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Original

The Dialectics of Self-Conscious Life and the Constitution of Social Practices in Hegel's Philosophy / Seddone, Guido. - In: ETICA & POLITICA. - ISSN 1825-5167. - XXI:1(2019), pp. -343.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11381/2858854 since: 2019-04-16T18:17:06Z

Publisher:

Universita di Trieste

Published

DOI:

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20 April 2024

THE DIALECTICS OF SELF-CONSCIOUS LIFE AND THE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIAL PRACTICES IN HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY¹

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution I defend the thesis that Hegel's notion of species (*Gattung*) is not merely the name given to a group of self-reproducing living beings but rather it is at the basis of the Hegelian naturalistic conceptions of self-conscious life, sociality and world history. I maintain that self-reflection and self-referring negativity are the main characteristics of the self-conscious life and they determine the features of both the individual self-consciousness and the entire human species by shaping social practices and world history as acts of actualized freedom. Therefore, the definition of human species goes far beyond the description of its natural features and depends on the fact that self-consciousness is able to determine itself by negating external powers or conditioning. The main argument of this contribution is that human species and its historical evolution can be defined by means of this self-referring negativity and by self-consciousness' capacity to place the external reality under an order of values and concept autonomously yielded.

KEYWORDS

Self-conscious life, norms, social practices, negativity, naturalism, social freedom

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Recently some Hegelian scholars have highlighted that Hegel's theory on self-consciousness is based on features that are determined by virtue of the living nature and dispositions of the subject, rather than by the logical characteristics of thinking.

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 704127.

Hegel's version of naturalism maintains that the behaviour of a living being is established by the possibilities of its own organic nature and by the significance that those possibilities represent.² As a consequence of this, self-conscious creatures develop a particular form of life defined by the way of self-consciousness. Similarly, speculation itself is not a propositional attitude towards reality, but rather a theoretical disposition embedded in the natural dimension of the living, desiring and longing subject. Consequently, the logical attitude towards the independent reality of the object, phenomenologically called by Hegel "otherness", does not consist in propositional inferring, but rather it is a dialectical activity by which self-consciousness determines itself as an autonomous subject within an objective world. The dialectics of self-consciousness establishes a relation with the otherness based on the spontaneous faculty of producing an order of concepts by which otherness' independence can be grasped and eventually superseded; this is the speculative act, metaphorically defined as "the labour of the notion".³ This contribution aims to explain how Hegel's peculiar version of naturalism tackles the question concerning the historical evolution of the social practices, the nature of the self-conscious species and the normative by elaborating a complex theory about the dialectics of self-consciousness, i.e. its peculiar way of interacting with external conditionings. In order to carry out this analysis on freedom, sociality and human history I intend to deal with some points in which Hegel describes how the institutionalization of social practices changes the nature of self-conscious life and self-determination. At the same time I will try to show that this institutionalization emerges as a necessary and concrete fulfilment of the self-conscious life and that there is a naturalistic presumption in Hegel's account of the human practices and their historical evolution. I will start by giving an account of the role played by the concept in Hegel's system and the naturalism entailed in it. Successively, I will deal with the notion of social freedom and how it affects the self-conscious life. Thirdly, I will tackle Hegel's theory on norms, recognition and sociality and maintain that the normative environment is necessary for self-conscious life in order to attain freedom. Eventually, I will explain that the evolution of the world history is the result of a self-reflection about the way how the human species organizes its activities and practices over time.

2. HEGEL'S NATURALISM OF THE CONCEPTUAL

Hegel conceives of the concept (*Begriff*) as a natural practical disposition of the living subject towards the independence of the reality and not as a logical tool for

² Pinkard (2017), 31.

³ Hegel *PS* (1997), 43: "True thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the Notion. Only the Notion can produce the universality of knowledge which is neither common vagueness nor the inadequacy of ordinary common sense, but a fully developed, perfected cognition".

inferring true statements. This revolution in the theory of the conceptual had been introduced in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant gives an account of the reflexive judgment by marking the difference from the so called objective judgement, which was addressed in the first *Critique*. Following Kant, whereas human judging of objects refers to a mathematical 'agitation' of the mind, i.e. to the power to have an adequate representation of the reality by means of true statements, the reflexive judgment is related to a peculiar 'power of desire' [*Begehrensvermögen*] (Kant *CJ*, 1987: 101) or 'a dynamical attunement of the mind' (Kant *CJ*, 1987: 101). Without doubt Hegel follows the path and the suggestions of the third *Critique* in which cognitive capacities are explained in a wider way than in the first one that exclusively puts the focus on the transcendental conditions of objective thinking. The chapter on Self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* tackles the question of the conceptual, freedom and the speculative by linking it to the very natural and practical features of self-consciousness.⁴ In order to achieve independence from any external powers, the subject need to relate the external reality to its cognitive patterns and to acquire a sort of mastery over the objective reality. This operation is very similar to what Kant calls the deduction of the categories that demonstrates how the logical concepts "must always contain the pure a priori conditions of a possible experience and of an object of it, for otherwise not only would nothing at all be thought through them, but also without data they would not even be able to arise in thinking at all".⁵ Although Kant intends here to point out that no experience is possible without the spontaneous activity of the intellect, by doing so he also highlights the infinite power of the autonomous subject that applies its own logical patterns to the object. Also Hegel addresses this spontaneous act of relating the object to the cognitive patterns of consciousness, but he deploys it in a naturalistic way by accounting for the practical mode of the self-conscious life,⁶ which becomes free from external conditioning by placing external reality under an order of concepts autonomously yielded. Such speculative effort preserves individual identity from the alienation

⁴ Following Hegel, freedom is the condition of the subject in which there are no relations of dependence from or before other subjects or external powers and in which otherness is somehow "domesticated" and made familiar. See Neuhouser (2000), 20: "To apprehend the fundamental rationality and goodness of reality as a whole is to learn that, contrary to appearances, the world we inhabit is not alien to our deepest aspirations but is instead a realm within which rational subjects can be 'at home,' or 'with themselves.' For a subject to achieve freedom in the speculative sense, then, is for it to overcome its original alienation from the world by finding itself (its aspirations as a rational subject) to be fully realized in an other (the world), which, when comprehended philosophically, ceases to confront the subject as an external, inhospitable other."

⁵ Kant *CPR* (1998), 227.

⁶ This subjective effort to master external reality by sublating its independence is called by Hegel 'return from otherness' [*Rückkehr aus dem Anderssein*]. See Hegel *PS* (1997), 105.

properly produced by the independence of external factors affecting self-determination and assures that living subject remains with oneself [*bei sich selbst*]⁷, i.e. free. In fact, individuality as concept of itself is infinity and self-referring negativity, i.e. “the ultimate source of all activity, life”.⁸ Nonetheless, in the emergence of the otherness as counterpart, the nature of freedom changes from being speculative to being social or practical, while otherness ceases to be a form of natural constrain or limitation and becomes an other similar self-conscious individual.⁹ The confrontation with an other ‘I’ represents a fundamental milestone in Hegel’s philosophy because it marks the difference between the very natural and one-sided dimension of self-conscious life as infinite self-referring negativity and the dimension of social norms and interaction. In spite of this demarcation, Hegel claims that the structure of self-consciousness remains unchanged as it preserves self-determination and self-referring negativity as its fundamental features.

3. SELF-CONSCIOUS LIFE BETWEEN SPECULATIVE AND SOCIAL FREEDOM

The notion of self-consciousness represents the core of the Hegelian philosophy and is at the basis of his theory on freedom and absolute. Freedom’s primary condition is the reflection about the self, which is fostered by what Hegel calls “self-referring negativity”, namely the act of negating external conditioning by reflecting on one’s own principles and identities. This self-referring thinking activity concerns the relations of dependence between the subject and the object and yields a concept by which self-consciousness is able to grasp the dialectics subject-object. What is compelling in Hegel’s theory of speculation is the idea that in thinking I’m not in *another* while the other is related to me: this achievement represents the identification with otherness, which I would call speculative freedom.¹⁰ Moreover, speculation is strictly related to life because without a self-differentiating living subject we

⁷ Hegel *PR* (1991), §§ 7, 23.

⁸ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 7.

⁹ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 7Z: “Then the third moment is that ‘I’ is with itself in its limitation, in this other, as it determines itself, it nevertheless still remains with itself and does not cease to hold fast to the universal. This, then, is the concrete concept of freedom, whereas the two previous moments have been found to be thoroughly abstract and one-sided. But we already possess this freedom in the form of feeling [*Empfindung*], for example in friendship and love. Here, we are not sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves.”

¹⁰ Hegel *PS* (1997), 120: “For in *thinking*, the object does not present itself in picture-thoughts but in *Notions*, i.e. in a distinct *being-in-itself* or intrinsic being, consciousness being immediately aware that this is not anything distinct from itself ... In thinking, I *am free*, because I am not in an *other*, but

could not have either self-reflection or the act of return from otherness. Speculative freedom as result of a reflexive act of return from otherness, i.e. the infinite identification with the absolute, represents the fundamental structure of self-consciousness and is attained by means of a naturalistic approach underlining the central role played by life. This develops a strong idea of subjectivity based on the autonomous striving for freedom and independence, which can be reached by overcoming otherness' independence and establishing identity with the objective world.

However, in the social dimension the other becomes another independent subject and the consequent reflexive act endorsing freedom is not a mere speculative act, but an act promoting interaction and institutionalization of practices. Whereas the element of life preserves the subject from being reduced to mere otherness or objectivity, the social factor of interaction pushes the subject to recognize the element of freedom in another subject and to evolve the nature of freedom itself. This is the logical result Hegel achieves in considering the living subject as irreducible to objectivity and endorsing autonomy as a logical movement of the conceptual [*Bewegung des Begriffs*] within the subject itself. At this point a coherent question is, why and how does the element of social confrontation with another subject emerge? Hegel's answer in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that "*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another Self-consciousness*"¹¹ because desire establishes a kind of relation with reality that constantly reproduces the object of desire itself. On the contrary, a relation with another subject having the same structure of self-referring negativity and self-certainty assures that satisfaction does not imply endless reproducing of needs.¹² The living self-consciousness develops, hence, a community of similar living beings connected to each other through the belongingness to the same *Genus* or species [*Gattung*], the species of self-consciousness.¹³ Although Hegel's aim is to address social recognition among rational individuals, these passages account for life and genus in a very wide sense including all species. In fact, as he highlights in the *Science of Logic* "life, or organic nature, is the stage

remain simply and solely in communion with myself, and the object, which is for me the *essential* being, is in undivided unity my being-for-myself; and my activity in conceptual thinking is a movement within myself."

¹¹ Hegel *PS* (1997), 110.

¹² Hegel *PS* (1997), 109: "Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact, something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of Desire; ... On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it *is*."

¹³ Hegel *PS* (1997), 110: "But this universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, it the genus as such, or the genus as *self-consciousness*. *Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*."

of nature at which the concept emerges, but as blind, as unaware of itself and unthinking”;¹⁴ this happens because life contains the speculative element that one still observes in unaware and unthinking forms of life. The differentiation of singular individuals within the genus and the preservation of the latter by means of the phenomena of reproduction, which Hegel connects to the overcoming of death as basilar instinct, is a fundamental structure with many theoretical implication regarding life. It has also several points in common with what Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson maintain about practical goodness, which they connect to the naturalistic dimension of the species.¹⁵ Following them, the good for the humans has to be found in the natural characteristic of the species rather than in transcendental and universal principles of action. Goodness is, hence, constituted within the naturalistic feature of a species and, in the case of the human, it has to do with a specific practical intelligence called by Aristotle *phronesis*.¹⁶ Particularly for Thompson, social practices cannot be defined out of the naturalistic analysis of the human species because of the logical continuity between living dimension and goodness. Consequently, human goodness represents the practical intelligence and has as object the human itself and not a transcendental or universal law determining an universal definition of rightness. Similarly, Hegel bases his idea of human practices and social interaction by starting with the primary elements of life and gaining from them the very basilar structure of the self-conscious life.

Sociality differs from the relation to the object of desire because it emerges from the interaction between living beings having a similar structure of self-referring negativity that the object of desire does not have. This interaction establishes a practical ambit in which self-consciousness affirms its own independence by attaining recognition.¹⁷ As a consequence of the fact that the practical ambit in which self-consciousness affirms its independence is social, concrete freedom has to be intended as social and not as merely speculative. Freedom is social because the living being, particularly the self-aware one, is a practical one and its goodness is defined within the practical ambit of interaction with individuals of the same species who are able to evolve similar activities and institutions. Therefore, the life-practice continuity explained by the notion of species indicates the continuity between speculative freedom as sublation of otherness’ independence and social freedom as freedom within

¹⁴ Hegel *SL* (1969), 586.

¹⁵ Foot (2001) and Thompson (2008).

¹⁶ Thompson (2017), 29-77.

¹⁷ This social dimension is also practical because there is no interaction without any practice and in this point Hegel is very sympathetic with Wittgenstein’s idea of form of life (*Lebensform*). See Wittgenstein (2001), § 241: “‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’ – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language their use. that is not agreement in opinions but in form of life”.

a social context. The species is indeed the fundamental natural characteristic of living individuals supplying them with belongingness to the same group of individuals sharing both natural and practical features. It represents, hence, the natural element at the basis of the evolution of social freedom because it stretches the living dimension into the practical one. As M. Thompson rightly maintains, the acting of a particular living being inevitably falls under the “wider context of vital description” (Thompson 2008, 59) of a species or a life-form fixing the practical features of every individual of that species.¹⁸ It is, therefore, impossible to establish freedom for self-conscious beings out of the natural dimension of the species and this is the reason why humans need the relation with individuals having the same structure of self-referring negativity in order to attain freedom in the practical sphere. Freedom cannot be explained by means of the external relations among similar individuals, but only by making recourse to a wider description of the species by which also the external relations can be thought.

4. RECOGNITION, SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND NORMS

Whereas freedom means to be with oneself [*bei sich selbst*], social freedom means to be *with oneself in another* [*bei sich selbst in einem Anderem*],¹⁹ and requires the relational condition of a subject having a social relationship with other similar individuals. As Allen Wood rightly states,²⁰ freedom is for Hegel a relational property of the agency because it is determined by the movement of positing both itself and another and, although the will is only free with itself, freedom is achieved as a result of the peculiar relation the will establishes with the external reality. This is the reason why freedom is achieved as outcome of a relation with the otherness, a sort of self-mastery attained by confronting otherness' independence. The kind of relation the subject establishes with a similar one is based on recognition that does not require the sublation of its independence, but rather the acceptance of its autonomy. This system of recognition is the requisite for developing social practices as counterpart of nature, namely as second nature. In the normative dimension of

¹⁸ Thompson (2008), 57: “...if a language contains any representation of members of the yet narrower class of *organisms* – ‘actual objects’ for which actuality takes the form of *life* – it must also include a battery of what we may call ‘life-descriptions’. Such would be, for example: representations of parts as organs or ‘members’; representations of particular sorts of goings-on as vital operations...”.

¹⁹ Hegel *Mitschriften* (1983), 216: “The free will wills only itself, wills nothing but to be free; it receives only its freedom as intuition. The will determines itself, it puts itself into an object; but this object is the will itself, the will is with itself in its object”

²⁰ Wood (1990), 46-47.

social relation needs can be recognized and institutionalized and the nature is regarded as included in the social dimension of norms. Recognition represents, hence, the condition in which speculative freedom attains a social status and the individual condition is accepted by other individuals. Moreover, the recognitive dynamic develops in both the natural dimension of needs and in the social dimension of interaction like a bridge between material and spiritual conditions of the social life. In fact, in the *Jenaer Systementwürfe*, an unpublished work preceding the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel pretty clearly states that the condition to be recognized [*das Anerkanntsein*] is immediate effectuality [*unmittelbare Wirklichkeit*], because only in this condition one's natural needs receive legitimacy.²¹ Immediacy notoriously is the characteristic of nature and Hegel in this work intends to deduce the social dimension of the right from the natural background of the individual subjectivity. He also highlights the effectual character of the condition to be recognized, whereas the previous condition of solitary desiring is conceived as abstract and untrue. Therefore, he considers recognition as a phenomena articulated on both the level of nature and sociality, because it emerges from the natural dimension of the individual will and generates the social practices and the normativity (Testa 2009). However, normativity is a quite complicated issue in Hegel's philosophy and it is not completely explained through the notion of recognition. In fact, he intends to demonstrate that norms and institutions are the result of an act of self-determination and freedom exerted by those individuals who are also subjected to these norms. In the first pages of his *Philosophy of Right* he, in fact, explains his philosophy of action by means of an articulated analysis of the will at the basis of his ethics. This analysis contains many elements of a metaphysics of action since it deals with the deduction of a-priori aspects of subjectivity revealing the identity of freedom and will and the indeterminate and potentially infinite character of the first singular person as the primary source of action.²² Such infinity of the will faces the limitation represented by otherness' independence and stands for the very epicenter of the free attitude of self-conscious life.²³ This natural characteristic of the will to be free and infinite points out that the peculiar relation of the subjectivity with otherness

²¹ Hegel *JS* (1993), 205: "Das Anerkanntsein ist unmittelbare Wirklichkeit, und in ihrem Elemente die Person, zuerst als Fürsichsein überhaupt; sie is genießend und arbeitend. - Erst hier hat die Begierde das Recht aufzutreten; denn sie ist wirklich; d.h. sie selbst hat allgemeines, geistiges Sein. Arbeit Aller und für All, und Genuß - Genuß Aller; jeder dient dem Anderen, und leistet Hilfe - oder das Individuum hat hier erst als einzelnes Dasein. Vorher ist es nur abstraktes, oder unwahres."

²² Hegel *PR* (1991), § 4

²³ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 5: "The will contains the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the 'I's pre reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through need, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other ways, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure thinking of oneself"

consists in its striving for achieving independence from external conditionings. However, subjectivity concretely requires a determined or actual content such purposes, intentions, procedures and practices, whereas the identification of will and freedom is general and based on a mere methodological connotation. When we switch the attention from the formal requisites of free will to the real and concrete dimension in which willing subjects act, we have to determine the content of this willing and acting. At this point the questions are two: 1) how is generated the content of acting? and 2) what kind of relation is that between the metaphysical requisites of will and its actual content? Following Hegel this content can be either determined by nature or generated by the concept of spirit,²⁴ i.e. it either depends from natural needs or from the development of shared ethical contents. Eventually, the determination of the content of will is possible only insofar it respects individual “self-reference of negativity”²⁵ proper of self-consciousness. In other words, “freedom lies neither in indeterminacy nor in determinacy, but is both at once”²⁶ because it must preserve the natural characteristic of infinity proper of self-consciousness. Will needs, hence, a content but such content must abide by the fundamental natural requisites of self-conscious life, i.e. infinity and self-referring negativity. In fact, in the long tradition of ethics and philosophy of right the content of will has been fundamentally identified in terms of norms, values and laws that are also expected to not harm the natural requisites of freedom and self-conscious life. Following Hegel, we can satisfy this expectation if we develop norms, values and norms that do not alienate will, but rather are the product of the will itself and endogenous outcome of its natural disposition and purpose. Since these requisites are conceived as fundamental for life, we can affirm that Hegel’s conception of normative is elaborated in order to preserve the original constitution of self-conscious life through the speculative freedom of the concept. This should also consent to avoid any transformationist approach to this issue following which social freedom emerges as transformation of speculative freedom. On the contrary, we maintain that social freedom conserves the general concept of freedom by which the subject can “overcome its original alienation from the world by finding itself to be fully realized in an other (the world), which, when comprehended philosophically, ceases the confront the subject as an external, inhospitable other” (Neuhouser 2000, 20). Social freedom is, hence, a sort of practical virtue by which the subject conceives of itself as free in relation to another similar self-conscious life, and norms and recognition does not represent a restraint of the will, but rather a practical attainment. In other words, the practical features of self-conscious life are connected to natural dispositions and entail the actualization of objective social practices by means of norms and social

²⁴ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 6.

²⁵ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 7.

²⁶ Hegel *PR* (1991), § 7Z.

interaction. In the next paragraph I will account for the normative and maintain that social practices represent the necessary accomplishment for the self-conscious life.

5. SELF-CONSCIOUS LIFE AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

We have seen that freedom means to be at once with oneself, self-mastery and self-determination, and this requires absence of any form of dependence from external orders and refusal of otherness' independence. At the same time, social freedom means freedom within a social order, i.e. within a social context whose rules are socially acknowledged. In this paragraph I will claim that self-conscious life develops social interaction and social orders by virtue of a natural disposition towards interpersonal relation and institutionalized practices. Socialization represents, hence, a natural need for a subject naturally predisposed to self-determination although it implies the establishment of relations of dependence among members and on laws and norms. On certain conditions this relation of dependence within social orders does not represent a hindrance to freedom, but rather its very actualization. Why are social orders necessary for the accomplishment of self-conscious life and which are the conditions under which social orders afford freedom?

Social orders result necessary for the self-conscious life by virtue of the naturalistic continuity between the very natural requisites of life and social integration. As we have already seen, for self-consciousness the relation to another subject having the same structure of self-referring negativity is necessary for establishing a dimension in which the natural features and needs are intersubjectively acknowledged and not solipsistically elaborated. The point here is that self-conscious life strives to the transition to universal self-consciousness in order to attain genuine human freedom and this is only possible by rising above the selfish individuality of natural will and desiring. The interpersonal relationships yields a discipline among individuals which is at the basis of overcoming egotism originated from material needs and evolving life into the social practices of a form of life. This is what Hegel actually means in the following passages about the relationship of mastery and bondage:

Since the bondsman works for the master and therefore not in the exclusive interest of his own individuality, his desire acquires the *breadth* of being not only the desire of a *particular* individual but containing within itself the desire of *another*... This subjugation of the bondsman's egotism forms the *beginning* of genuine human freedom... Without having experienced the discipline that breaks self-will, no one becomes free, rational, and capable of command. To become free, to acquire the capacity for self-government, all peoples must therefore undergo the severe discipline of subjection to a master.²⁷

²⁷ Hegel *PM* (2007), § 435Z.

In spite of the asymmetrical and one-sided character of freedom achieved in the mastery-bondage relationship, the passage shows the importance of the interpersonal interaction for overcoming selfish individuality originated by the natural conditions of the self-conscious life. Socialization is the fundamental instrument by which self-consciousness gains the universality represented by shared and socially acknowledged practices, which are expression of the “wider context” of the human species. In fact, universality is inherently related to self-conscious life, which negates the particularity of individual expression of the species in order to preserve the species itself. The species represents, hence, the universality of the individual living beings and realizes itself by means of the practical dimension of the wide context of the forms of life, in which individuals actualize their natural prerequisites. Norms, institutions, rules and social interaction shape the universal context of practices, which overcomes selfish individuality and is based on the living dimension of the species. Self-conscious life is concretely free when it acquires a social and practical shape because it is only within the wide context of its form of life that it becomes universal. This introduces another ambit of the investigation about self-conscious life, which is represented by its historicity and the linked contingent evolution of the forms of life of a genus. We are, hence, in the dimension of the philosophy of history that will be addressed in the next paragraph.

6. THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE SELF-CONSCIOUS SPECIES

The idea of self-consciousness certainly represents the core of the Hegelian thinking because it reflects the structure of both the practical and cognitive dispositions of the self-conscious type (*Gattung*) or species. It is, hence, crucial for understanding both the individual and the social attitudes because the interpersonal relations are also constituted by means of an act of self-understanding, which entails the possibility of the autonomous evolution of the practical dimension by virtue of the disposition to understand reality under an order of concepts and autonomously evolve forms of practices. Since self-understanding implies also the negation of what is independent, negativity represents the power of the self-conscious life to determine the concept of itself by autonomously faces external conditioning and opposition (Ng 2017). As we have already seen, this opposition can arise due both natural factors and other self-conscious individuals, but it can also be identified in the universal world history, namely the entity by which we explain the evolution of the self-conscious species over time and generations. World human history describes how distinct civilisations thrive and evolve different typologies of social practices by opposing their own self-awareness to the endless evolution and transformation of the human history itself. Hegel's idea of world history accounts above all for the development and downfall of human civilizations in the proscenium of the narrative of

the human species. This dynamical transformations are determined by the power of self-consciousness to contrast the inexorable proceeding of the events by means of the speculative force of negativity. This dialectics between human species and the historical evolution of the practices is what defines the species itself as the outcome of historic transformations. Negativity in self-consciousness is potentially infinite and represents the effort to overcome and master the restless evolution of the universal and to avoid the downfall. Therefore, world human history is shaped by the dialectics of self-consciousness facing the universality of time and evolving specific forms of practices and institutions. This represents the fundamental distinguishable feature of the self-conscious species whose activities are determined by means of a collective and historical act of self-understanding persisting among generations and determining the human history as the history of the evolution of ethics, institutions, norms and social practices. The central point for Hegel is that self-consciousness is the feature by which the human species understands itself, builds a community, actively defines norms, ethical values and practices and pro-actively faces the evolution of world history. However, how is it possible that human civilizations decline and die in spite of their universal values and forms of life, such as the ancient Roman and Greek ones? Following Hegel, the end of a civilization is not determined by the universality of its values, but rather by the fact that this universality “can appear ... as what is posited over against it” (Hegel *PWH* 2011, 161). This passage highlights that the universal course of human history determines the downfall of those peoples who do not understand themselves as an ethical organization, i.e. as an organization held together by means of universal values. The act of self-understanding is crucial for the spiritual life of a people because it does not only exist as a complex of material infrastructures and facilities, but rather it inwardly exists as result of a self-aware understanding of its role in the course of the historical events. The self-reflection gives instruments to understand the real nature of history beyond particularity and material needs and gives a people the opportunity to have a role in determining its progress. This because the evolution of both the human history and the human species is determined through the concept we have of them and is subjected to normative and universal principles, which are not understandable by a mere materialistic analysis scrutinizing the externality of the singular events. Those principles are instead the explicit articulation of the inwardness of the idea, or the translation of the interiority of the idea into the exteriority of the existence.²⁸ Hegel applies an important principle of his logic of life to the philosophy of history, that the abstract and internal idea requires the externality of existence in order to gain expression and, simultaneously, the existence of any historical occurrence can only be understood as the expression of an ideal frame of concepts and principles. In other words, there cannot properly be human history without a self-conscious subject able to

²⁸ Hegel *PWH* (2011), 172.

think it. In fact, the philosophical definition of world history must be comprehensive of its “universal purposes that transcend the sphere in which ordinary and particular inclinations can be satisfied ... purposes that have the meaning in the world history, purposes that are carried out with energy, by an abstract willing that is often directed against the happiness of individual themselves and of other individuals.”²⁹

Hegel's interest in the philosophy of history was probably waked by the question about the decline and end of human civilizations and by the course of history. In the Hegelian formal analysis of history, the reason why civilizations decay is determined by the fact that although their ethical sphere is universal it is also determined and can be overcome by a higher universal order of values and practices overwhelming it.³⁰ In fact, the ethical dimension of a civilization represents a determined expression of the self-conscious life and, like every determination, is the negation of something other. The succession of historical civilizations is the result of the fact that a single civilization is not able to satisfy all the possibilities of human social and institutionalized practices. The advantage given by the philosophy of history is that of reflecting about the real nature of historical contingency and to counterpose to it the freedom act of determining the concept of human-species and its evolution. As Karen Ng (2017) rightly maintains, human history represents the history of the evolution of our species, which determines as self-conscious and self-reflecting form of life the immanent standards governing meaningful activity and defining ethical values and social practices. Whilst all biological species live and act accordingly with natural given standards determined by their biological constitution, self-conscious beings ask themselves about what is right and ethically valid. They actively determine the principles of good practice because they give sense to what is universally right by an inferential act of reflection and argumentation excluding the influence of external factors (Pinkard 2017, 31 and 146). It is an act that takes place inwardly and excludes the influence of external and material factors and for this reason is an act of actualized freedom. Human history can be, hence, defined by making recourse to a formal analysis of the self-conscious life and its disposition to define itself by the speculative act of self-referring negativity and the actualization of its own universality. Such actualization becomes freedom when a civilization is able to understand the universal shape of the human species and to acknowledge the historical

²⁹ Hegel *PWH* (2011), 172. In the same page, Hegel defines world history as a “formal activity” or “formal unity” that can be correctly understood by a logical act of abstraction which is proper of self-reflection.

³⁰ Hegel *PWH* (2011), 174: “A universality that is higher than the preceding universal, higher than what is now specified in contrast to it as particular, can be referred to as the next type. It was already inwardly present in the preceding universal but had not yet come into currency, so that its actual existence was precarious and inwardly broken. It is precisely the great historical figures, the world~historical individuals, who grasp such a universal and turn into their purposes.”

evolution by a conceptual or speculative act of self-understanding. Otherwise, grasping itself in the form of particularity instead of universality produces self-seeking and refusal of the historical course, contributing to the spiritual death of a civilization.³¹ In fact, understanding the universal concept of world human history requires an act of self-reflection that goes beyond the particularity and singularity proper of self-promoting. Grasping itself in the form of singularity, even if this singularity expresses universal values, produces the downfall of a civilization because it keeps it far from the evolution of the human species. What Hegel means by maintaining that universality “can appear ... as what is posited over against” a nation, a state or a civilization is that nations ought to be aware about the nature and evolution of history in order that they are able to sustain their own downfall by fostering an ethical sense of their own historic destiny and tasks. Hegel’s philosophy of history aims at identifying the requirements needed by a civilization for mastering the contingency of human history and the steady succession of new forms of social practices.

Such conception of world history is strictly connected to the Hegelian conception of self-consciousness and spirit because it conceives of the historical evolution as outcome of the natural features of the human species (Pinkard 2017, 11). It requires actualizing the concept of self-consciousness in life and in the present time under different demands and needs and pursuing freedom and independence from external mastery. The understanding of one’s place in history is ruled by the logical requisites established by being a self-conscious subject that does not merely pursue desires, but rather aims at taking place under a specific concept of itself. Since spirit is the way in which our species conceive of itself as an unitary and collective subject, the history of this species has to be understood in terms of the history of a collective subject placing itself under specific concepts and ideals such as justice, freedom, happiness, right and many others. These pursuits do not aim at the satisfaction of organic needs that are determined by given biological conditions, but rather at the satisfaction of a specific concept of itself that the self-conscious species establishes on the basis of an ideal form of life. This the reason why history can be conceived as a logical evolution of the idea that spirit has of itself and of the human species.

Moreover, among nations there are those that take active part in shaping history and in determining the concepts under which the human species should be placed and thought. The way how Hegel treats non-European civilization is certainly affected by an archaic prejudice about the supremacy of the European culture due to an alleged capacity to evolve advanced institutions and knowledge. At the time of Hegel Europe was the core of modernity and progress, in which men and women

³¹ Hegel *PWH* (2011), 163: “This subjective inwardness, grasping itself in the form of singularity, is what produces vanity, self-seeking, etc. - qualities that are contrary to faith, to immediacy. Thus self-interests and passions are unleashed as destructive qualities, and the destruction of a people runs rampant. This is not natural death but the death of an ethical life, a death that appears in ethical life as the tearing apart of the members.”

felt subjected to an universal ideal of reason immune to superstitions and religion and acted consequently by developing a free and wealthy society. In contrast, other non-European civilizations were seen as subjected to false idols and beliefs and their underdevelopment was considered as outcome of a non freed humanity. Certainly, Hegel disregarded in his world history many significative achievement of non-European cultures that have also an impact in the western civilization. However, what is compelling for us is the idea that the Hegelian formal analysis of history implies a relative hierarchy between the different expressions that it has. He observes that there are civilizations that during a precise arc of time determine the human history by determining their own values, ethical life, practices and institutions. This is the case of ancient Rome that became the center of the world because it excelled in many aspect of social life from engineering to justice, from political institution to religious rituals. Hegel is surely right when he maintains that the evolution of the concept of species happens in the history through those civilizations able to introduce changes and improvement in the social practices. In his analysis of world human history he actually aims to account for its evolution as something that can be managed and controlled through an act of self-reflection because of its spiritual nature. The material conditions are in fact shaped and determined by the self-conscious' disposition to negate external powers and conditioning, and in this way history reveals to be the rational course of events at the basis of the evolution of humanity. However, this evolution does not represent a chronology, but rather the spiritual evolution of the self-conscious life by its disposition to self-determination and emancipation from external conditioning. The history of human civilization is, hence, subjected to the dynamical development of the practices and ethical values and is strongly connected to the way how humanity as a species conceive of itself and its own form of life.

7. CONCLUSION

In this contribution I have addressed the Hegelian notion of species (*Gattung*) and how he relates it to his theory on self-conscious life and social practices. I pointed out that the self-conscious species, namely the human, cannot be understood without making recourse to its disposition to undertake a self-referred interaction with the independent and external reality by fostering self-determination, eagerness towards independence from external conditioning, freedom, social practices and human history. The notion of human species requires the understanding of the dialectics that the self-conscious life undertakes with reality in order to establish a system of concepts under which social practices and their historical evolution can be thought. I have also focused on the continuity between self-conscious life, speculative freedom, social freedom and freedom in history that Hegel explains by

highlighting the very natural attitude of self-reflective negativity proper of self-consciousness. By understanding freedom through a formal analysis of the nature of self-consciousness Hegel is able to develop a very sharp investigation into sociality and history and to explain them in a coherent and unitary way by inferentially unfolding or making explicit the idea that is implicit in their external structure and chronology of events.

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