inform its understanding of itself. While Hegel nowhere directly describes self-consciousness itself as "living", there is a key sense in which "life" characterizes both an activity immanent to the experience of consciousness and the bodily activity of organic nature. This enables self-consciousness to recognize itself in the activity of the living body while grasping the difference that separates the phenomenon of life from the conceptual activity characterizing its own experience. I shall later argue that recent interpretations of the fourth chapter by Robert Pippin and Karen Ng deflate the role of life as instructive difference by downplaying the key significance of this difference in the formative education (*Bildung*) of self-consciousness. The contribution I hope to make to interpretive literature on this chapter is therefore to demonstrate what is required of our concept of life such that it may play an instructive role for self-consciousness.

I elaborate this concept of life in sections 2-4 of this paper. Before doing so, it is necessary to clarify what brings consciousness to the encounter with life at the start of the fourth chapter. My aim in the first section is to clarify how Hegel comes to articulate his most basic concept of self-consciousness just prior to this chapter, at the end of "Force and Understanding." I argue that Hegel's method of articulating a concept of life here is importantly distinct from self-consciousness's phenomenological apprehension of life in the fourth chapter. Consciousness does not first grasp the concept of life by encountering an external object; rather, it does so by grasping the "simple essence of life" as something immanent to its own experience. The distinction matters because the realization of life, or infinity, as immanent to the experience of consciousness sets the stage for an encounter with life as a determinate object that is recognitive, and this element of recognition is the basis of the instructive lesson undertaken in the fourth chapter.

1. Life in "Force and the Understanding"

Hegel's first mention of "life" in the *Phenomenology* appears in the third chapter as a term closely related to his concept of infinity (Unendlichkeit). Here, I am as concerned with the meaning of these concepts as I am with the method by which consciousness arrives at them. To explicate my claim that life is immanent to the experience of consciousness, I first describe a key sense in which the *Phenomenology* must be understood as an immanent self-examination of consciousness, then demonstrate how this immanent character is relevant to at work in articulating the concepts of life and infinity presented in the conclusion to this chapter.

While the characterization of the method of the *Phenomenology* as "immanent" is multifaceted in scholarship on the text, here I wish to use this term specifically to denote the sense in which the self-examination of each "shape" of knowing is carried out on terms that are

presupposed by that shape itself.[4] Simply put, each "shape of knowing" presented in the first three chapters of the text represents a manner in which consciousness knows its object by relating to and distinguishing itself from it (*PhS* ¶82). Sense-certainty, perception, and the understanding all suggest their own concept of the object and their own standards for judging what is objectively true.

Hegel spells out and justifies the procedure of self-examination in his introduction by detailing how consciousness "provides its own criterion from within itself" (*PhS* ¶84). By "criterion", he simply means the standard, norm, or rule according to which knowledge claims are judged true or false – as a yardstick is used to measure distance, for instance. The *Phenomenology,* however, is not an objective science, but a "science of the *experience of consciousness*" (*PhS* ¶88): its object of study is this experience itself, and so it proceeds by attending to the criteria of knowing themselves, judging their internal consistency, and seeing what their failure entails for the shape of consciousness which provisioned such criteria in the first place.

The chapter on sense-certainty provides a helpful illustration: the "Now", "Here", and "This" which serve as the objects of knowing cannot possibly live up to their own concepts of themselves as "pure immediacies," insofar as they vanish over time or distance, revealing what at first appeared "immediate and simple" as in fact "a movement which contains various moments" (*PhS* ¶¶95-108). Sense-certainty learns that its self-professed criterion is *internally* incoherent, and so the shape of knowing itself demands reconsideration. In this way, self-examination is

[4] Michael Becker (2020) breaks down the various senses in which the *Phenomenology* is characterized as an exercise in "immanent critique" in critical social theory. The characterization of Hegel's method as immanent self-examination I present here draws from Becker's analysis, but does not claim to offer a thorough or original account of what it means for the method of the *Phenomenology* to be immanent.

conducted without "importing criteria" from outside these shapes, but rather by a "comparison of consciousness with itself" (*PhS* ¶84), by grasping the failure of its criterion as its own failure. Such failures recur throughout the text, and in failing to demonstrate that its given concept of the object can meet the standard which it itself has set as the measure of truth, consciousness is compelled to reevaluate and reconsider the self-conception articulated by that given shape. This procedure is what Hegel intends in his claim that consciousness studies itself while the reader, the philosophical "we" alluded to throughout the text, simply "looks on."[5]

The understanding characteristically knows the world through *explanations,* which work by capturing particular observable phenomena under universal abstract laws. Paradigmatically, the concept of gravity will "explain" a specific event (say, a ball rolling down a ramp) by describing it in terms of universal, unchanging formulas (with the law of falling bodies, $d = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$).[6] In such an explanation, the understanding posits an *explanandum* (that which is to be explained) and an *explanans* (that which does the explaining) as two distinct aspects of a phenomenon that is fundamentally grasped as one.[7] That which is to be explained is the "sensible", and that which does the explaining is the "supersensible" – and their distinction lies in the fact that one does not directly perceive gravity in a falling body, but rather perceives the phenomenon as an instantiation or expression of the law. The peculiarity of the understanding is that it grasps these components of explanations as unified at the same time that it conceptually

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[5] The distinction between the vantage point of "consciousness", which undergoes a formative education over the course of the *Phenomenology*, and the reader, whom Hegel refers to where he uses the pronouns "we" and "us", will be an important distinction to track in the fourth chapter. I omit a discussion of the meaning of the "we" and the broader significance of this distinction for understanding Hegel's methodology. It is sufficient to note that this distinction is directly traceable in the text, as Hegel frequently distinguishes between knowledge "for us" and "for consciousness" throughout.

[6] Hegel cites gravitation as an example in his discussion of law as the "expression" of force in *PhS* ¶152. Jean Hyppolite (1974: 129), Caroline Bowman (2022: 278), and Michael Baur (1991: 148) all cite Galileo's formula for the law of falling bodies to interpret this discussion.

[7] I follow Morris (2006) and Baur (1991) in using these terms to interpret Hegel's argument in this chapter.

holds them apart. That is, there is no sense in which the supersensible can really be located "beyond" the reach of appearances in the way that this distinction may suggest (*PhS* ¶149); there is not a literal "inner world" of laws standing above or beyond the "world of appearances" which those laws are meant to explain. A key insight of Hegel's examination of the understanding is that the difference between them is "not a *difference belonging to the thing itself*" (*PhS* ¶154) but is rather introduced by consciousness in the very activity of explaining.

We may think of the criterion suggested by this shape of consciousness as just the supersensible world of law itself, since this world is posited as the ultimate reality or ultimate truth of the world of appearances, and the validity of an explanation is judged by the ability of a given *explanans* (i.e. a universal law) to account for the relevant phenomena.[8] The task of comparing the understanding with itself, so to speak, will consist in examining how the supersensible might possibly account for its very own unity with the sensible world. That is, the understanding is evaluated by seeing whether the universal laws and forces of the supersensible world can account for the relationship of the sensible and supersensible upon which its own explanations rest.

Hegel will conclude that it cannot. While the argument that leads him to this conclusion is intricate enough that I cannot offer a detailed summary here, it is sufficient to see that the kind of universal that such self-understanding would require would amount to something which does not only capture particular empirical phenomena, but explains the *necessity* of the relationship between these particular phenomena and the laws that preside over them. That is, it would have

[8] Caroline Bowman and Jon Stewart suggest that the criterion at work at the outset of this chapter is the "unconditioned universal" (*PhS* ¶132), which transmutes into the concept of the supersensible world in the first half of this chapter. I suggest the supersensible world rather than the unconditioned universal as a criterion for the sake of brevity, and on the grounds that this transmutation allows us to grasp much the same interpretation as Bowman and Stewart regarding the role of the criterion in this chapter, but without an extended discussion of the first half of it.

to explain why gravity, as expressed in the law of falling bodies, causes bodies to fall toward the earth rather than, say, move away from it, or why distance is the square root of time rather than the other way around in Galileo's equation.[9] For the criterion of the understanding to understand the identity of sensible and supersensible which stands forth in our explanations, it would have to be able to account for its own unity with the actual particulars which it explains rather than their opposites. The fact that it cannot live up to this task shows that there is something more in our explanations that does this work, a kind of relationality that unites the universality of the supersensible with the particularity of the sensible.

It is this kind relationality that Hegel calls *infinity*, a concept he describes as "the simple essence of life" and "the soul of the world" (*PhS* ¶162). Before explicating this concept, we may note that Hegel states that it is by apprehending this concept as something immanent to the understanding's explanations that consciousness grasps itself as self-consciousness:

> Appearance, or the play of Forces, already displays [the infinite], but it is as *'explanation'* that it first freely stands forth; and in finally being an object for consciousness, *as that which it is*, consciousness is thus *self-consciousness.* The understanding's 'explanation' is primarily only the description of what self-consciousness is. (*PhS* ¶163)

This passage illuminates the sense in which infinity comes to the scene of the *Phenomenology*, standing forth in our explanations as that object which *consciousness* is,[10] and Hegel's mention of the "essence of life" should be understood in this context. What consciousness grasps in this moment is not life as a phenomenon or an intuition – it is not as if a living thing appears,

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[9] Bowman suggests the second way of "inverting" the law of falling bodies, p. 280.

[10] The German suggests that the "that" in "that which it is" refers to consciousness, though there is ambiguity here: "Die Erscheinung oder das Spiel der Kräffte stellt sie selbst schon dar, aber als Erklären tritt sie zunächst frey hervor; und für das Bewußtseyn Gegenstand ist, als das, was sie ist, so ist das Bewußtseyn Selbstbewußtseyn" (Hegel 1980: 100). The neuter "das" in "das, was sie ist" is indexed with "das Bewußtsein" (consciousness) rather than the masculine "Gegenstand" (object). The feminine "sie" refers to "Die Erscheinung" (appearance). This sentence therefore states that the infinite is an object for consciousness, as that (i.e., as consciousness) which it (i.e., the appearance) is; it identifies both consciousness and the appearance with the infinite.

somehow, as an object facing consciousness, and in grasping this object as living, consciousness becomes self-consciousness. Rather, consciousness first grasps its own manner of relating to the object in its explanations as an infinite activity: the unity of *explanandum* and *explanans*, sensuous and supersensuous, which constitutes every explanation as a whole, must be grasped as unity within which an inner difference appears.

The key terms which characterize infinity at ¶¶162-163 capture intrinsic elements of our explanations which the understanding itself cannot account for. Consciousness is *self-identical* and *self-dividing* (*PhS* ¶162), capturing the identity and non-identity of *explanans* and *explanandum*. The term *self-moving* (*PhS* ¶163) indicates the spontaneity with which the understanding grasps this identity and non-identity and our propensity to move between them and grasp them as held together in our explanations. In grasping this movement, we see that the distinction is the condition of their unity, that the dissolution of difference between these terms is necessary for our explanations to carry weight, and yet that this dissolution is one which, at the same time, must preserve and return to this difference, never effacing it completely.[11] The speed of a ball rolling down a ramp is "explained" by the law of falling bodies because the observed phenomenon just *is* an instance of the universal law, but the identification between the two terms of this explanation is only possible so long as they may also be held apart, so long as we grasp the movement between the identity and non-identity between the sensible and supersensible, phenomenon and law, as an ongoing activity.

The reason why consciousness becomes self-consciousness with this apprehension, then, is that it grasps this activity as its own – and more precisely, it grasps this activity as just the

[11] "It is self-*identical,* for the differences are tautological; they are differences that are none. This self-identical essence is therefore related only to itself; 'to itself' implies relationship to an 'other', and the *relation-to-self* is rather a *self-sundering*; or, in other words, that very self-identicalness is an inner difference." (*PhS* ¶162).

activity by which it can grasp *itself* as an "I". That is, the self-identical and self-dividing conceptual character inherent in our explanations is also found in that formula basic to the self-reflexive structure of self-consciousness: "I am I." In light of his articulation of infinity, the tautologous form of this statement is in fact animated by the very conceptual activity which the critique of the understanding has uncovered as essential to consciousness: the identity of subject and object here depends upon their differentiation, which itself, in turn, is just the *self*-differentiation of the "I", its immediate positing of itself as both subject and object. Hegel's claim that "explanation" is just "a description of what self-consciousness is" (*PhS* ¶163) thus amounts to the insight that self-consciousness displays the same spontaneous activity in explaining the world around it and in grasping itself as an "I", and the concept of the "I" which Hegel will carry over into the chapter on self-consciousness, as its central object of investigation, consists essentially in this basic activity. There is therefore a key sense in which the "simple essence of life" which Hegel equates with infinity is the life of subjectivity or of the understanding.[12]

Many classic interpretations of the third chapter draw on Hegel's mention of life as a useful illustration of infinity and an intimation of the next chapter, in some cases suggesting that consciousness learns what infinity is by apprehending a living object or apprehending the object as such *as if* it were living.[13] Ng's overview of this chapter suggests this manner of apprehension,

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[12] Pippin calls this the ""life" of subjectivity" in his reading of the third chapter (Pippin 1989: 140). Morris 2006 calls it the "life of the understanding".

[13] Hyppolite's suggestion that the infinite comes from a "dialectic of the "thing-in-itself"" which "infuses life into the "quiescent rule of laws"", or the inner world, indicates an origination of the concepts of infinity and life on the side of the object. He furthermore suggests that "the concept, as universal life, presents itself to us" as a "manifestation" to consciousness in his reading of the third chapter (Hyppolite 1974: 132, 139). To me, these formulations suggest a phenomenological apprehension of life as an object. Gadamer's famous essay on the third chapter closes with a discussion of organic nature as "the true reality" of the world as uncovered by the understanding (Gadamer 1971: 52-53). Baur suggests something similar, asserting that consciousness at 162 "must be able to understand everything that is as a living self", though he also recognizes the constitutive ambiguity of the

that is, the apprehension of life as an object of experience, identifying infinity with the "living object" which "provides consciousness with the resources to adequately grasp itself as self-consciousness, allowing consciousness to understand and explain its own inwardness, self-relation, self-dividedness, and activity." In this way, she suggests that life has a basically instructive role for consciousness already at ¶162, as a "not-I that opposes itself to the I" thus "reflecting back" its characteristic unity and division (*HCL,* 107). Living nature indeed displays the infinite, but to suggest that consciousness acquires this concept by apprehending a living thing in its experience does not explain how the infinite, or "the simple essence of life," has been determined as immanent to consciousness itself, or how the concept of life has been articulated through Hegel's immanent method. The only way to explain the appearance of life is to appreciate how its "simple essence" has first stood forth in our explanations, as precisely that element which the criterion of the supersensible world was unable to grasp.

While the appearance of life as a phenomenal object is indeed a part of the fourth chapter, I think that the key significance of infinity and life in "Force and the Understanding" lies in the fact that they do not stand *opposed* to the "I" but rather stand forth at first from *within* it, making up its minimal self-conception and furnishing us with a basic concept of the object which will be explored in the self-consciousness chapter. There is an expansive sense to Hegel's use of "life" in ¶162, as something which may characterize either the object of experience or the subjective activity by which the object is explained and understood. Hegel discerns the phenomenological sense of the word, akin to the sense of life in the term "lived experience," not by importing

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object of the understanding that is so central to the conclusion of this chapter: "Because of the very fact that the truth of Consciousness is Self-Consciousness, then, what may be spoken of as the objective activity of Force in the external world is equally to be comprehended by us as the immanent activity of consciousness itself" (Baur 1991: 145, 147).

descriptive resources furnished by the living object, but through an attention to the structure of our explanations and what is required for them to carry weight. That is, self-consciousness does not require a phenomenological encounter with the living object to grasp the characteristics that ma ke it self-conscious, nor does it require such an encounter to grasp "the simple essence of life". I shall therefore argue in the next section that the lesson which it ultimately learns from this encounter is not that consciousness is self-consciousness, but that self-consciousness is potentially bound to the same limitations which characterize the sphere of living nature. The formal homology between self-consciousness and the living object is not itself the lesson of this encounter, but the ground of there being a lesson in the first place. One of Ng's key contributions to scholarship on the *Phenomenology* is her original account of the transformation which self-consciousness undergoes in its apprehension of the living object. By limiting this encounter to a distinct moment of the fourth chapter, and arguing that self-consciousness learns something rather different in discovering its formal similarities with the sphere of life, my aim is to offer a modified account of the phenomenological contribution of the living object in this transition.

2. Life in "The Truth of Self-Certainty"

This contribution lies, I will now argue, in the distinctive identity of infinity and finitude which inheres in living things, which constitute and preserve themselves as individuals by dividing into shapes and organs and again dissolving their inner differences to this end. This section will elucidate this concept of the individual living body, arguing that self-consciousness comes to recognize life insofar as it presents itself in the form of an individuated body, and in this moment of recognition, comes to apprehend itself as subject to the same finitude, and thus potentially the same fragility and perishability, of organic beings. And moreover, this identity of

infinity and finitude is the key condition of life having an instructive role for self-consciousness, as this is what prompts it to reconsider what is involved in its self-conception as an infinite "I".

To defend this claim, it is worth situating the introduction to the fourth chapter within the general methodology I outlined in section 1. In this vein, we may pose the question: what sort of object might serve as a criterion for this "self-certain" shape of consciousness, for the self-identical I which Hegel calls "immediate self-consciousness"?[14] For a shape of self-consciousness that simply takes itself as its own object, it would seem that the only available candidate for the criterion would be the "I" itself, and the comparison of the subject with this object would amount to the "motionless tautology of 'I am I'" (*PhS* ¶167). Recognizing this circularity, and understanding this reflexivity as only one conceptual moment of consciousness in general, Hegel's concern here is with self-consciousness in its *unity* with consciousness of the object.[15] That is, he examines what the essential self-relatedness of the "I" entails for its knowledge of the not-I, how self-consciousness is not a simple matter of appending the "I" to a list of objects which consciousness may grasp, but a kind of self-relation which transforms the nature of that grasping in general, which makes it "a reflectedness-into-self, consciousness of itself in its otherness" (*PhS* ¶165).

Hegel famously expresses this unity with the claim that "self-consciousness is *desire* in general" (*PhS* ¶167), and the object which will serve as the "criterion" for this shape of consciousness will crucially present itself not only as an object of knowledge but now as an

[14] "Immediate self-consciousness" comes from the corresponding section of the Berlin *Phenomenology*, *Enc* ¶425Z.
[15] *PhS* ¶165. Referring to the difference between the reader and consciousness itself, Hegel closes the third chapter by noting that while *we* may grasp this unity, consciousness itself does not. It is for this reason that self-consciousness only grasps itself as the "motionless tautology of "I am I"" (*PhS* ¶167) at the start of the fourth chapter.

object of this desire.[16] For self-consciousness to desire is for it to grasp its object in light of its own self-relatedness, and specifically to see its object as potentially satisfying that desire, as serving some end for the subject who grasps it. With this practical dimension introduced to self-consciousness, self-certainty is already implicitly refigured – it is no longer something immediately known, but something to be achieved by making the object something for-consciousness.[17] That is, with the concept of desire, self-consciousness must *become* self-certain by demonstrating through action that the object is "mine".

It does so in two related ways: first in how it conceives of its object, and second in how it acts upon it. Its concept of the object is henceforth "doubled", consisting of two conceptual moments: it exists as both in-itself and for-us, as essence and appearance, and self-consciousness conceptually grasps these two moments as one. In this way, the theoretical doubling of the object also provokes a practical demand within the subject:

> This antithesis of its appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness. (*PhS* ¶167)

Self-consciousness must enact this unity, and the remainder of the fourth chapter will proceed to detail what kinds of actions might serve to satisfy this desire and thereby secure the subject's self-certainty. And crucially, the action that most straightforwardly corresponds to the practical demand for unity is also an intrinsically destructive one: self-consciousness eliminates the in-itselfness of the object much in the same way that an animal nourishes itself, apprehending its

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[16] I put "criterion" in brackets because, with the introduction of desire as an element of consciousness's relation to its object, our assessment of the object is now not only concerned with its agreement with a purely theoretical standard of knowing, but with its ability to satisfy the aims and desires of consciousness. It seems to me that with this turn consciousness is now concerned with the criterion of *independence*, which may display to it the requisite characteristics of a "self-standing" object.

[17] The formulation of self-consciousness as a practical "achievement" is key to Pippin (2011).

object by literally appropriating and consuming it, effectively making the in-itself of the object something for-itself.[18] My relation to the object as something conceptually and potentially for-me is a marker of my appetitive, intentional relation to it, anticipating and informing the actual appropriation which is soon to be carried out.[19]

While the negative element of desire might seem to take us far astray from the chapter's starting point – the minimal concept of an "I" which only knows itself – we can appreciate the reasoning behind this move by taking stock of the purported immediacy of self-certainty, and seeing that the dissolution of difference on which this immediate self-relation depends will spur a similar relation to the object. Recalling the previous section's demonstration that the immediate self-relation of 'I am I' is in fact animated by an infinite self-movement, a notion of the "I" has come into view as the movement by which the difference between the subject and object is removed: the "I" is the "*content* of the connection and the connecting itself" (*PhS* ¶166), that is, that which brings unity to this tautologous identity statement, as well as that which grasps the object as both in-itself and for-us. The movement to desire is much more intuitive if we appreciate that the infinite unifying movement of 'I am I' thus also structures my apprehension of the object, but insofar as the object is in-itself and not for-me, my apprehension of it does not attain the same tautologous certitude. It is for this reason that I must dissolve the difference which separates the object's being-in-itself and its being-for-consciousness: only in doing so can the "I" establish itself as independent according to the standard it has set for its self-knowledge.

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[18] This destructive element becomes clearer at *PhS* ¶175, as I show later. It is also more explicit in the corresponding section of the Berlin *Phenomenology*: "Thus appetite [Begeirde] in its satisfaction is always destructive, and its content selfish", *Enc* ¶¶426-428. García Mills (2022) stresses this point in his criticism of Pippin's reading of this chapter.

[19] The emphasis on hunger as a paradigm of desire is prominent in Pippin's reading of this chapter as key to Hegel's practical turn, (Pippin 1989: 143-152; 2011: 6-34). For an interpretation which instead centers erotic desire as paradigmatic, see Novakovic (forthcoming).

With the self-certain "I" and desire understood in this way, we can begin to grasp the significance of the quote I presented at the very start of this paper.[20] The reason why the object must repeat the self-reflexive movement carried out on the side of the subject can be clarified by attending to three key details in these sentences.

(I) First, the object under consideration is qualified as "*for us,* or *in itself*". With the mention of the "for us", Hegel communicates a return to the standpoint of the reader, noting that *we* grasp the object of self-consciousness as it is "in itself". We may note here that all of ¶168 serves as an introduction "for us" of the transformation which self-consciousness will undergo in ¶¶169-175. Moreover, the equivocation of these terms tells us that there is no skeptical gap separating the object's appearance from its being or essence – as was the case, for instance, at the start of the third chapter, where the inner world stood behind the sensible world of appearances. For the object to be *for us* what it is *in itself* is for the subject to immediately grasp what it is, in the sense that the infinite was grasped at the end of the last chapter. Indeed, Hegel there used this exact language with the claim that "the apprehension of *infinity* as such, is *for us,* or *in itself*" (*PhS* ¶164), and inasmuch as the infinite has furnished us with a self-identical concept of the "I", it would seem that the "I" itself also carries forward this equivocation. Hegel's repetition of this phrase here indicates that the object to which we now turn will be apprehended in much the same way.

(II) Second, the object is again qualified as the "negative" of self-consciousness – referring back to the first moment of the double object in ¶167, as that which indicates the otherness of the object to self-consciousness, and whose otherness is indeed a precondition of my desire for it.

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[20] I'll reproduce the quote for convenience: "But *for us,* or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become life." (*PhS* ¶168).

Here, along with the qualification in (I), Hegel places two constraints on the kind of object we are here considering, which until now could not have been thought together: the object here is a "not-I" which somehow immediately displays the unity of its being-in-itself and its being-for-us. While the infinite has already served as such an object, the import of this concept in the previous chapter did not lie in its status as the negative of self-consciousness in any sense. Rather, I have argued that it was central to the argumentative role of infinity that it be identified with consciousness, as it is only in light of this identification that consciousness could be grasped as self-consciousness. Now, in identifying an object that is genuinely other than consciousness – an object that is "posited as being" (*PhS* ¶168) – Hegel is asking us to bring the infinite to bear on an object that stands opposed to me.

(III) It is in light of these conditions placed on the kind of object we are considering that it has "returned into itself". It is not just any object which has "become life" owing to this transformation in consciousness, but specifically the "not-I" which displays back to consciousness the self-reflexivity which it has found within itself, such that what it is in-itself and for-us are one and the same. Though the past imperfect tense of the first two sentences in ¶168 is generally taken as a reference back to the infinite object of ¶162, the identification of the infinite with consciousness that is so important to that chapter should dissuade us from treating this passage as a straightforward reference to something already accomplished there.[21] Rather, I think that Hegel is here setting up something not yet seen in the experience of consciousness: this is an encounter between self-consciousness conceived as desiring and infinite – whose desire

[21] Neither Ng (2020) nor Pippin (1989) explicitly claim that Hegel is simply picking up where he left off at ¶163, but both are ambiguous on the matter of what exactly is different at ¶168. John McDowell describes their relation as follows: "life [at ¶162] served as a figure or model for his conception of "the Notion", which generates differentiation within itself rather than being externally related to a subject matter that is simply other than it. But here, in the opening section of the "Self-Consciousness" chapter, life becomes more than a figure. It becomes, so to speak, itself" (2009: 156).

renders its object "null" insofar as it makes it merely an object *for me*, even striving towards the "destruction" of that object[22] – and an object which reflects these essential characteristics back to it. My suggestion is that this object "returns into itself" just as consciousness has done because the appropriative movement of desire must confront an object displaying its own self-reflexivity back to it if that object is to meet the conditions set in (I) and (II). The movement of infinity which grounds the "I" here sets the standard according to which the independent reality of its object is judged, and the characteristics with which we have come to grasp this "I" must be found on the side of the object, the "negative" of self-consciousness, for it to meet that standard. In apprehending this object, we will find that

> Self-consciousness which is simply *for itself* and directly characterizes its object as a negative element, or is primarily *desire*, will therefore, on the contrary, learn through experience that the object is independent. (*PhS* ¶168)

The object which most explicitly satisfies this demand is a *living thing* (ein *Lebendiges*). The passages that immediately follow ¶168 inaugurate Hegel's phenomenological description of life, where the nature of living things is articulated in terms that reflect the language of infinity at the close of the third chapter. These passages (¶¶169-173) are particularly obscure, as they draw from a technical vocabulary to describe the activity of living beings that is also found in Hegel's philosophy of nature.[23] But amidst this obscurity, two things are clear. The first is that Hegel is especially concerned with the self-relating, self-dividing character of life – particularly those living things which Hegel calls *individual*, and which I think we are justified in calling *embodied*, in the very specific sense of embodying a relation of finitude and infinitude in what

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[22] *Enc* ¶¶425-428.
[23] Some examples: the term "pure axial rotation" (*PhS* ¶169, *Enc* ¶341Z); the notions of formation and assimilation (*PhS* ¶¶170-1, *Enc* ¶¶346-7); and discussions of members, organs, and the genus.

Hegel, in ¶168 calls a living thing, *ein Lebendiges.*[24] Hegel's attention here is on the organic "individual" whose literal inner dividedness into organs and "members" sustains it through a "splitting-up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences" (*PhS* ¶171).[25] In his philosophy of nature, this inner dividedness is a sure sign of life that is individuated, "self-like", and even "subjective" in the case of animals; the existence of "members" and splitting into "shapes" is what separates individual plant and animal life from pre-individual, amorphous organic substances such as lichens and algae.[26] This self-dividedness, moreover, is a condition of the self-relatedness by which a living individual maintains an inner-outer distinction, reaching outside itself for nutrition, consuming and assimilating its other in order to maintain its existence as a determinate thing (*PhS* ¶¶170-171).

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[24] As John Russon (2001) observes, Hegel nowhere develops a rigorous theory of "the body." I use this term to designate those concrete, determinate lifeforms which Hegel describes as "individual" in the sense I outline here. I take Hegel's specification that self-consciousness confronts a "living *thing* [*ein Lebendiges*]" to be centrally important here. It is this living thing that I refer to in my discussions of the "living body". Whereas the "simple essence of life" (¶162) was essentially tied to infinity, the thinghood of life designates its finitude. The term "Lebendiges" brings together infinity and finitude in a way that Hegel spells out in the description of life following ¶168. In moving from "Lebendiges" to "living body", my point is to draw attention to the way that the finitude and infinity of life form a unity in which the being of each depends essentially upon the other. It is specifically this interdependence of finitude and infinity that is at stake in what I call the "living body", versus the manifold other attributes one might associate with the bodies of living organisms. This body as *ein Lebendiges* does coincide with and refers to one's body in the biological or everyday sense, but it names and conceptualizes it specifically as the locus wherein finitude and infinitude interpenetrate one another. It is the living body conceptualized this way that has the instructive role for self-consciousness. I thank David Morris and Emilia Angelova for insightful comments on this point.

[25] It must be noted that this language also describes the genus-process, in which the "members" and "shapes" in question refer not to organs but members of a species. However, this does not conflict with my focus on the self-like character of individual organisms, if we appreciate that organic individuation is carried out in and through the concrete activity of the particular members of the species. This is indeed Hegel's position in the *Philosophy of Nature* (*Enc* ¶348). For reasons of space, this paper leaves out detailed engagement with the role of the genus in this transition, which Hegel explicitly mentions at PhS ¶¶172-174. What is left out by this omission is the normative element of life's instructive role for self-consciousness: for a living thing to be an instance of its genus is for it to act out and live in accordance with its own norms, to sort out what is good or bad for a being of its kind. One could argue that this "thin normativity" of the genus, to borrow a phrase from Hannah Ginsborg (2001), will ground the contestation of norms carried out on a social or spiritual level for Hegel – but this is not an argument I will advance here. I rather simply note that the relationship between the normativity of the genus and the finitude of the living body warrants further consideration, and also that if we appreciate that the genus-process is carried out immanently by the individuals that constitute it, then whatever instructive import the genus might have for self-consciousness, it has in virtue of the embodied individuals that are its members.

[26] On the "self-like" individuality of plant life, see *Enc* ¶¶342-343. On the "subjective" character of animals, *Enc* ¶350. On pre-individual or "selfless" life, *Enc* ¶341.

The second is that life satisfies the conditions set in (I) and (II) by displaying the predicates characterizing infinity, and the concept of the "I" which comes with it, in the form of a finite, determinate body. Self-movement, self-division, and self-unity do not here characterize an element of my experience, but the concrete activity of the living body. In the finitude of the body, self-consciousness confronts something which does not simply reflect back, unadulterated, the predicates by which it understands itself – this body rather sustains its own determinacy, unity, and finitude through its self-dividedness and self-movement. Finitude and infinity are interdependent in the self-determining structure of the body, and this brings us to the key sense in which the operative concept of infinity is transformed in self-consciousness's encounter with life. After addressing the inner division into members which constitutes individuated life, Hegel writes:

> It is the whole round of this activity that constitutes life: not what was expressed at the outset, the immediate continuity and compactness of its essence, nor the enduring form, the discrete moment existing for itself; nor the pure process of these; nor yet the simple taking-together of these moments. Life consists rather in being the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself. (*PhS* ¶171)

In this definition of life, Hegel stresses the inadequacy of both the infinite self-moving process and finite determinacy of the body, of the dissolution of differences and the stability of individual organic form, to understand the activity of the body, and even suggests that simply adding these together as aspects of life fails to bring us to the critical insight he is after in this digression. For the moments of finitude and infinity to be strictly interdependent, rather than two independent moments that happen to come together in the living body, means that life preserves itself as a finite body, a stable shape, *by* maintaining its inner unity through an inner dividedness.[27]

[27] Various articulations of the interdependence of infinity and finitude in life are offered in Hegel's discussion of animals in the *Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature*: "There thus exists in the animal the veritable subjective unity, a

This interdependence of finitude and infinity, inner rest and inner movement, is key to the lesson on the independence of the object which self-consciousness learns here. By displaying the movement of the infinite in the sensible actuality of a finite body, life stands in a relation to self-consciousness that is characterized by both identity and difference, in a sense that can only be appreciated by attending to the way that life transforms the operative sense of infinity at the outset of the chapter. The "identity" of life and self-consciousness is ultimately owing to the formal similarity by which my language for the minimal concept of the "I" is suitable for describing life, for "[characterizing] it without having further to develop its nature" (*PhS* ¶169). Life and self-consciousness are analogous, each of them displaying self-reflexivity, inner unity and dividedness.[28] The difference, however, consists above all in the finitude and determinacy of life, and the discovery that this finitude is both the condition and consequence of its infinite inner movement – and after all, it is upon this difference that the very possibility of the analogy rests. Without the independence of the body and the determinate shapes which constitute it, its encounter with self-consciousness would not be an encounter at all, but the gazing of an empty, formal "I" into an empty inner world: this would be "the vision of the undifferentiated selfsame being, which repels itself from itself, posits itself as an inner being containing different moments, but for which equally these moments are immediately *not* different" (*PhS* ¶165), and indeed, this is just the immediate self-identity realized at the end of the third chapter. It is the embodied

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unity soul, the immanent infinitude of form which is set forth in the externality of the body… The life of the animal as this highest point of nature is thus the absolute idealism of possessing within itself the determinateness of its bodily nature in a perfectly fluid form" (*Enc* ¶350Z). Also: "it has animal *heat* as a permanent *process of the dissolution* of cohesion and of the enduring self-subsistence of the parts in the permanent preservation of shape" (*Enc* ¶351). See ¶¶350-376 generally. A more historically informed reading of Hegel's discussion of life would incorporate a comparative analysis of *PhS* ¶169-174 with these and other passages in the *Encyclopedia*; this lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

[28] A thorough exposition of this analogy is in Ng (2020: 102-4).

character of the determinacy of life which supplies the difference that enables it to be instructive for self-consciousness, demonstrating to self-certainty that its object, too, is independent.

3. Projection and Intuition in Consciousness of Life

To refine this image of the identity and non-identity of life and self-consciousness, let me contrast this line of reasoning with two alternative interpretations of this chapter. In doing so my aim is to demonstrate that the recognition of life and the lesson of this encounter are only possible insofar as the living object is grasped as a living body, in whose very finitude the key predicates characterizing infinity inhere. The interpretations I read here obscure this point by implicitly granting conceptual priority to the subject or object of this encounter, and deriving an articulation of either life or self-consciousness from its given opposite. By "conceptual priority" I mean that the notion of infinite self-identity is first assumed within the subject, as self-consciousness, or within the object, as life. The living object is then conceived through a *projection* of my self-conscious, desiring experience onto the object by those who grant priority to the subject; or, self-consciousness is conceived through an *intuition* of the inner principle of life, grasped in the phenomenological apprehension of life, by those who grant priority to the object.[29] I take it to rather be a condition of the recognition of life that it proves to be reciprocally co-constitutive with self-consciousness, and that this co-constitution is a dynamic movement wherein self-consciousness grasps the finitude of the living object as embodying, displaying, and indeed transforming the predicates by which it has already grasped itself.

[29] While my own interpretation broadly moves from the subject to the object, as the infinite is first realized in self-consciousness in the third chapter, and then phenomenologically apprehended in the object in the fourth, this apparent "priority" to the subject is only textual and not conceptual *per se*, since self-consciousness is educated by life in a sense that cannot be appreciated if we treat the latter as a mere projection of my own self-conception.

(I) Robert Pippin's approach generally grants priority to what he calls the "life of the subject". By this, I mean that his discussion of "life" grounds this concept in terms derived from the experience of consciousness, and in doing so, grasps the living object as a projection of the broad characteristics of subjective experience. I already noted in section 2 the sense in which "the simple essence of life" in the third chapter primarily described the subject for Pippin, and the way that this essence is grounded in an articulation of infinity as immanent to the experience of the understanding. In more recent work, he suggests that "life" in ¶168 is another name Hegel gives to the "striving or orectic for-itself-ness"[30] which was introduced through the discussion of desire in ¶167. In one's experience as a desiring self-consciousness, one possesses a "sentiment of oneself as living and as having to maintain life" – this is a "brute or simple *for-itself* quality of living consciousness (which form of self-relation we share with animals)".[31] The source of our knowledge of what makes life living comes from this self-sentiment which attends the experience of desire.[32]

On the one hand, this approach is problematic for textual reasons. Nowhere does Hegel call the subject's self-consciousness *itself* living:[33] life is consistently found on the side of the object, and Pippin's metaphorical claims which mobilize the language of life to describe

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[30] "Orectic" is Pippin's alternative to "erotic" desire, denoting hunger rather than lust (2011: 12).
[31] Pippin (2011: 30).
[32] Pippin interprets the discussion of life in ¶¶168-174 principally as a reference to the life of the *subject*, such that the construal of life as the "object of immediate desire" expresses the subject's motivation to preserve its *own* life rather than a desire to appropriate, consume, or destroy something external to it (2011: 20-34). While this marks a departure from my suggestion that this passage may be viewed as a scene of encounter between self-consciousness and a living object (a not-I), Pippin proceeds to address the relationship between self-consciousness and life (its own life, its status as one of its kind or genus) such that the concept of "life" in general (i.e., the concept of a living object, a not-I) is critically informed by *my* experience as living and desiring (2001: 34-39). While his most recent book on the fourth chapter departs from his *Hegel's Idealism* in several respects, these points are consistent with the claims he makes about the same passage in that book (Pippin 1989, 150-152).
[33] We should be careful to note that Hegel's reference to "living self-consciousness" at ¶177 denotes the *object* of consciousness. This is not, then, a claim that the orectic structure of apperceptive awareness entitles us to metaphorically describe that awareness *per se* as "living", but rather a claim that a self-consciousness which recognizes another self-consciousness does so while grasping it as a living thing.

something essentially subjective are part and parcel of a general interpretive strategy which deflates the constitutive difference between the two. The object becomes life, according to him, when self-consciousness grasps its object as having desires of its own, expressing a similarly orectic manner of relating to the world, inasmuch as it considers its objects as "threats to, means to, or indifferent to [its] life-sustaining" in the same way that I do (*HCL,* 30). Pippin's reading is problematic, then, not only for the interpretive liberties it takes, but because it leads him to a concept of life which seems incapable of educating self-consciousness in any sense, since it only reflects back what self-consciousness already knows about itself. And this view is indeed borne out in the subordinated argumentative role which Pippin attributes to the living object, which is only an extension of the concept of desire and a necessary precondition for the real lesson which self-consciousness learns here, that my practical commitments must be recognized by another independent, desiring self-consciousness to hold the normative authority which I invest them with. This is certainly a key part of the picture, but it suggests that consciousness only undergoes an educative experience in confronting another self-consciousness, not another life.

(II) Karen Ng's recent reading of this passage, by contrast, grants priority to life as an object in the fourth chapter, and argues that it is through an immediate *intuition* of life that consciousness comes to grasp itself as self-consciousness. Ng's Hegel is a realist with respect to life, in that the conceptual architecture of the living object is not furnished by the subject's projection of anything from its own experience, but is rather an objective and real "inner principle of [its] activity" (*HCL,* 114). As addressed in my discussion of the third chapter, Ng understands life at ¶162 to somehow provide consciousness with the resources it requires to grasp itself as self-consciousness. The nature of this "provision", however, is left ambiguous until Ng's discussion of the apprehension of the living object at ¶169-172, which she describes as self-consciousness's

"immediate intuition" of life. By characterizing this intuition as immediate, Ng is saying more than the obvious point that consciousness is receptive of a sensible manifold in the observation of living nature: her claim is that the apprehension of the organism *as a living thing* is immediately intuited, that life presents itself to consciousness in such a way that I intuit the "inner principle of activity" which makes it living.

Contrary to Pippin, this approach grants priority to the *object* in that "the grasp of the living object is a necessary condition for self-consciousness" (*HCL,* 110). Ng's interpretation of Hegel's argument is therefore transcendental as well as phenomenological, in that the actual apprehension of such an object is a condition for consciousness to grasp itself as self-consciousness (*HCL,* 114). On this view, the object becomes life in the *Phenomenology* because the appearance of such an object was a condition of consciousness becoming self-consciousness in the first place.[34] Though I have criticized Ng's reading of the third chapter, my approach is ultimately closer to hers than Pippin's, in that she positions the formative education of self-consciousness *by life* as a central part of Hegel's argument. But by stressing that consciousness grasps its own self-reflexivity by apprehending the living object, she identifies a lesson rather different from the one concerning the independence of the object which Hegel himself suggests at ¶168. While I have challenged Ng's "necessary conditions" claim concerning the third chapter on textual grounds, I think it runs into a deeper problem in relation to the fourth,[35] since here, life

[34] Though she will go on to develop an a priori, logical concept of life in her reading of Hegel's *Logic*, which grasps life as a category deduced from thought itself rather than something empirically learned or immediately intuited, her reading of the *Phenomenology* is different. Christopher Yeomans points this out in his review of Ng (Yeomans 2021). The basic difference lies precisely in the phenomenological nature of the text, which cannot prove "the strong a priori necessity of life in the strict transcendental sense, [but instead shows] the learning process by which consciousness attains self-consciousness" (2020: 114) by way of its apprehension of life. While Ng therefore joins Pippin in acknowledging the place of "life" on the side of the subject, even granting a transcendental status to life as a condition of thought in her reading of the *Logic*, the critical import of life in her reading of the *Phenomenology* instead resides unambiguously on the side of the living object.

[35] Ng claims that this grasping and the lesson thereby learned takes place in both chapters (*HCL,* 110).

would seem to provision consciousness with conceptual resources that it already explicitly and constitutively possesses, and which it has ascertained from the immediacy of its own experience. If we accept that this has already been accomplished at the start of the fourth chapter, it makes little sense that the apprehension of life will again play the provisory role which Ng claims it does here.

While Ng recognizes the transcendental, constitutive import of life for self-consciousness in a way that Pippin does not appreciate, her suggestion that it is "self-relatedness and self-division" which consciousness takes away from its encounter with life seems not only mistaken on textual grounds, but threatens to repeat the error of Pippin's "projective" reading by depriving life of its fundamental difference from self-consciousness – indeed, on the present reading it is just this difference that enables the living body to serve its instructive role. In this way, one of the fundamental points of Ng's interpretation (i.e., that life provisions self-consciousness with the conceptual resources it requires to grasp itself as self-consciousness) is itself undermined by her claim that life is immediately intuited by self-consciousness as an *a priori* inner principle, and that this immediacy is owing to self-consciousness being constituted by the same sort of activity. On her reading, it is the similarity or even "identity" of life and self-consciousness, and seemingly not their difference, that has import for the development of self-consciousness.[36]

[36] Ng does, in fact, recognize that there is *some* important difference between self-consciousness and life, doing so most clearly where she situates Hegel's account in relation to his critique of Fichte. There, she writes that life serves as Hegel's alternative to Fichte's concept of the *Anstoß,* or "check" on self-consciousness – the object which opposes or resists the infinite self-positing of Fichte's I, serving as an enabling condition of empirical knowledge. She writes: "Hegel is thus claiming that as a matter of transcendental, a priori necessity, the appropriate not-I that opposes itself to the "I", such that the "I" can be determined to be self-determining, is not an *Anstoß*, but life. Life is the only object that expresses the unity and division—a unity and negativity of form—adequate to the unity and division characteristic of the activity of the "I". In grasping the unity and activity of life, self-consciousness immediately grasps and constitutes itself, setting into place, as Fichte argued, a schema of subject-object identity and opposition" (Ng 2020: 107). This insight ultimately serves to distinguish Hegel's account from Fichte, and does not hold a significant place in her reconstruction of Hegel's argument in the *Phenomenology.* But Ng does not elaborate upon *why* life is categorically different from self-consciousness in a way that enables it to serve an instructive role.

The issue I am bringing to light in both Pippin and Ng's accounts, then, is that neither allows us to grasp the constitutive difference between life and self-consciousness that will ground the dynamic movement of recognition - and indeed, the asymmetric course which it is to take in the struggle of lord and bondsman. Whether life is intuited by the subject or projected onto the object, it seems that the principles shared by each – self-reflexivity, inner unity and inner dividedness, orectic being-for-itselfness, etc. – are simply transposed from self-consciousness to life, or vice versa, without the principles themselves undergoing any transformation in the process. In the summary of Hegel's natural-philosophical digression I provided above, this is patently not the case: infinity is not the same after the appearance of the living body. This body concretizes these predicates, renders them determinate and sensible, even demonstrating that this finitude is interdependent with infinity in the preservation of individuated organic life. The body is the locus of this interdependence of finitude and infinity, and the recognition of life consists in the apprehension of this body not only as a reflection of the "I" but as its concrete embodiment. Self-consciousness recognizes life as independent because it puts something like its own minimal self-conception on display in the form of another determinate being. In this recognition, then, the "I" finds an object which expresses the truth of self-certainty inasmuch as it presents the infinite as intrinsically attached to something finite – the infinite is here "attached to life" (*PhS* ¶187), and in this attachment the living object confronts self-consciousness with the possibility that its own infinite character has its truth in the finitude of the body, that the limitless character of the "I" finds its truth in the delimited sphere of nature.

In the absence of such an account, her focus is instead on the structural similarities between them, and she locates the fundamental lesson of their encounter in self-consciousness coming to grasp these similarities.

The next section will clarify and defend these claims by briefly considering the closing passages of "The Truth of Self-Certainty" (*PhS* ¶¶175-177) and showing how the concept of the body which I have suggested conditions the movement of recognition which begins there. In doing so, my aim is to restore to life its central instructive role in the transition to recognition – to show how it is the living body which brings the infinite self-movement of the "I", in a way, down to earth, "where [self-consciousness] leaves behind it the colourful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present" (*PhS* ¶177).

4. Recognizing Life

Let me first summarize the key points of my reconstruction of Hegel's argument:

> (I) Life first appears in the text coupled with the concept of infinity, describing an activity immanent to the experience of consciousness. It primarily characterizes the spontaneously self-relating and self-dividing activity of consciousness, which first expresses itself in the inner unity and dividedness of sensible and supersensible worlds displayed in the understanding's explanations (*PhS* ¶162).
>
> (II) Consciousness grasps itself as self-consciousness by grasping the infinite as its own subjective contribution to the structure of its objective knowledge. Self-consciousness is minimally conceived as just this activity: the "I" is grasped as a self-reflexive, self-unified, self-dividing conceptual movement (*PhS* ¶163-167).
>
> (III) Desire is the name of this minimal concept of the "I", grasped in its unity with objective consciousness. This is a theoretical and practical mode of relating to objects in which the self-relatedness of the "I" informs its conscious knowledge of the object, now grasped as not only in-itself but for-consciousness (*PhS* ¶167).
>
> (IV) This "I" knows itself as self-certain and independent by negating, destroying, or consuming its other. This negation is a practical expression of the dissolution of difference that grounds the infinite self-identity of the "I" (*PhS* ¶165, ¶167).
>
> (V) The negative object of self-consciousness which displays an identity of being-in-itself and being-for-us, and thus, the self-reflexivity, self-unity, and self-dividedness of infinity, is life. By expressing these characteristics in the concrete form of the living body, this object displays an interdependence of infinity and finitude, and self-consciousness confronts an object which determinately embodies the abstract characteristics predicating its own self-conception (*PhS* ¶168).

In the encounter which then follows between life and self-consciousness in ¶¶169-175, I have argued that notions of projection and immediate intuition, taken alone, obscure the essentially instructive character of this encounter by flattening the difference between self-consciousness and its living object. This section will now further clarify the formative lesson of this encounter by defending the interpretive claim just anticipated, namely, that

> (VI) Self-consciousness recognizes its own infinite character embodied in the finite determination of life. This recognition prompts self-consciousness to conceive of its own independence as potentially subject to the same limitations of independent life. In this way, the dissolution of difference which was meant to secure the self-certainty of the "I" gives way to the recognition of life as a new standard according to which the independence of self-consciousness is measured (*PhS* ¶¶175-177; ¶¶185-187).[37]

Now I will demonstrate that the recognition of life supplants immediate self-certainty as the measure of the independence of self-consciousness at the end of "The Truth of Self-certainty". In doing so, I will voice a final point of departure from Ng's interpretation, arguing that the determinacy of the living body, in opposition to the "I", is the ground of the asymmetry which inheres in recognition, and which will later culminate in the opposition of lord and bondsman.[38]

There are three key conceptual moves in these passages, at ¶¶172-177, which amount to this conclusion when taken together. (I) First, in light of its grasp of the concept of the body I have described above, self-consciousness comes to grasp life as independent (*selbstständiges*). As anticipated at ¶168, this independence is grasped to the extent that the object reflects back the

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[37] I should note here that by bringing the concept of recognition into the encounter between self-consciousness and life, I am indeed making use of it in a way that Hegel nowhere explicitly endorses: for him, recognition appears in the encounter between self-consciousnesses, as the next section of the fourth chapter proceeds to show. The central difference in my use of the term is that the recognition of life is not a reciprocal movement, in that self-consciousness recognizes itself, in the way that I have described, in the living object while the inverse does not hold true, at least for Hegel. Therefore, self-consciousness does not yet grasp itself as recognized by another in the same way that it recognizes that other itself. I take this to be the reason for the claim at ¶168 that "to the extent… that consciousness is independent, so too is its object, but only *implicitly,*" or only "*in-itself*" [*an sich*]: this independence does not understand itself as a unity "for which the infinite unity of the differences [of life] is… [but] *is* only this unity itself." Because an organism simply lives, but without apprehending itself in its apprehension of the world, it reflects back the orectic character of self-conscious desire without knowing that it is doing so.

[38] The above reconstruction offers an alternative to the one offered in *HCL,* 110-111.

unity characteristic of the independent "I". (II) Because self-consciousness is desire, and desire acts to negate its object in consuming or appropriating it, in making this discovery self-consciousness immediately acts to negate life: "it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty" (*PhS* ¶174). This activity is consistent with the concept of self-certainty with which the chapter began, as an essentially destructive movement which grasps its object as nothing aside from its being-for-consciousness. (III) In destroying the object and restoring its self-certainty thus, however, self-consciousness only reaffirms the independence of its object, and in doing so invites us to reconsider the independence of the subject as well. "Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other" (*PhS* ¶175).

The sudden turn from the description of the living object to its destruction by self-consciousness in these passages is nearly as surprising as the first appearance of life at ¶168. But what this moment reveals is the inner contradiction within self-certainty and the standard it has set by which we had hoped to judge the independence of self-consciousness. The "I" proves that it could never have been what it held itself to be in the first place, that is, a being which secures its independence by grasping the other as something for consciousness, and acting out its desire by appropriating, consuming, destroying this object. Part of the contradiction is revealed in the simple fact that the otherness of the object is a condition of its appropriation, but there is a deeper lesson in the fact that it is not just any object, but specifically an object "that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life" (*PhS* ¶174), which self-consciousness destroys. It does so because the independence which this object displays in its inner movement, in the pursuit of its own desires, is at once the ground of my recognition of it as an independent

other, and insofar as it therefore independent from me, is susceptible to the destructive movement of my appetite. The living thing here stands as just that form of independent objectivity which resists the totalizing appropriative movement of desire precisely by embodying it and displaying back as "the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element" (*PhS* ¶168). The reason why self-consciousness cannot tolerate this independence, then, is the very same reason why it recognizes life as implicitly independent in the first place.

The phenomenal display of life thus undermines the standard of immediate self-certainty in two ways. The first is that self-certainty depends upon its object to be satisfied; in satisfying this desire and dissolving the difference which separates it from the object, it implicitly acknowledges this object's independence. "Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from sublating this other: in order that this sublation can take place, there must be this other" (*PhS* ¶175). The second, which requires our attention to the self-determining shape of the living body to be properly appreciated, is that the destruction of the living thing shows that, insofar as self-consciousness is *itself* an independent object for *another* self-consciousness, it is subject to the same perishing that it finds in the sphere of life. Now, this discovery will only be fully borne out in the struggle for recognition which follows in the fourth chapter. There, two self-consciousnesses "*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another," and in this, "they are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being of *life* – for the object in its immediacy is here determined as life" (*PhS* ¶¶185-186).[39] But in this confrontation, as self-consciousness comes to grasp itself as the other's object, it wishes to show "that it is not attached

[39] Note here that this quote lends support to the interpretation that life supplies the most basic form of independent objectivity for self-consciousness: before recognizing the other as another self-consciousness, we recognize it here as a living thing.

to any specific *existence*, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life" (*PhS* ¶187). The ensuing struggle to the death, in which each self-consciousness stakes their own life to establish the truth of their self-certainty, is a well-known story. What matters for my argument is that the destruction of the living object anticipates and conditions this struggle in that self-consciousness here learns that life is perishable and fragile, that what is living can also die, and that insofar as my independence is of the same sort as the independence of life, I am subject to this same fragility.

It is worth noting that this discovery adds an important qualification to the instructive import of self-consciousness, in that self-consciousness immediately wishes to deny its attachment to life. That is, while the reader of the *Phenomenology* recognizes the dependence of self-consciousness on life in this passage, and even that self-consciousness acknowledges this dependence insofar as it recognizes something of itself in its object, self-consciousness itself immediately acts against life, rejecting the lesson of the living object and hoping to restore the "I" to immediate self-certainty. It is only after risking its own life in the struggle to the death with another self-consciousness that the lesson that self-consciousness cannot detach itself from life will fully sink in – but the very possibility of this attachment, and the reasons for self-consciousness's desire to reject it, are themselves enabled by the recognition of life and the discovery of its fragility at ¶174.

With these aspects of the independence of life in view, we can appreciate how the notion of embodiment which I have advanced has its advantages for turning to the passages on recognition that follow it. The body enters into this dialectic as that object of self-consciousness which it recognizes "as a living self-consciousness" (*PhS* ¶177). It is the most basic form of independence which I recognize in the other – a point which Ng appreciates in her remark that

"what each [self-consciousness] first recognizes in the other is life" (*HCL,* 119). But owing to her argument that life is immediately intuited by self-consciousness, she does not grasp the asymmetric turn towards the destruction of this object as something continuous with the concepts of life and self-consciousness as they are articulated at the start of the chapter. She writes that

> in order to avoid a dogmatic and naively optimistic immediatism about the "affection" by the organism (a kind of myth of the given with respect to life), Hegel must present the actual experience of consciousness as one in which our recognition and acknowledgment of life is momentary at best, constantly obscured, and continually fails. Indeed, as soon as self-consciousness as desire and its living object appear on the scene, self-consciousness acts to *negate* life, first in the object outside itself (eating the object, killing the other), and second, in its own self by risking its life. (*HCL,* 114)

If life is immediately intuited by self-consciousness, there is indeed no reason for the destructive turn at ¶174, aside from the lesson which Ng suggests Hegel leads us into here. Hegel's concept of life, on Ng's account, rather seems to lend itself to a recognitive encounter in which the intuition of another being as living seems to pose no intrinsic challenge to my own self-conception. In intuiting the object's inner principle of life, I simply grasp it as reflecting my own inner nature as a living thing; Hegel therefore dictates the destructive turn at ¶174 to demonstrate that things in reality are not so simple, and that recognition is vulnerable to misrecognition because, for reasons unbeknownst to us, self-consciousness wishes to deny its own status as living. With this denial, the tumult of Spirit's self-actualization in the *Phenomenology* is the result of self-consciousness's repeated failure to acknowledge its own status as living (HCL, 109, 114-115).

My reading differs here in that self-consciousness has its *own* motivation for destroying the independent living thing which it here faces, and these reasons are grounded in the differences in the concepts of life and self-consciousness I have developed in this paper. Self-consciousness does not negate life so that we may avoid such a dogmatic immediatism, but

because self-consciousness grasped as desire, and life grasped as determinate embodiment, demand an overcoming of the key difference which intrinsically sets them apart; this difference, residing in the finitude of the body, is most simply eradicated through the destruction of the living object. But this destruction, rather than affirming the difference between self-consciousness and life, only re-entrenches it. Only insofar as self-consciousness recognizes itself in this object – and specifically in the perishable, fragile nature which it has discovered by destroying this object – can it even begin to strive to demonstrate that it is "not attached to life". The recognition of life, the impulse to destroy it, and the ensuing struggle to secure one's safety from such destruction, all depend upon a concept of life whose finitude self-consciousness both recoils from and depends upon, as the dialectic of lord and bondsman will go on to show.[40]

The asymmetry of life and self-consciousness which Hegel develops in ¶¶162-177, and is especially clear at ¶174, prefigures the asymmetry of recognition which culminates in this experience of lord and bondsman. This asymmetry ultimately reflects the divide between every individual's standing as, on the one hand, potentially the object of another consciousness, reducible to the status of a thing, "like [an] ordinary object," and on the other, as an independent I which might take another for such a thing, which might stand above another as their master and put them to work for the satisfaction of one's own ends. Our propensity for holding both of these positions, our capacity for lordship and vulnerability to servitude, is grounded in the ambiguous independence of life as the object of desire in which I recognize myself, and the identity of infinity and finitude which inheres in the living body is at the heart of this ambiguity. With the perishability of this body in view, we can see how the concept of life precipitates a theory of

[40] One contemporary reading which stresses a similar asymmetry of life and self-consciousness is John McDowell's (2009), though McDowell reads this as an *intrapersonal* asymmetry, reading the distinction between lord and bondsman as an allegory for the distinction between the "apperceptive I and the empirical self."

freedom that is at once a theory of responsibility – towards what is living, and so what is vulnerable to injury and death, in oneself and another.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that life has an instructive difference from self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in that it demonstrates to self-consciousness that the independence of the "I" is dependent on the finite, contingent sphere of nature. For life to serve this role, self-consciousness must recognize itself in the determinate activity of the living body and find that this life affronts its self-conception. Moreover, for such recognition to be possible, we must understand the living body not only as formally analogous with our minimal conception self-consciousness, but as transforming the key predicates that ground the analogy between them. Hegel articulates this transformation by demonstrating how life provisions consciousness with an object in which the form of the infinite is interdependent with the finitude of the body, and it is this finitude which compels self-consciousness to reconsider the nature of its own independence. The instructive role of life is thus conditional on a conception of the living body as displaying this interdependence, and a minimal conception of self-consciousness characterized by the infinite activity which stands forth in the understanding's explanations. I have argued that Ng and Pippin do not supply us with an account of life that meets these conditions. Moreover, I have suggested that these are conditions which must be met for consciousness of life to anticipate and inform the dynamism of the movement of recognition and the asymmetry of lord and bondsman which issues from it. To grasp life as implicated in driving forward the movement of the *Phenomenology*, itself characterized by a dynamic interplay of finitude and infinity in the drama of recognition and ethical life, we would do well to appreciate that this dynamic finds its key

determinate expression in the living body and the unending dissolution of differences by which it sustains itself as what it is.

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