THE FREEDOM OF LIFE:
AN INTRODUCTION
Thomas Khurana

For post-Kantian philosophy, “life” is a transitional concept that relates the realm of nature to the realm of freedom. From this vantage point, what is living seems to have the double character of being both already and not yet free: Compared with the external necessity of dead nature, living beings already seem to exhibit a basic type of spontaneity and normativity that on the other hand still has to be superseded on the path to the freedom and normativity of spirit. The origin of this constellation is to be found in Kant’s discussion of natural purposes in the third Critique; its most articulated shape, however, is developed in Hegel’s conception of life. To introduce the questions that this volume discusses, I will briefly characterize the way in which Kant opens up this conception of the living (I) and outline the way in which Hegel develops this approach (II, III). I will close with a brief outlook on the contributions collected in this volume (IV).

I.

After two critiques that have developed accounts of understanding and of reason, that is, of our theoretical and practical capacities for cognition, and of the correlative concepts of nature and freedom, Kant goes on to write a third Critique, devoted to the faculty of judgment, understood as an “intermediary” between reason and understanding. The way the first two critiques have developed understanding and reason, there seems to be a deep rift between the two realms that each of
them governs and between the correlative concepts of nature and the concept of freedom. The faculty of judgment is characterized by Kant as being productive of a concept—the concept of the “purposiveness of nature” (KU 5:196)—that is able to mediate between these concepts of nature and freedom. Generally speaking, this concept mediates between nature and freedom by making it possible to conceive of nature in such a way that it can be thought how freedom might realize itself in nature. It helps us see how nature can be understood by us to expose a form of order that goes beyond the order of causal necessities. It is in grasping what Kant calls “organized beings” or “natural purposes,” which are exemplified in living beings, that we so conceive of nature. Living beings seem striking to us because their structure would appear as contingent to the highest degree if we were only to judge them according to the “mechanism of nature.” The inherent order and necessity that they exhibit goes beyond what we are able to explain by means of laws of mechanical causality alone. Kant argues that we can only get to know these entities (KU 5:383; 370; 389f.; 400) and begin accounting for the “surplus of form” they exhibit if we consider them under the concept of purposiveness: if we treat them as if there were an underlying concept which is the cause of the reality of this being. We make use of an analogy with our own intentional purposiveness to conceive of the inherent necessity of living beings.

This analogous conception is, however, only partly adequate as we understand natural purposes not only as organized, but, more precisely, as self-organizing beings. We cannot point to a representation of the concept of the being external to and preceding this being, as we can in the case of an artifact, which is produced according to a design in the mind of its creator. We do not know the living being to be organized from without; it rather appears to us as organizing itself in the sense that its parts “combine themselves into a whole by being reciprocally the cause and effect of their form” (KU 5:373; translation modified). If there is a concept that is the cause of the reality of this being, it is not present as an external representation of this concept, but rather immanently present in the way in which the parts of the organized being condition and constitute one another.

This leads us to a conception of the living being in which it is the source of its own order: it is cause and effect of itself and in this sense subject to a form of organization that it itself brings forth. On Kant’s description the living being thereby constitutes itself in such a way that it is already susceptible to a normative description. Due to its inner purposiveness the living being suggests “that there is something that it ought to be” (EE 20:240). In bringing forth their own order, living beings not only exhibit a de facto order, but manifest a sort of oughtness: it seems to us that the living beings’ parts and operations do not just happen to be instrumental, but “ought to have been suitable” for something (EE 20:240). The living being thereby seems to be subject to evaluations qualifying to what degree its moments actually are suitable in this way and grasping to what extent an actual creature adequately lives up to itself, that is to say: to its species.

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1 The concept of purposiveness thus answers to the task that Kant describes in the introduction of the Critique of Judgment: “Now although there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, so that from the former to the latter (thus by means of the theoretical use of reason) no transition is possible, just as if there were so many different worlds, the first of which can have no influence on the second; yet the latter should have an influence on the former, namely the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world; and nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom.” (KU 5:175f.)


or, in a more abstract expression: to the concept that is the cause of its existence. In this manner, the living creature manifests a norm to which it is specifically subject.

Thus, we might say that organized living beings constitute themselves and are in doing so, in a certain sense, laws unto themselves. Understood in these terms, living beings seem to exemplify a basic form of autonomy or normative self-determination and hence seem akin to the type of freedom that Kant has famously made the centerpiece of his practical philosophy. Of course, this does not mean that we can directly ascribe practical freedom to living beings. But, insofar as the order of the living gives us an idea of a natural form of self-determination and normativity, it seems possible that it might thereby at least allow for the mediation between concepts of nature and the concept of freedom. Schelling has made this possible role of the concept of the living explicit by defining life as “autonomy in appearance”: “the schema of freedom insofar as it reveals itself in nature.” The living being appears as a natural presentation of freedom, thereby suggesting that freedom might be realized in nature and hence answers to a major desideratum in Kant’s account: “If I am to rule in the world of appearance and to govern nature according to moral laws, the causality of freedom has to reveal itself through physical causality.” On Schelling’s account the causality of life is exactly such a physical causality revelatory of freedom.

There are, however, severe limitations with regard to the extent to which living beings can actually be considered as autonomous in Kant’s own account: Firstly, the self-determination and normativity they manifest still falls short of the autonomy of practical reason that is founded in transcendental freedom and that is understood by Kant to abstract from any material determination whatsoever. Secondly, the self-determination and normativity that we attribute to living beings is of such a sort that we cannot attribute it to them determinately, but only in an indirect and problematic manner. On Kant’s account, we are not equipped to directly grasp the form of self-organization peculiar to living beings: as we only have a discursive intellect we are forced to model living beings according to the inadequate analogy of practical purposiveness. Our teleological judgments of natural processes hence fail to fully grasp their peculiar form of self-organization and attribute purposiveness to them only per analogiam and indirectly. Kant adumbrates the form of an intuitive understanding for which the mechanism and purposiveness of nature would converge and that would seem to be able to positively know the organization of the living, yet at the same time he denies that we are capable of possessing or attaining such an intuitive understanding.

As is well known, this was a source of deep frustration for Kant’s successors who argued that Kant here denied us a type of knowledge the shape of which he had already outlined. Hegel expresses this sense of frustration when he points out that although Kant had rightly conceived of nature as subject-object in his understanding of living beings, he has unfortunately qualified this insight as a merely subjective conception. Kant has formed the idea of an intuitive intellect that would seem to be able to objectively conceive of nature as subject-object, but had failed to raise this idea to reality (D 2:103f./163). Although Kant concedes that this idea is “absolutely necessary,” it remains “problematic” for us (GW 2:325/89). The attempt to overcome this view of natural teleology and of the forms of

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understanding adequate to it as merely problematic has been
a chief motivation for German Idealism.7

II.

Kant has marked the problem of overcoming the mere opposition
between our concepts of nature and the concept of freedom
and has indicated that the natural purposiveness exemplified in
living beings can play a decisive role in this task. Their mediation,
however, seems to remain incomplete and problematic: As
the actual concept of practical freedom goes beyond the basic
autonomy presented by living beings, there seems to remain a
gap; and as even the basic autonomy attributed to living beings
is ascribed to them only problematically, the true foundations
for this mediation seem inaccessible. Kant points to the pre-
curious status of this mediation by suggesting that the “unifying
point” can only reside in “the supersensible” (KU 5:341) and
hence in something we cannot have positive knowledge of.8

Now, Hegel accepts the task of thinking the passage from
nature to freedom and he agrees with Kant that our conception
of the living is central to understanding this very passage “from
necessity to freedom” (EPG §381Z). However, he criticizes Kant
(1) for the way in which he withholds from us any adequate
form of knowledge of the living and (2) for the way in which he
characterizes the remaining gap between living self-organiza-
tion and practical autonomy. (1) Concerning the knowability of
the living, Hegel rearticulates the concept of inner purposive-
ness and the living in such a way that it loses its merely prob-
lematic character: “Natural” or “inner” purposiveness is not an
incomprehensible structure, dependent on an analogical use
of a notion of intentional purposiveness. On the contrary,
“inner purposiveness” designates the more fundamental con-
cept and the most complete form of purposiveness, required in
order to make sense of relations of finite purposiveness. Thus,
we do not understand natural purposiveness by modeling it
according to forms of intentional purposiveness, but on the
contrary understand intentional purposiveness against the
background of inner purposiveness. Intentional purposiveness
appears as a finite form of purposiveness in so far as the end in
this case remains external to the objects or sites in which it real-
izes itself, so that these objects can always be regarded as mere
means to the realization of the end, and not themselves as its
realization. Inner purposiveness, however, defines an end
which “does not pass over into something else, but preserves
itself, in its operation” (EL §204A; translation modified; cf. also
WL 6:454/747ff.). As aiming for an end means aiming for a con-
crete universal, for the objective realization of a concept, the
concept of an end comes to itself only in the concept of inner
purposiveness.

(2) But Hegel not only takes issue with Kant’s qualification
of natural purposiveness as a merely problematic concept. He
also questions the way in which Kant conceives of the gap
between living self-constitution and practical self-determina-

7 See Eckart Förster, The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction,
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2012, pp. 230ff. Förster describes the
different ways in which Fichte, Schelling, Goethe and Hegel have launched attempts
to develop further Kant’s ideas of intellectual intuition and intuitive intellect and have
tried to “raise them to reality.” For an overview of the course of the reconstruction see
Ibid., pp. 373ff.
8 See KU 5:422: “Our reason does not comprehend the possibility of a unification of
two entirely different kinds of causality, that of nature in its universal lawfulness and
that of an idea that limits the latter to a particular form for which nature does not
contain any ground at all; it lies in the supersensible substrate of nature, about which
we can determine nothing affirmative except that it is the being in itself of which we
know merely the appearance.” Cf. KU 5:428: “We have also seen that even the unifi-
ability of the two ways of representing the possibility of nature may well lie in the
supersensible principle of nature (outside of as well as inside us), since the representa-
tion of it according to final causes is only a subjective condition of the use of our
reason.”
9 For more on this point see James Kreines’ essay in this volume, pp. 111ff.
tion and the way in which he links freedom to an abstraction from or domination of living nature. If it is true that the free is, as Hegel argues in the *Science of Logic*, nothing other than “the concept in its existence” (WL 6:437/734) and if an end is precisely “the concept itself in its existence,” (WL 6:438/735) it seems that natural purposiveness manifests at least a basic form of freedom and that practical freedom can not be understood as merely abstracting from or suppressing the order of living purposiveness. Accordingly, Hegel indeed criticizes Kant for conceiving of autonomy one-sidedly as a domination of or abstraction from living nature, rather than as a “modification of life.” That does not mean that Hegel describes the structure of living self-organization and spiritual self-determination as simply identical or continuous and that he ascribes freedom in the full sense already to natural life. It just means that the turn that is needed to develop the self-determination of spirit cannot be understood in terms of abstraction or suppression, but rather in terms of a reflective grasp and transformation of the form of the living and the peculiar “freedom” it might already possess or display. For Hegel, the structure of free spirit is in important ways won in and from life, even if it can only be attained by superseding natural life.

III.

Against this background, it does not come as a surprise that the concept of life plays an important role throughout Hegel’s works. Historically, it is striking that although the concept of life seems to lose its prominence in the course of Hegel’s development from the earliest writings to the *Phenomenology* and to make room for the concept of spirit as the foundational concept of his system, Hegel continues to employ the concept of life as a crucial transitory concept and, what is more, speaks of the “life of spirit” and hence characterizes spirit itself as alive in a peculiar sense. Systematically speaking, it is noteworthy that the notion of life plays a central role in all three parts of Hegel’s mature system: in his logic, where he describes life as the immediate idea and hence as the first form of true unity of concept and reality, subject and object (WL 6:464ff./756ff.); in his philosophy of nature, where he describes life as the highest point of nature (EN §§248, 350Z, 376Z), a point at which it becomes “practical” (D 2:109/168); and in his philosophy of spirit, which characterizes spirit as both opposed to and at one with life (WL 6:471/762; PhG 3:139ff./106ff., 199ff./157ff.; EPG §§379Z, 381Z).


Against this background the contributions in this volume are not confined to a certain stage in Hegel’s development or a certain part of his system. They rather take recourse to the whole span of Hegel’s development and address all forms in which the conception of life is developed—as logical life, natural life and spiritual life. In revisiting these conceptions of life, the specific question they unfold is how to relate logical, natural and spiritual life to self-determination and freedom. For this question the passage from nature to freedom, from natural life to the life of spirit is of special importance. But in order to understand this passage, it is of course equally important to understand the logics of life and the structure of natural life in its own right.

Throughout the different phases of Hegel’s works and across the different stages of its articulation, Hegel approaches life as a specific type of unity. In distinction from an entity that is opposed to or separated from its concept and in opposition to an object unrelated to itself, life is the name of a unity of concept and reality (WL 6:464ff./756ff.) and, more specifically, of subject and object (WL 6:466ff./758ff.)—or, to put it in terms more common to the field of the living: a unity of soul and body. If life is that which vanishes when soul and body, concept and reality separate of themselves (WL 6:464/756), it seems that the living consists in the attaining and sustaining of such a unity and in realizing a “concept in its existence.” This living unity of concept and reality, subject and object includes a specific “organic unity” of the particular and the general (GW 2:326/90).\(^{16}\)

16 This unity of the particular and the general is manifest in the reciprocal determination of particular part and overarching whole, in the relation of living being and life process, individual and genus. For more on the concept of “organic unity” see Sally Sedgwick’s contribution in this volume, pp. 212ff.; see also her Hegel’s Critique of Logic and System.

The peculiar character of this living unity in all its different aspects is marked by two crucial features: Firstly, the fact that it is not arrived at by the mere subjection of one side to the other or the mere elimination of the respective difference (of concept and reality, subject and object, general and particular). It is rather a unity that contains and depends on the difference of the two sides unified in it. To use a phrase from the System-fragment 1800, life is not just unity, but rather the “union of union and nonunion” (SF 1:422/312).\(^{17}\) Secondly, this type of negative unity has a processual and self-constitutive character: it is not simply given as a unity or indifference of the respective sides; it rather only exists as an activity or process whereby the sides are differentiated and unified, unified in their difference and differentiated in their unity.

Hegel specifies three processes that articulate this living unity: the process of shape, the process of assimilation and the process of genus.\(^{18}\) These processes are outlined in the Science of Logic and are described in a more detailed and concrete way with regard to natural life in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature. While the process of shape concerns the living individual and the way in which its parts reciprocally condition and produce one another, the process of assimilation describes the relation of the living being to its (inorganic) other and the way the living being assimilates it. The process of genus finally concerns the way in which the living being relates to itself in its other: the way in which a living being relates to other living beings and reproduces its genus. These three processes can generally be under-

17 Cf. also the Phenomenology where Hegel characterizes life as an “absolutely negative or infinite unity” (PhG 3:40/107).

18 For more on these processes see the contributions in this volume by Haase, pp. 104ff., Khurana, pp. 174ff., and Kreines, pp. 136ff.
stood as processes of self-constitution whereby the living being constitutes, preserves and reproduces itself and ‘unifies’ its concept and reality, subject and object, particular and general.

If freedom can be understood as a way of “being at one with oneself in the other,” as Hegel repeatedly proposes, it suggests itself to consider the living being as a possible candidate for a basic model of freedom. Insofar as the living animal constitutes, sustains and reproduces its unity by way of assimilating its environment and by reproducing itself (its species) in relating to an other, it seems suggestive to understand it as a being that is at one with itself in the other. However, although Hegel points out that in animal life nature in fact reaches the level of subjectivity, he does not go so far as to qualify natural life as free in the full sense. It seems crucial to Hegel that what is living manifests a higher form of necessity than the lifeless (EPG §381Z), but he explicitly insists that the “animal soul is still not free.” If we attend more closely to the processes of organic self-relation, it becomes apparent that the way in which what is living is at one with itself in the other remains insufficient compared to the way the human will manages to be at one with itself in its other. In interesting ways, life does not have the fundamental structure of freedom for itself, but only for us—“this other life,” as Hegel says in the Phenomenology, that knows itself as life.

Hegel, thus, neither remains content with merely opposing life and spirit, nor does he aim to simply reduce human freedom to the self-constitution of natural life. Becoming a spiritual being for which life exposes a first form of the structure of freedom does not just mean continuously unfolding a potential that living beings already possess, it requires a turn or step that implies an essential transformation. In this transformation, detachment or abstraction from the determinations of life regain their place. But neither that which performs this transformation nor that which it results in can be described as simply foreign or indifferent to life. Spirit still has (or rather: leads) a “life,” even if the sense in which it does is deeply different from the way a plant or an animal has (or rather: is) a life.

IV.

The contributions in this volume thus do not aim to reduce the freedom of spirit to living self-organization or to identify life and spirit, they rather aim to investigate Hegel’s multifaceted concept of life in its logical, natural and spiritual articulation and determine its complex relation to the problem of free self-determination.

19 For the idea “that being at one with oneself is an ideal with its roots in animal life” and that “human subjectivity emerges as a kind of reflexive complication of this kind of organic, animal self-relation,” see Terry Pinkard, Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, p. 58, 30; see also Sebastian Rödl, “Das Erbe der Philosophen,” Philosophische Rundschau 54 (2007), pp. 123–147, with the assessment that for Hegel the living is already “characterized by subjectivity and freedom” in a basic sense (p. 137); see also Derrida’s diagnosis that for Hegel the “liberation of freedom” happens for the first time in becoming alive: Jacques Derrida, Glas, trans. J. P. Leavey, Jr. and R. Rand, Lincoln and London: University Press 1986, p. 25.


21 It requires “development” not in the sense of a mere unfolding or a continuous growth, but rather in the sense of a certain “labor against itself” (see VPGE 184/109; for some further thoughts on the opposition of natural growth and spiritual development see Derrida, Glas, pp. 34ff.).

The first two contributions by Karen Ng and Matthias Haase both start from the logical concept of life and touch on the notorious question in what sense the concept of “life” might have a rightful place in the science of logic as Hegel has famously argued. Both address this question indirectly by first clarifying the relation of life and self-consciousness, life and spirit. Karen Ng starts out from Hegel’s Jena writings in order to show that the structure of speculative unity that underlies Hegel’s conception of knowledge and truth is first defined as a relation of life and self-consciousness: as the unity of object and subject (or, more precisely: as the unity of the objective and the subjective subject-object). What is living is understood by Hegel as an objective subject-object and hence as a figure that Hegel accuses Kant and Fichte of failing to account for. Ng then proceeds to the Phenomenology of Spirit to investigate further the way in which life serves as the first object of self-consciousness. She develops the way in which self-conscious spirit depends on this first object and manifests itself as both different from and at one with the living. On her account, it is precisely this double character of self-consciousness that constitutes its very negativity. In closing Ng returns to the Logic and develops the way in which thought itself can be said to be dependent on the form of life.

Matthias Haase retraces why, in order to articulate the structure of mind, Hegel feels driven to start from the concept of life. According to Haase’s reconstruction, to start with the concept of life seems necessary to avoid a rationalist or empiricist theory of the mind. Where the first is unable to account for the actuality of mind, the latter is unable to account for its unity. Haase argues that by Hegel’s lights we have to depart from the concept of life in order to think both the actuality and unity, i.e.: the living unity of mind. The relation of life and mind is usually thought in terms of an additive model: subjective spirit is taken to be based on life, but defined by adding another layer to the more basic vital capacities (e.g. an additional ability of stepping back from our natural impulses and strivings). Haase criticizes this additive model and takes Hegel to outline a transformative model in which the step from animal to self-conscious life completely transforms the sense in which it is alive and also reorganizes the capacities self-conscious life seems to share with plant and animal life. This transformative model brings us back to the problem of logic as it requires a conception of concepts that allows for one and the same concept—the concept of life—to transform its sense through the different stages of its realization.

As the first two contributions give us an idea about the fundamental role of the notion of life in Hegel’s account of self-consciousness, spirit, and thought as such, the following contributions focus on the way in which the concept of life is thereby related to the problem of freedom and self-determination. The contributions by James Kreines and myself start out from certain parallels between figures of life and freedom. While Kreines argues that it is methodologically helpful to attend to formal features of the debate on free will in order to understand the debate on natural teleology and life in Kant and Hegel, my own contribution suggests that it might be useful to attend to the self-constitutive structure of the living in order to

23 For another formulation and different understanding of the thesis that “the first object of self-consciousness is life” see Pippin, Hegel on Self-Consciousness, pp. 32ff.; for the general thesis that on Hegel’s account life—and not dead matter—is the paradigmatic object of cognition see Dina Emundts, Erkennen und Erfahren: Hegels Theorie der Wirklichkeit, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2012, pp. 323ff.; on the related notion that what is to be grasped by thought and thereby to be transformed into something known is the “factum of physical or spiritual [...] vitality” see Jean-Luc Nancy, The Restlessness of the Negative, trans. J. Smith and S. Miller, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002, p. 33.

make progress in understanding the structure of freedom as autonomy.

By analyzing debates on free will James Kreines gains a two-
dimensional matrix of positions. In contradistinction to the
common tendency to perceive these debates only according to
one dimension differentiating between inflationary and defla-
tionary accounts concerning the nature of free will, Kreines
argues that it is important to acknowledge a second, orthogonal
dimension: optimism or pessimism concerning the question
whether we have free will. Where an inflationary optimist in fact
ascribes to us the challenging type of freedom he has specified,
the inflationary pessimist who shares this challenging account
of the nature of freedom holds that we do not have such free-
dom (or: can never know we do). In this sense, Kant is charac-
terized by Kreines as an inflationary pessimist about freedom.
Kreines transposes this formal structure to Kant’s conception
of natural teleology, in order to show that Kant is an infla-
tionary pessimist in this regard, too. Kant argues for a strong con-
cept of natural purpose, and at the same time doubts that we
can ever positively know something to be a natural purpose.
The main reason is this: “anything knowable by us can be a tele-
ological system only if it is the product of a prior representa-
tion,” and it distinguishes natural purposes from artifacts that
they do not depend on such a prior representation of the whole.
This reconstruction allows Kreines to clarify Hegel’s critical
response to Kant’s conception of natural teleology. Hegel gives
up on Kant’s pessimism, but not by formulating a totally defla-
tionary account, but rather by modifying his inflationary
account. Describing the way in which living beings reproduce
themselves, Hegel tries to show how we can objectively know
of a concept that is the cause of that which it conceives without
their having to be a representation of the concept external to
and prior to the process of its realization.

My own contribution starts from the diagnosis of a wide-
spread problem in the conception of freedom as autonomy—
the threat of a paradox of autonomy—and considers the ten-
dency to turn to laws of the living as a possible remedy, which
gives us the right basic idea of an autonomous law. In order to
investigate the merits of this strategy I turn to Kant and sketch
a structural analogy between living self-organization and prac-
tical self-determination that in fact seems helpful to grasp the
structure of autonomy. In a second step I consider Kant’s rea-
sions for not drawing on this analogy and turn to Hegel who has
deepened the analogy in terms of a systematic interrelation of
life and spirit. In order to outline the way in which life and spirit
are conceived of as both continuous and discontinuous by
Hegel, I investigate his concept of habit as “second nature.”

The last pair of contributions—those of Catherine Malabou
and Sally Sedgwick—both discuss the becoming of freedom
and hence concern the passage from natural life to spirit. Mala-
bour addresses this question by revisiting three interpretations
of the master-slave dialectic in the Phenomenology of Spirit and
by developing a critical perspective on them. This dialectic con-
cerns a process of liberation that essentially depends on the
way in which self-consciousness detaches itself from or attaches
to bodily life. The three readings Malabou considers—Kojève’s
interpretation, Bataille’s reading as presented by Derrida, and
Foucault’s understanding as reconstructed by Butler—all
reveal that the operations of attachment and detachment are
intertwined or complicit with each other. The attachment to
bodily life that characterizes the slave is at the same time
related to a subtle form of detachment that the slave is subject
to in the process of labor and formation. The detachment on
the other hand that is characteristic of the master and, in a dif-
f erent way, of his double, Bataille’s sovereign, can be character-

25 See Kreines, in this volume, p. 123.
ized as implying an attachment to detachment. In this dialectic of attachment and detachment neither a complete separation from bodily life nor a reduction to it seems sustainable. What Malabou finds problematic in all these readings is their diagnosis that within Hegel’s system it remains impossible to think a form of absolute detachment. Malabou closes by pointing to a form of absolute detachment that is not to be found in the context of the master-slave dialectic, but emerges later in the characterization of the absolute and its “giving up.” This form of absolute detachment is connected to a freedom beyond self-subjugation and related to a fundamental feature of the spiritual that Malabou characterizes as its plasticity.

Finally, Sally Sedgwick examines the process of “Becoming Ethical” as described in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Even though Hegel on the one hand explicitly denies non-human animals the capacity of becoming ethical and suggests the necessity of a certain abstraction from the determinations of our living nature on our path to freedom, the ethical will can on the other hand only be explicated by recourse to the idea of unity of the particular and the general that Hegel had introduced as “organic.” By going through the tree parts of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Sedgwick traces how our will becomes ethical by coming to be exercised in such a way that it wills the universal in the right way. At the level of abstract right, the particular will already wills on the basis of a feature it shares with other particular wills, but takes no interest in the universal aspect of its willing. It understands the idea of right that it takes recourse to as implying an indifference to particularity and hence as being abstract. At the level of morality, the external relation of particular will and abstract right is superseded, but only by inter-

“Plasticity” designates the capacity of both giving and receiving form and further implies a radical negative capacity to annihilate form. For more on the role of this concept in Hegel see Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, trans. L. During, London and New York: Routledge 2005.

The series of these contributions highlights a remarkable double feature in Hegel’s thinking of the passage from life to spirit: On the one hand, the passage from natural life to free self-consciousness, from natural to ethical will, from first to second nature seem to imply a detachment from and a transformation of natural life. However, the capacities actualized in this transformation and the structure we arrive at are at the same time characterized as indebted to the form of life. It is only in and from life that free spirit emerges, and it is only by in turn gaining its very own form of spiritual life that it can maintain itself. Thus, the passage from life to spirit cannot be properly understood as a mere subjection or overcoming of life. For spirit to exceed life means at the same time to return to a form of life in a different guise. If this characterizes the genesis of spirit in general, it becomes clear why Hegel thinks that in spirit life appears both “as opposed to it” and “as posited as at one with it, this unity being reborn as the pure off-spring of spirit” (WL 6:471/762). Understanding this double relation defines the vanishing point of this volume in its attempt to overcome the alternative of either opposing life and spirit or of reducing one to the other. The task that Hegel defines for us is to articulate the way in which spirit might be both indebted to and excessive of, both opposed to and at one with natural life. How exactly to characterize the form of life and how precisely
to describe the opposition and the unity of natural life and spirit, is, of course, a contested matter between the contributors. As the different contributions emphasize both the unitary and the negative character of life, they raise the question how exactly to relate unity and negativity, completion and diremption in the concept of life. And as the contributions point to different figures for describing the passage from life to spirit—union of union and nonunion, a step up the ladder, a reflective turn, a relative or absolute detachment, a completion of organic unity—they pose the question how best to characterize the relation of life and spirit: is spirit best grasped as the “highest form of life,” as “an overcoming of natural life,” as “both alive and more than alive”? The purpose of this volume was not to defend a unanimous answer to these questions, but to establish their relevance and to re-open the debate upon them.27

27 This collection has arisen from a workshop on “Life and Autonomy in Hegel,” hosted at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main in December 2010. I would like to thank the Exzellenzcluster “The Formation of Normative Orders” for making this workshop possible and its participants for their comments and critique. I should also like to thank Erick Jiménez for his excellent editorial assistance in completing this collection.
THOMAS KHURANA (ED.)

THE FREEDOM OF LIFE
HEGELIAN PERSPECTIVES

Freiheit und Gesetz III

With contributions by Matthias Haase, Thomas Khurana, James Kreines, Catherine Malabou, Karen Ng, Sally Sedgwick

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The book series “Freiheit und Gesetz” is dedicated to an idea that lies at the foundation of modern practical philosophy: the notion that being free and being obligated by norms (“the law”) do not stand in opposition to one another but instead bear on each other in an essential relation. This is the very idea of autonomy: laws are binding only to the extent that we have given them to ourselves. The series is devoted to the critical examination of this concept. It investigates the complexities and tensions presented by the idea of autonomy, the conditions upon which it is based, and the possible consequences of its political, juridical, and social realization.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Hegel

All references to Hegel’s writings in this volume will use the abbreviations listed below. The abbreviations will be followed first by the page or section number of a German edition (in most cases the Thesie-Werktausgabe edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel) and secondly, if it differs, by the page or section number of an English translation. The authors in this volume have sometimes altered the cited English translations where they regarded it necessary. The referenced texts and editions are the following:


Abbreviations


KrV:  Kritik der reinen Vernunft, in: vol. 3 of Kant's Gesammelte Schriften / Critique of Pure Reason, trans., ed. P. Guyer and A. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998 (cited according to the pagination of the first two editions, A (1781) and B (1787)).