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# Karen Ng, "Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic."

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**Karen Ng.** *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic.* Oxford University Press 2020. 336 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190947613).

In *Hegel's Concept of Life*, Karen Ng offers a new reading of Hegel's entire philosophical project that foregrounds the importance of the logical form of life and Hegel's indebtedness to Kant's third *Critique*, specifically the theme of purposiveness. Most of the book is a defense of Ng's central argument that, for Hegel, life plays a constitutive role for the activities of reason and that Hegel's idealism cannot be properly understood without articulating life's essential role in thought and self-consciousness (3). This, she claims, corrects the largely one-sided apperception view—i.e., that the primary source of Hegel's idealism is Kant's transcendental unity of apperception—and shows that this account is incomplete without a proper account of life.

Ng's argument hinges on three major interpretive claims: first, that the purposiveness theme from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* influenced Hegel's treatment of the Concept in the *Science of Logic* (6); second, that the speculative identity thesis developed in Hegel's *Differenzschrift* is the model for Hegel's mature philosophical method; and third that Hegel's treatment of 'subjective logic' is Hegel's own 'critique of judgement' which is grounded on the activity of life (9). Ng defends the first interpretation in chapter 2, focusing on two main issues from Kant's third *Critique*: (i) purposiveness as an enabling condition of lawful empirical judgement (27); and (ii) the primacy of teleology over mechanism in the operation of judgement (50). Ng claims that Hegel appropriates from Kant a priority of teleology in judgement thereby indicating an essential connection exists between life—understood as self-caused unified natural forms—and cognition (61). According to Ng, Hegel is interested in the connection between living and conceptual form and how the relation between life and self-consciousness is *constitutive* of experience and not merely regulative as it is for Kant (63-4).

In chapter 3, Ng continues to trace the theme of life through Hegel's early *Differenzschrift* and attempts to show that the relationship between life and self-consciousness, and the identity between the two, becomes the foundation of Hegel's 'entire system of philosophy' and his idealism (76). According to Ng, this 'speculative identity thesis' is an integration of two Kantian ideas via Schelling: (i) that the self is the unity of knowledge and experience, and (ii) that the purposive unity and organization of life is 'an enabling condition of cognition' (71). In other words, speculative identity, the identity between subject and object in consciousness, is the result of a reciprocal and constitutive connection between the unity of self-conscious judgement and the unity of life. Thus, the relation and opposition between self-consciousness and life, and their identity and non-identity, carry the theme of purposiveness further by demonstrating that life serves as the enabling condition of consciousness and the mind's activities (122).

Ng devotes the remainder of the book to her third interpretive claim and begins with a chapter on actuality and the genesis of the Concept, thereby setting up her discussion of the Doctrine of the Concept in chapters 5-8. In chapter 4, Ng argues that Hegel's discussion of actuality and activity of form—influenced by his engagement with Spinoza and Aristotle (132)—is how he transforms Kant's purposiveness thesis into his own account of the Concept (130). Actuality thus becomes Hegel's way of thinking through the relationship between life and spirit as a reciprocal relationship that generates the Concept (161). According to Ng's Hegel, actuality and activity require an account of reciprocity and purposive self-activity that are both essential for the deduction of the Concept, thereby demonstrating that reciprocity and purposiveness are what ground actuality and subjectivity. Ng claims that this deduction is informed by the speculative identity thesis since the unity of the object is constituted

through its reciprocal connection with the subjective, i.e., the relationship between freedom and life (164).

In the following chapter, Ng builds on her discussion of life and its relationship with judgement. In doing so, she makes two interpretative claims. The first is that Hölderlin's account of judgement as original division is the framework for Hegel's understanding of judgement (168). The second is that the criterion of judgement's form is its ability to express the unity of life and natural purposiveness (186). In short, Ng argues that by appropriating Hölderlin's account of judgement as original division and swapping out the unity of Being for life, Hegel makes life the original judgement and the enabling condition of the unity and division between subject and predicate in propositional judgements (171). Thus, Ng argues, Hegel makes the teleological form of the Concept the sufficient ground for judgement, wherein the relationship between ground and judgement is not two entirely heterogeneous elements but is based on a unity that allows judgement to be actualized, i.e., the activity of life (214).

In chapter 6, Ng focuses on the Objectivity of the Concept and attempts to show that, for Hegel, self-determining activity is fully realized through inner purposiveness (230). Ng argues that this idea of internal purposiveness is Hegel's transformation of Kant's account of purposiveness and becomes a standard of truth in three ways: (i) it articulates unity between universality, particularity and individuality; (ii) allows us to understand the unity and activity of judgement; and (iii) allows us to understand the activity of self-determinate activity in which subjectivity and self-determination are objectively realized in the world, which grounds the capacity for objective judgement (234). This Ng claims is the 'culmination of Hegel's argument that purposiveness serves a positive function for philosophy' (236). Hence, the original judgement of life is the immediate manifestation of self-determining activity and is also the original manifestation of the Idea (242).

In chapter 7, Ng discusses the final chapters of the *Science of Logic* and claims that the 'doubling' or 'duplication' of the Idea is Hegel's attempt to replace the dualism between intuition and concept with life and cognition (247). Ng suggests that the logical form of life takes the place of intuition and that this original judgement of life becomes the 'original synthetic a priori judgement' and the enabling condition of anything becoming an object for cognition (253). Ng claims that the immediate judgement of life provides three essential features of Hegel's idealism, namely (i) that objectivity is posited as the activity of the judging subject, (ii) that objectivity is only for a self-determining subject, and (iii) that the subject of judgement is a *living* individual, a universal perspective that is at once individual *and* universal (263). For Ng, this grounding of life as the basic enabling condition of the Concept's actualization in objectivity presents a 'naturalized' account of idealism (265).

Ng completes her study with a short chapter devoted to the limitations and powers of theoretical and practical cognition and how these limitations are overcome by understanding their unity and dialectical relationship, the result of which is Hegel's 'absolute method' (279). This unity allows both a reciprocal and a mediating relationship between theoretical and practical cognition which helps avoid the limitations of both, i.e., the former's inability to overcome the given, and the latter's failure to realize the will as the source of the good (281-7). This unity, Ng claims, is the result of the unity and opposition between life and self-conscious cognition (289). Absolute method then consists of a dialectic between life and cognition, which Ng takes to be the result of Hegel's appropriation of the purposiveness theme from Kant's third *Critique* and shows how cognition and the activities of judgement are enabled by the original judgement of life.

To evaluate Ng's impressive book properly would require more pages than can be offered here. Ng's careful arguments and historically sensitive engagement with Hegel and his predecessors

are a must read for any student of post-Kantian idealism and will become an important voice in the ongoing conversations about the nature of Hegel's idealism. By way of conclusion, I have one minor critical comment. It's clear that Ng takes herself to be offering a reading of Hegel that is truer to what Hegel himself meant by properly foregrounding the theme of life inherited through Kant and Schelling. A question needs to be raised whether Ng's Hegel is a faithful reading of Hegel or the result of creative retrieval that makes Hegel more amenable to those committed to a naturalized version of idealism. In short, Ng could have done more to situate her account among other competing interpretations, but this may be an unfair demand of a book that already does so much.

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