

HEGEL AND BICHAT ON SYMMETRY AND LIFE: BETWEEN PHYSIOLOGY, AESTHETICS AND FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT: Drawing from Bichat's distinction between the asymmetrical organic life and the symmetrical animal life of the living individual, Hegel introduces an element of freedom through dissymmetry. This element points toward a new norm of life which transcend its strictly natural, organic and physiological dimension to emerge as this life of spirit (*Leben des Geistes*) which defines itself through the autonomy of human agency. But the importance of Bichat does not limit itself to the sphere of physiology and the issue of life within Hegel's *Philosophy of nature*. Hegel also draws important conclusions from Bichat's distinction and the issue of symmetry for his aesthetic theory.

KEYWORDS: Xavier Bichat; G.W.F. Hegel; Animal Life; Organic Life; Freedom; Habit

INTRODUCTION

The long-held understanding of Hegel's philosophy of nature as an attempt to deduce nature *a priori* from the logical and dialectical structure of the 'Concept' (*Begriff*) developed in his *Wissenschaft of Logik* is, since the 1970s at least, thankfully less and less common among Hegelian scholars¹. Indeed, careful readers have shown just how much Hegel's philosophy of nature was in tune with the scientific discoveries of his time². This constant dialogue is obvious if we consider the extent

¹ See Rand, Sebastian. 2007. "The Importance and Relevance of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Nature'". *The Review of Metaphysics*, 61(2): 379-400.

² See Petry, Michael John. 1970. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature (3 vol.)*. New York: Humanities Press (from now on Petry 1970); Petry, Michael John. 1986. "Scientific Method: Francoeur, Hegel and Pohl". In R.-P. Horstmann & M. J. Petry (Ed.), *Hegels Philosophie der Natur* (pp.11-29). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta; Petry, Michael

of Hegel's own scientific library³ in which the titles devoted to the life sciences numerous. Of the 235 or so titles of Hegel's personal library devoted to the philosophy or sciences of nature, more than a quarter deals with life sciences in general (64 titles), without taking into account the books devoted to anthropology or animal magnetism (15 titles)⁴.

Nonetheless, although Hegel seems well-aware of the scientific developments of his time and asserts that "philosophy must accord with the experience nature gives rise to" and that "in its *formation* and in its *development*, philosophic science presupposes and is conditioned by empirical physics⁵", he does not wish to simply rehash the results of scientific discoveries, but seeks to push them further by showing the underlying speculative content of certain empirical discoveries. As such, "[t]he material prepared out of experience by physics, is taken by the philosophy of nature at the point to which physics has brought it, and reconstituted" (Hegel, PhN 20; Petry 1970₁, 201) in such a way that, for Hegel, the philosophy of nature is both *driven* by the content of empirical science and seeks to shed new light on these discoveries through a "translation" into the philosophical framework of the Concept (*in den Begriff Übersetzung*) (Hegel, PhN 20; Petry 1970₁, 201). In that measure, if Hegel does not seek presumptuously to substitute his own philosophical conception of nature to the scientific framework of his time, he nevertheless pretends that the dialogue between philosophy and science is fruitful in both ways⁶.

As I shall argue, this is the case in Hegel's dialogue with Bichat's physiological

John (Ed.). 1987. *Hegel und die Naturwissenschaften*. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog; Petry, Michael John. 2001. "Hegelianism and the Natural Sciences: Some Current Developments and Interpretations". *Hegel Studien*, 36, 199–223.

³ Neuser, Wolfgang. 1987. "Die naturphilosophische und naturwissenschaftliche Literatur aus Hegels privater Bibliothek". In M.J. Petry (Ed.), *Hegel und die Naturwissenschaft*, (pp.479-99). Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog.

⁴ Neuser, "Die naturphilosophische und naturwissenschaftliche Literatur aus Hegels privater Bibliothek", p.498-99.

⁵ Hegel, G.W.F. 19862. *Werke in 20 Bänden - 9: Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830. Zweiter Teil. Die Naturphilosophie*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, p.15 (from now on PhN) / Petry 1970₁, 197.

⁶ Chaput, Emmanuel. (2018). "Hegel lecteur de Bichat, ou comment la raison spéculative fait d'une distinction d'entendement un moment conceptuel du vivant ". *Symposium* 22, no.1: 159-186; Chaput, Emmanuel. (2019). "What is Living and What is Dead in the Empirical and Speculative Sciences? The Problem of Demarcation and the Speculative Structure of Life in Hegel's *Naturphilosophie*". *Plí – The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, no.31: 141-163.

distinction between the organic and animal life within the living organism. The distinction will play an important role in Hegel's conception of animal life within nature and its distinction from life as it is organized within the sphere of what Hegel calls the 'subjective spirit' and which relates, roughly speaking, to human agency as individual living organisms. But on the other hand, the distinction will provide, for Hegel, a new perspective on what life is. A perspective which Bichat's physiological standpoint couldn't fully encompass. On this level, Hegel's views seem – somewhat surprisingly – in tune with Georges Canguilhem's more modest approach of the relation between philosophy and life sciences:

It is quite difficult for the philosopher to try his hand at biological philosophy without running the risk of compromising the biologists he uses or cites [...] Yet would it nevertheless be possible, without rendering biology suspect, to ask of it an occasion, if not permission, to rethink or rectify fundamental philosophical concepts, such as that of life?⁷

In this paper, I want to show just how Hegel tried to rethink the concept of life by highlighting on the one hand the difference between the norms of life within nature and the norms of life within the realm of free and self-conscious (human) organisms, and by showing, on the other hand, the relation these norms nevertheless entertain with one another. As we shall see, if, according to Bichat, the living organism is naturally constituted through a binary division between the (asymmetrical) organic life and the (symmetrical) animal life, for Hegel, self-consciousness and human agency introduces in this natural norm of life a subversive element of *dissymmetry* that explains both man's natural *clumsiness* and his/her *freedom* to develop on his/her own terms (Hegel, PhN 458-59). As such, Hegel is implicitly pointing toward the role of neoteny within the development of human agency⁸. Human organisms enjoy a kind of freedom unknown within the well-balanced, well-organized realm of nature because their juvenile character retains an element of plasticity that allows the development of self-determination and self-consciousness. On the contrary, for Hegel, animals that instinctively adopt an adequate behaviour toward their environment remain figures of the immediacy of nature. They may be self-moving, but not yet self-determining.

⁷ Canguilhem, Georges. 2008. *Knowledge of Life*, trans. S. Geroulanos & D. Ginsburg. New York: Fordham University Press, p.59.

⁸ See Lejeune, Guillaume. 2016. *Hegel anthropologue*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, p.51.

Accordingly, it is important to understand freedom as a gradual notion in Hegel. A living organism is not either free or not, but there are several levels of freedom (that are at the same time levels of *un*freedom when compared with more developed forms of life). As self-movers, and through their ability to interact with their environment, animals embody a certain degree of freedom unknown within inorganic nature and among plants. But this freedom is still externally determined by their species-being (*Gattung*), their instinct, etc., which remain manifestations of heteronomy. In that regard, freedom within nature as it is embodied in the animal organism still remains imperfect in comparison to the autonomy of a rational living being able to establish or at least consent freely to the laws of his or her own actions and volitions.

Distinguishing between the norms of natural life and the norms of human life, Hegel does not only present an aspect of life that Bichat failed to clarify, he also allows us to understand the transition from the philosophy of nature to the philosophy of spirit within his own philosophical system according to a naturalistic framework. Indeed, the possibility of self-determination through one's own will remains inseparable from one's attempt to unbalance what remains the natural constitution of the human body. To put it bluntly, the norms of human agency which defines for Hegel the norms of life within the realm of subjective spirit need to sublimate (*aufheben*) the natural constitution of the human organism. If, as any other animal, the human being is structured around Bichat's binary distinction between organic and animal life, its neotenous character grants him/her the possibility to act upon the symmetry of animal life and open a space for freedom and self-determination thus bringing forth what is, for Hegel, a new figure of what life is or can be.

As such, the transition from the realm of nature to the realm of freedom and spirit which is so crucial in Hegel's philosophy can be traced back to an element of physiology, to the distinction between the asymmetry, the symmetry and the dissymmetry that exist within the systems of organs of certain living beings⁹. But the physiological distinction made by Bichat in his *Physiological Researches on Life and Death* (1800) will be significant to Hegel not only for the transition from the

⁹ This is something I have shown in a previous paper, see Chaput, Emmanuel. (2018). "Hegel lecteur de Bichat".

realm of nature to the realm of subjective spirit, but also for his aesthetic theory. As we shall see, when distinguishing between natural beauty and artistic beauty, the issue of symmetry and dissymmetry will again come into play for Hegel and he will again mobilize Bichat's distinction to mark the distinction between the realm of nature and spirit, this time in regard to beauty and aesthetic freedom.

Thus, the following paper is divided in three parts. In the first part, I present Bichat's distinction between the organic and the animal life of self-moving living organisms and its importance for Hegel. In the second part, I show how Hegel introduces in Bichat's empirical distinction an element of dissymmetry which opens up toward a new sphere of reflection on the understanding of what life is. This new perspective rests on a philosophical rather than empirical reflection, though I argue that Hegel nevertheless remains within a naturalistic framework by making his philosophical argument consistent with what is established by the empirical sciences of his time. Lastly, in the third part, I underline the parallel between Hegel's aesthetic theory and the transition between life within the realm of nature and life within what he calls the sphere of spirit. In both cases, the demarcation between asymmetry, symmetry and dissymmetry will play a crucial role to distinguish between the natural (life, beauty) and the spiritual (life, beauty) which Hegel associates with a higher form of freedom.

BICHAT'S DISTINCTION AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR HEGEL

Hegel is far from being the only one who has found a philosophical interest in Bichat's distinction. Quite famously, Schopenhauer has written about Bichat: "His reflections and mine mutually support each other, since his are the physiological commentary on mine, and mine the philosophical commentary on his; and we shall be best understood by being read together side by side¹⁰". But one can hardly conceive of more opposed interpretations than those offered by Hegel and Schopenhauer, who was in fact one of the most virulent critique of Hegel in his time. Whereas Hegel seek to show how Bichat's description of animal life already points out toward a superior (spiritual) form of life endowed with greater freedom and willfulness, Schopenhauer rather emphasizes the

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1911. *Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. II. München: R. Piper, p.296 / *The World as Will and Representation*, II, trans. E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1969, 261.

importance of the organic life as an expression of what he calls the ‘Will’ which is at the core of his own metaphysical construct and delineate voluntary, self-conscious action by pointing out to the unconscious, involuntary motives of our actions. As passions and emotions depend on the organic life for Bichat, the organic life is for Schopenhauer the physiological expression of this blind force that is the Will¹¹. Bichat’s distinction is thus used for opposite reasons. For Hegel, it presents an argument for the genesis of freedom within and beyond nature, whereas it confirms, for Schopenhauer, the fatal supremacy of the Will over the illusion of freedom which is, in the end, a mere representation of the mind.

If Hegel may have read Bichat earlier, his active interest seems to date back to the 1820s. Although there is no mention of Bichat in the first edition of Hegel’s *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1817), his distinction is mentioned in the summer 1823 lessons on aesthetic and Bichat is explicitly named in the second and third Berlin editions of the *Encyclopedia* (1827, 1830) (although Bichat is mistaken in the 1827 edition for the physician Jean-Baptiste Biot). From then on, Bichat remains an important reference in Hegel’s lessons. Nonetheless, although he refers to Bichat’s important distinction between organic and animal life within self-moving living organisms not only within his *Philosophy of Nature* (Hegel, PhN 445-46, 454-59), but also within the first part of his *Philosophy of Spirit* dedicated to the subjective spirit¹² and in his lessons on aesthetic¹³, it has been

¹¹ See Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, II, p.299-300 / *The World as Will and Representation*, II, p.264-65; Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1911. *Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. III. München: R. Piper, p.319-20 / *Two Essays: I. On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason; II. On the Will in Nature*. London: George Bell and Sons, p.246-47.

¹² Hegel, G.W.F. 19863. *Werke in 20 Bänden - 10: Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830. Dritter Teil. Die Philosophie des Geistes*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 91-92, 111. (from now on PhG)

¹³ Hegel, G.W.F. 2005. *Esthétique. Cahier de notes inédit de Victor Cousin*. Paris: Vrin, p.58 (from now on EVC). *Esthétique. Cahier de notes inédit de Victor Cousin*, is a French manuscript of Hegel’s lessons on aesthetic probably taken from the summer 1823 lessons. It has recently been found in the archives of Victor Cousin, a major figure of French philosophy in the nineteenth century and a personal acquaintance of Hegel. Over the years, he has repeatedly asked for transcriptions of students’ notebooks of Hegel’s lessons. The said manuscript is the first translation of Hegel’s work in French, the original document from which it was translated is apparently lost.

noted¹⁴ that apart from a few exceptions¹⁵ little attention has been given to this significant relation.

It is all the more surprising when we think of Bichat's very definition of life as "*the sets of functions that resist death*"¹⁶, which, as Jacques D'Hondt noted¹⁷, is very close to Hegel's own¹⁸. Indeed, life can only be defined for Hegel in relation and opposition to its other, namely death¹⁹. Of course, the idea of an intimate relation between life and death and the impossibility of defining the first without the other is not new, going from Heraclitus²⁰ to Claude Bernard²¹. Nonetheless, as Foucault insisted²², by conceiving life "only in relation to death", Bichat instilled, in the already revolutionary era of his time, an important revolution in the area of physiology:

For Cabanis, as for the eighteenth century and for a whole tradition that was already familiar in the Renaissance, the knowledge of life was based on the essence of the living, since it, too, is no more than a manifestation of it [...] With Bichat, knowledge of life finds its origin in the destruction of life and its extreme opposite; it is at death that disease and life speak their truth...²³

The novelty of this approach to physiology shared by both Bichat and Hegel

¹⁴ See D'Hondt, Jacques. 1986. "Le Concept de la Vie, chez Hegel". In R.-P. Horstmann & M. J. Petry (Ed.), *Hegels Philosophie der Natur* (pp.138-50). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, p.142; Schott, Heinz 2002. Medizin um 1800. In O. Breidbach & D. von Engelhardt (Ed.), *Hegel und die Lebenswissenschaften* (pp.123-33). Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, p.126.

¹⁵ See D'Hondt, "Le Concept de la Vie, chez Hegel"; Hagner, Michael. 2002. "Cerebrale Asymmetrie, Montrositäten und Hegel. In O. Breidbach & D. von Engelhardt (Ed.), *Hegel und die Lebenswissenschaften* (pp.95-106). Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung; Ferrini, Cinzia. 2009. "From Geological to Animal Nature in Hegel's Idea of Life". *Hegel-Studien* 44, p.80-82; and more recently Chaput (2018). "Hegel lecteur de Bichat".

¹⁶ Bichat, Xavier. 1973. *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*. Verviers : Marabout, p.11. (from now on RP).

¹⁷ D'Hondt, "Le Concept de la Vie, chez Hegel", p.142.

¹⁸ A similar point was made by Stefania Achella in her paper "Anatomopathologie der Vernunft. François Xavier Bichat und die Macht des Negativen" presented during the International Conference „Der Naturbegriff im Deutschen Idealismus“, LMU Munich, 04-10-21.

¹⁹ Hegel, G.W.F. 1986. *Werke in 20 Bänden - 3: Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, p.149 (from now on PG); PhN 335.

²⁰ Heraclitus. 1991. *Fragments*, trans. T.M. Robinson. Toronto: Toronto University Press, p.35.

²¹ Bernard, Claude. 1885. *Leçons sur les phénomènes de la vie communs aux animaux et aux végétaux (vol. 1)*. Paris: Librairie J.-B. Baillière et Fils, p.41.

²² Foucault, Michel. 2003. *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A.M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, p.179.

²³ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p.178.

is all the more tangible when contrasted with the definition of physiology given by one of its early theorists, Jean Fernel (1497-1558) who defined it as the first element of medicine which “explore the nature of the healthy human being, in all his strength and functions²⁴”.

By opposition, both Bichat and Hegel defined life through the apprehension of its other, of sickness and death. And despite their very different metaphysical assumptions (or alleged lack of in Bichat’s cases (RP 47, 170)), their affinities on the topic of life is not limited to broad generalities, but extend to very specific points²⁵. Nowhere is this proximity as obvious as on the topics of Bichat’s distinction between organic and animal life.

The importance of Bichat’s distinction for Hegel is threefold: 1) to establish the physiological norms of animal (and human) life within nature; 2) to mark the difference between strictly natural life and spiritual living organisms; and 3) to similarly mark the aesthetic difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty. In fact, 2) and 3) concurrently points out how Hegel uses Bichat’s distinction to make the same argument in different spheres of his system: the necessity to distinguish between the symmetry of animal life and the dissymmetry of spiritual life is mirrored by the necessity to distinguish between natural (symmetrical) beauty and artistic (dissymmetrical) beauty. But in order to show how Hegel establishes the transition between the norms of life within nature and the norms of life within the realm of spirit where life progressively becomes an equivalent to freedom and autonomy²⁶, I briefly present Bichat’s distinction²⁷.

Bichat’s distinction between an organic, “interior” life and an animal life oriented toward the “outside” (RP 12) is in a sense reminiscent of Aristotle’s own distinction between the “vegetative” and the “animal” parts of the soul²⁸, where the vegetative power of the soul, as Bichat’s organic life, is responsible for nutrition and the animal power is responsible for sensation and incidentally for self-

²⁴ Quoted in Huneman, Philippe. 1998. *Bichat, la vie et la mort*. Paris: Presses universitaires France, p.5 (my translation).

²⁵ See D’Hondt, “Le Concept de la Vie, chez Hegel”, p.142.

²⁶ See Khurana, Thomas (Ed.). 2013. *The Freedom of Life. Hegelian Perspectives*. Berlin: August Verlag; Khurana, Thomas. 2017. *Das Leben der Freiheit*. Frankfurt-am-Mainz: Suhrkamp.

²⁷ This description partly intersects with a description given in a previous paper on Bichat, see Chaput, Emmanuel. (2018). “Hegel lecteur de Bichat”.

²⁸ Aristotle. 1995. *The Complete Work (vol. 1)*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, p.658.

movement (Aristotle's argument being that one cannot move without sensation of one's surroundings). And just as "the nutritive soul is found along with all the others and is the most primitive and widely distributed power of the soul, being indeed that one in virtue of which all are said to have life" for Aristotle²⁹, whereas sensation and self-motion is specific to animal (and human) beings; likewise, for Bichat, the functions of the organic life are broadly similar between plants and animals, whereas "*animal* life [is] so-named because it is an exclusive attribute of the animal kingdom" (RP 12). As such, Bichat's *general* distinction is hardly new in *principle* and differs from Aristotle's theory only by its omission of the issue of reproduction³⁰. Its novelty lies in the empirical description of organs and systems specific to each order of life.

Although Bichat opposes systematically the characteristics of the organic and animal life, a strange parallelism remains. As Bichat writes: "each of these two lives, animal and organic, are composed of two order of functions which succeed and concatenate each other in opposite direction" (RP 13). Those two orders are those of receptivity and spontaneity. Both organic and animal life work according to the binary logic of receptivity/spontaneity. Within animal life, this binary order of functions is translated into the organs of sensations which are receptive and affected by external stimuli. The information received through the organs of perception are then gathered and processed by the brain which initiate the signal for the active response of volition and movement via the motor organs. Similarly, within the organic life, a first order of functions plays a receptive role of assimilation of nutrients, light or oxygen. For Bichat, assimilation is indeed a passive function to which succeeds the active moment of absorption which transforms the foreign elements of the outside into constitutive elements of the organism's life and body (RP 14). The secretions (bile, gall, saliva, etc.) actively enable absorption by dissolving and digesting what is first merely assimilated. In other word, assimilation consists in passively letting something enter the body of an organism, whereas absorption consist in actively transforming the foreign substance in something that is part of the whole (fat, muscle, fluids, etc.).

As such, both lives are similarly structured according to the same binary

²⁹ Aristotle. 1995. *The Complete Work (vol. 1)*, p.661.

³⁰ See Chaput (2018). "Hegel lecteur de Bichat", p.168-69.

opposition. In both cases, Bichat also considers the existence of an intermediary system that mediates the different organs of both organic and animal life and provides a bridge between the receptive and spontaneous elements of both lives. In the case of animal life, this function is fulfilled by the brain. In the case of the organic life, Bichat attribute this intermediary role to the bloodstream (RP 14). But this is where the parallel stops. Otherwise, the animal and organic life are in a thorough opposition.

Part I of the *Physiological Researches on Life and Death* is indeed dedicated to the description of a series of distinctions between organic and animal life. There is, for Bichat, a difference of domain (interior/exterior), functions (assimilation/digestion/respiration/secretion vs. sensation/motricity/volition), structure (centralized/decentralized, regular/irregular, asymmetric/symmetric), and operation (continuous and necessary vs. sporadic with necessary periods of rest) between organic and animal life. Emotions and affects are also associated to the organic life for Bichat, whereas understanding, memory and intelligence find their source in animal life (RP 45-49).

In what follows, I focus only on what will appear, for Hegel, as the most significant elements of this opposition, namely: 1) the relation of interiority/exteriority and its impact on the plasticity or rigidity of the organism toward its environment or its own corporeal constitution; 2) the regularity/intermittency of the activity; and most importantly 3) the asymmetric/symmetric features of each life.

From the outset, Bichat describes organic life as strictly interior whereas animal life is oriented toward exteriority (RP 12). Indeed, volition, sensation, and self-movement all imply a certain interaction with the outside world, whereas the organic life is impervious to any external influence.

This is for Bichat an essential distinction between organic and animal life. Organic life and its specific organs (the lungs, liver, heart, stomach, etc.) are immediately adequate to their function, and any failure to fulfill their specific task quickly results in the annihilation of life (RP 33). As such, their activity must be constant and without rest. Immediately adequate to its function and constantly active, organic life leaves no place for improvement and progress. Its immutable necessity for the maintenance of life is impervious to any influence of the will, since any modification or change equates with the death of the organism. As such,

organic life will appear for Hegel as characteristic of nature's immediacy (PhN 30), an immediacy which remains for him a sign of impotence (*Ohnmacht*) (PhN 34). There is for Hegel, as for Bichat, a lack of plasticity and adaptability within organic life. Its perfection is in fact a defect in their hierarchical conception of life where the ability to learn and adopt new behavior is conceived as a manifestation of freedom and a greater sense of self. Organic life, as such, presents, for Hegel, an essential aspect of natural life, namely its material necessity devoid of any flexibility or adaptability. But natural life is not merely ruled by blind necessity.

While organic life is conceived as the most basic form of life that is common to plants, protozoa, animals and human beings, animal life, on the opposite, is conceived as a higher manifestation of life, opening new possibilities. In fact, despite Bichat's claims, his descriptive opposition between the functions, structures, and modes of activity of both lives is implicitly motivated by a hierarchical conception of life whose underlying criteria is a certain conception of freedom. The organs of animal life which allows movement, sensation, reflection and thinking are seen as a greater expression of life's full potential even though it remains largely dependent on the existence of organic life. Organic life and the functions it fulfills are seen as mere means for animal life, whereas animal life constitutes its own end. This bears some importance, since as we shall see, Hegel's critique of animal life's symmetrical dimension will be articulated within the same framework that is implicit in Bichat, namely that freedom is the true criteria to establish the differential value between forms of life. In fact, if Bichat's distinction is so important for Hegel, it is because behind its merely descriptive character, one can find certain assumptions regarding the purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) of life which commingle with his own conception of freedom and autonomy.

Paradoxically, if animal life is seen as a superior form of life, it is precisely because there is no immediate adequation between the organs proper to animal life and their function. The eye must learn to distinguish light, colors and forms, the muscles must learn to coordinate and move appropriately. And these learnings can only occur through an interaction with our natural and social environment³¹. Habits will as such play an essential role in the development of

³¹ Huneman, *Bichat, la vie et la mort*, p.52.

the animal life as a figure of freedom, for both Bichat (RP 38) and Hegel (PhG 184-87), although for the latter, habit may also become an obstacle to freedom if it ends up becoming an unreflective automatism³².

The initial shortcomings of animal life will become in the end its best asset. Contrary to what happens in organic life, an organ of sensation or of motricity can be partially or totally inadequate to its function without jeopardizing the life of the whole organism. For example, an ill-formed eye will either partially or completely alter the eye's function, namely sight. But these malformations do not endanger one's life as would the incapacity of the heart to fulfill its role. Moreover, they do not necessarily impair the organism which can develop an alternative response to even out what could be seen as a crippling malformation. The blind person or the organism without the sense of sight will compensate through other means or acute senses. The loss of a leg will likewise involve a reconfiguration that will often result in a greater muscle tone for the remaining members designed for locomotion. The initial inadequacy (or rather non-immediate adequacy) of animal life provides a certain plasticity that allows the possibility of contingent accidents, mishaps, and malformations, *and* the possibility to sublimate these contingencies by developing other means or by making of an apparent handicap an asset. This is why, in a sense, animal life and the way its organs develop progressively and potentially in multiple ways is seen as a manifestation of freedom and autonomy. As such, when Merleau-Ponty writes that "the accidents of our bodily constitution can always play this revealing role" of showing how one is free to consider them as "means of extending our knowledge" or "as pure facts which dominate us"³³, since we can *choose* to let ourselves be limited by our imperfections or to either *bypass* them through other means or *embrace* them as signs of who we are, this can only concern accidents pertaining to animal life. For Bichat, accidents that hinder the active operation of the organic life soon end up with the destruction of the organism as a whole. The kind of existential freedom which consists of making sense of our body constitution with its imperfections or defects and making them our own is something that is only possible in regard to animal life. And one should not think that this kind of learning-behaviour

³² Hegel, G.W.F. 1986. *Werke in 20 Bänden - 12: Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, p.100.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1967. *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. A. L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon, p.203.

consisting in coping with one's environment or bodily constitution is a strict privilege of the human organism, as we can witness it among various non-human animals.

Animal life's ability to adapt and learn new behavior, which could have been at first considered as a shortcoming, as a lack of adequacy to its end or function, also implies another apparent shortcoming, namely the necessity of rest. Whereas the activity of organic life is necessarily continuous, conversely the organs of animal life necessarily need rest in order to remain fully operative (Bichat, RP 34). But again, this apparent defect of the animal life will be considered by Hegel as sign of superiority in comparison with the structural immediacy of organic life. Dominated "by the *alternation* of rest and activity", animal life is inherently structured through opposition and tension between different states, whereas "the *organic* life which does not enter into this alternation corresponds to the *undifferentiation* of the soul present in sleep³⁴". The alternation between rest and activity which Hegel relates to the state of sleep or wake establishes the dynamic character of animal life which is in constant tension between the tendency to be in motion and in interaction with the external environment and the tendency to rest in a state analogous to death (Hegel, PhG 91). On the opposite, organic life is largely indifferent to the state of wake or sleep. It is "a life which continues in sleep and ends only in death" (Hegel, PhG 91 / PhS₂, 135). As such, it is an "undifferentiated unity" (*unterschiedslose Einheit*) (Hegel, PhG 91). Organic life is this long quiet river which remains largely unchanged until death prevails. It follows its courses without hurdles and never deviates from its course. By opposition, animal life is in constant tension and in reconfiguration. But as we saw, for both Bichat and Hegel life is essentially this state of tension and opposition which is able to "*resist death*" (Bichat, RP 11). As such, although the functions fulfilled by organic life are necessary for the existence and continuity of animal life while we can conversely envision the possibility of a vegetative state where the organic life of an organism is maintained without any manifestations of the activities (sensation, motricity, etc.) usually associated with animal life, nonetheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, animal life is considered as a

³⁴ Hegel, PhG 91 / Petry, Michael John. 1978. *Hegel's Philosophy of subjective spirit*, II, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co. p.137. (from now on PhS).

superior form of life. The tension and oppositions pervasive to the animal life breed greater possibilities of configurations, which allow a certain kind of basic freedom. For both Bichat (RP 12) and Hegel (PhN 457), the simple fact that an animal can move around and interact with a certain environment (*Umwelt*) is already a manifestation of a greater freedom³⁵. As such there is already for Hegel a certain place for freedom as self-determination within nature, but it nonetheless remains incomplete since the ability to move oneself willingly and to adapt one's behaviour according to certain situations is still entangled in the heteronomy of generic instinct. For Hegel³⁶, the animal is free to move in one direction or the other, but its decision will always be in the end overdetermined by what its instinct dictates, a certain typical behaviour common to all individuals of a certain species that cannot be modified by any of them individually. Once again, Hegel aims to show that even at the highest level of freedom attained within nature, nature is still characterized by its own impotence (*Onhmacht*). Nature on its own has, for Hegel, no destination other than to be what it is, but human agency systematically informs nature with meaning and signification.

Accordingly, spirit, for Hegel, steers nature toward a certain ideal. This is done through the human organism's transformation of its natural surrounding, which translates, for Hegel, in the most basic form of art, namely architecture: "Its task consists in so manipulating external inorganic nature that, as an external world conformable to art, it becomes cognate to spirit³⁷". As we shall see, Bichat's distinction between organic and animal life will play an important role again in the realm of art and particularly in architecture for Hegel.

In that regard, for both the aesthetic and physiological demarcation between the norms of nature and norms of human agency, the most important element Hegel draws from Bichat's distinction revolves around the issue of symmetry and asymmetry.

³⁵ I made a similar point in my paper "The Relation between Nature and Consciousness in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: The Inorganic Nature as *Umwelt*" presented during the International Conference „Der Naturbegriff im Deutschen Idealismus“, LMU Munich, 04-09-21.

³⁶ See Hegel, G.W.F. 1986. *Werke in 20 Bänden - 13: Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, p.196-97. (from now on VA)

³⁷ Hegel, VA 116 / Hegel, G.W.F. 1998. *Aesthetics (vol.1)*, trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.83-84. (From now on A1)

SYMMETRY, ASYMMETRY, DISSYMMETRY: HEGEL'S WEAK NATURALISM

Bichat “is quite right” for Hegel, “when he says that in the system of sensibility” and in the animal life of the organism, “the sensory and motor nerves are symmetrical [...] The same is true of the sense organs” (Hegel, PhN 457-58 / Petry 1970₃, 129): the osseous system, the muscles, the breasts, the ligaments, etc. For Bichat “symmetry is the essential character of man’s animal life organs” (RP 17). In fact, the issue of the symmetry of the organs of the animal life in contrast with the asymmetry of the organs of the organic life is considered by Bichat as “the most essential difference between the organs of the animal and organic life” (RP 16). It is also Hegel’s main focus.

Here however, we definitely leave behind the empirical and descriptive enterprise of Bichat and enter the realm of philosophical speculation peculiar to Hegel. As we already stated, Hegel is less interested in the physiological importance of Bichat’s distinction than in its underlying metaphysical implications. In a certain way, Bichat’s work is taken as a scientifically adequate description of what are the norms of organization of natural organisms alongside the empirical works of Autenrieth, Richerand, Erman and so many others. But for Hegel, the aim of physiology cannot be merely descriptive: “physiology needed to make it one of its chief propositions that life in its development had necessarily to proceed to the human form as the one and only sensuous appearance appropriate to spirit.” (VA 110 / A1 78 [slightly modified]). That is precisely what Hegel finds in the underlying metaphysical assumptions of Bichat’s distinction. As we saw, the very structure of animal life grants it a greater plasticity, adaptability and capacity to modify one’s behaviour through interaction. In a word, animal life allows a certain degree of freedom and autonomy which are perhaps *the* central preoccupation of Hegel’s system.

Of course, Hegel’s metaphysical conclusion about the relation between the physiological configuration of a certain living organism and the notion of freedom or self-determination is not entirely disembodied from the empirical reality described by Bichat. Although Bichat claims to be doing merely an empirical description of the structural configuration of life within the living organism, he himself seems to confer a certain superiority to animal life (Bichat, RP 12) which only makes sense if we consider its higher level of plasticity,

adaptability and possibilities as a better expression of life itself. As such, freedom, or at least agency, and life seem to go along one another for both Bichat and Hegel. Explicitly for the latter, implicitly for the former. But if, for Bichat, the autonomy and freedom of animal life is entirely justified by the natural physiological configuration of a given living organism, for Hegel, there is a limit to freedom within nature, where the ability to adapt and interact with the environment still remains externally determined by one's instinct as an external condition to which one is subjected. Such a concept of freedom is still lacunary and steeped in heteronomy.

In a sense, Bichat adopts a strong naturalist view on freedom according to which freedom merely rests on the physiological configuration of the living organism and its potential for various behaviours and adaptations. Even human freedom is a mere effect of the potential of its bodily configuration which allows a greater development of skill, adaptation, and intelligence. This naturalist stance is consistent with his scientific commitment to physiology and empiricism. Conversely, Hegel's refusal of such a strong naturalist stance is consistent with his own philosophical commitment in which human beings are the living manifestation of spirit (*Geist*) whose freedom is precisely to sublimate their immediately given natural configurations. As such, Hegel presents what one might call as weak or qualified naturalist stance. While he acknowledges the factuality of our physiological constitution as natural organic living beings, he considers that human beings enjoy a kind of freedom unknown within the rest of the animal kingdom since they can redefine their immediately given natural features as means toward achieving certain aims (Hegel, PhG 190), as a 'sign' (*Zeichen*) (PhG 192) encompassing spiritual (i.e., social) meanings foreign to what is merely naturally given (PhG 193-94). As Hegel writes: "Whereas everything that becomes necessary on account of the Idea of the animal is brought about in an immediate manner through the animal's body obedience to instinct, it is by his own activity that man first masters his body" (PhG 190 / PhS₂, 405-07).

Freely quoting Bichat (RP 29), Hegel argues that the symmetry of the animal life is intimately related to instinct rather than intelligence: "exercises in which intelligence only plays a small part preserve symmetry in their movement. 'Animal leap with the greatest skill from crag to crag, where the very slightest slip would send them toppling into the abyss, and move with astonishing precision on

surfaces scarcely as wide as the extremities of their limbs” (Hegel, PhN 458-59; Petry 1970₃, 130). Instinct and symmetry seem to preserve animal organisms from missteps: “Even the ungainliest of animals do not stumble so often as man” (Hegel, PhN 459 / Petry 1970₃, 130). But the human being’s natural clumsiness is in fact an asset rather than a defect. As Guillaume Lejeune remarks: “man would preserve a greater plasticity toward the world and the determinism of evolution, because, at a material level, his body’s evolution would have remained at a juvenile level³⁸”. This neotenus character anticipated by Hegel would explain why the human’s mastery over his or her own body implies training and habituation which in counterpart allows oneself to willfully determine toward what aim(s) the body shall be trained. For Hegel, the symmetry is broken, but it is voluntarily, as a manifestation of freedom, that an inequality in the body’s development is introduced (PhN 459). One can thus speak of a weak naturalism in Hegel’s case, since neoteny is a physiological characteristic of the human organism, but this naturally given feature of human beings is only the material precondition that allows a non-natural element, namely spirit, to act upon one’s body and express a new form of freedom which is not defined in terms of physiological potential, but in terms of *making sense* of what one is, wants to be, etc. Freedom thus becomes a matter of interpretation and meaning, resting 1) on the ability to provide direction to forces that are already at play in nature, but deprived of reflective aims; and 2) on the ability to see what is naturally given not as something that is immutable and fixed.

THE NORMS OF LIFE AND HUMAN AGENCY

Just as the apparent shortcomings of animal life were in fact manifestations of its superiority in comparison with organic life which, immediately adequate to its function, is also hopelessly fixed and immutable, the neotenus character of human life is, in turn, a manifestation of its superiority toward animal life which remains instinctively configured to quickly develop the necessary means to fulfill its functions. For Hegel, Bichat’s distinction between organic and animal life adequately underlines the distinction between the norms of necessity and the norms of freedom within nature: the organs of organic life may only be adequate

³⁸ Lejeune, *Hegel anthropologue*, p.51.

to their functions by being fixed and impervious to any extraneous influences. They are as such the necessary condition of possibility of animal life. Animal life, on the contrary constitutes the norms of freedom within nature: freedom exists as the ability to move oneself, to adapt, to infer from perception certain information, etc. But these norms of freedom to which Bichat's strong naturalism confines itself omits for Hegel a further figure of what freedom means as an expression of life. The merely natural animal life needs to be sublated in a properly spiritual, human form of life, in which the norms of freedom will not be determined by the arbitrariness of instinct, but by the 'rational will' (*vernünftige Wille*) (Hegel, PhG 301) of human agency.

In that regard, the issue of symmetry plays a crucial role. The inflexibility of the organic life and the plasticity of the animal life are directly correlative to their asymmetrical/symmetrical configuration. As Bichat writes, "the organic life" whose organs are asymmetric, "forms a unique system where everything is related and coordinated, where the functions cannot, on one side, cease without the other necessarily stopping" (RP 19). It is almost like a clockwork mechanism where each part plays a certain unique role in a vast chain of functions which cannot be substituted by another part. On the contrary, the symmetrical character of the organs of the animal life allows for the substitution of the right side by the left side and *vice versa*. Although I can close my left eye, I can still see from the right one. Likewise, tired from carrying a heavy package with my right hand or shoulder, I can always use the left ones to alleviate the burden. Because of their symmetry, the organs of the animal life can "compensate each other reciprocally" (RP 19).

Symmetry as such is essential to animal life. It is not a merely contingent aesthetic configuration, but a functional one. It is the condition of this plasticity which allows the theoretical and practical relations of an organism to its environment (Hegel, VA 184). The symmetry of the organs of animal life allows the organism's adaptation and learning process. But this symmetry is in a sense self-defeating as we progress toward self-determination. Indeed, symmetry allows, as Bichat argues, the possibility of substitution which in turn gives way to the opposition between right and left. As such, although the symmetry of the animal life is opposed, for Bichat, to the asymmetry of the organic life, it cannot necessarily be reduced to some kind of abstract identity: "As the habit to act perfects the action, one can understand the cause of the greater level of agility of

the right limb over the left one” (Bichat, RP 29). The muscles of the right hand, used more often than the left, usually appear as more developed than those of the left hand. There is, as Bichat asserts, an “excess of nutrition” on the right side (RP 94) which may in time imply a certain imbalance of the symmetry. As Hegel writes, the “[u]niform duplication” implied by the symmetry of animal life “is not entirely identical” (Hegel, PhN 458 / Petry 1970₃, 130 [modified]). For François Dagognet, this is precisely where Hegel completes what is merely sketched out in Bichat: “The similarity of the two halves does not amount to an equality, which would introduce repetition, number, abstraction³⁹”. What remains, with Bichat, a mere observation of a variation of shape due to habit, take on a much more important meaning for Hegel. Hegel sees in this ‘dissymmetry’ the hallmark of spirit within nature. I use the term ‘dissymmetry’⁴⁰ as a technical term to differentiate between the asymmetry of organic life and the imbalance introduced *in* the symmetry of animal life either by the necessity of substitution between the right and the left side or by a rational will which sets out a certain goal in the configuration of one’s body.

For Hegel, the dissymmetry that may appear and imbalance the symmetry of animal life is mainly and primarily present in the human organism and showcases the spiritual dimension of human essence. Of course, dissymmetry may occur in nature and with non-human animals, but mainly due, for Hegel, to accidental causes. The temporary impairment of a leg may, for example, favor the other legs and introduce dissymmetry. But this is merely a sign of the ability of the animal to adapt to extraneously imposed conditions, whereas the human being “voluntarily introduces inequality” (Hegel, PhN 459 / Petry 1970₃, 131) as a mean toward an end that is freely chosen. The dissymmetry within the natural symmetry of animal life is in fact for Hegel the manifestation of the higher subjective development of the human being in comparison to non-human animals. As a free and self-conscious being (a “spiritual being” in Hegel’s words), the human being “shapes his form by orientating his individuality outwards, and in a special way concentrating his bodily power into a single point of his body, deploying it in a certain direction, and for particular purposes. He will disturb

³⁹ Dagognet, François. 2007. “Sur la Philosophie de la nature de Hegel. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 55(3), p.408.

⁴⁰ Ménétrier, Jacques. 1973. “Xavier Bichat, le précurseur”. In Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques*, p.7.

the [symmetrical] equilibrium of this power in order to write for example” (Hegel, PhN 458 / Petry 1970₃, 130).

This already points toward spirit for Hegel, toward a freedom unknown to the animal, which is only outlined by Bichat when he notes that “society almost always provides a perfection to certain external organs that is wholly unnatural” (RP 94). Responsive to these observations which go beyond the mere description of the life and death processes to infer something more philosophical about the essence of life within or without nature, Hegel will accentuate the importance of Bichat’s remark: “When people acquire spiritual and other kinds of aptitudes, and develop a fluent style, ability in music and the fine arts, technical skills, the art of fencing, etc., the equilibrium is lost [Hegel’s footnote: “Cf. *Bichat*, loc. cit. pp. 35-40.]” (Hegel, PhN 459 / Petry 1970₃, 131). Self-conscious and endowed with free will, the human being does not only transform its direct environment, he/she alters his/her own organic constitution according to spiritual, cultural or aesthetic ideals. In that regard, the young Marx’s distinction⁴¹ between the animal and the human being is not as far from Hegel’s stance as one might think. They both share a qualified naturalist stance which acknowledges the physiological embeddedness of our theoretical and practical relation to nature while preserving a space for a specifically human freedom which allows, for instance the human to “also fashion things according to the laws of beauty⁴²”. As we shall see, the aesthetic implications of dissymmetry will turn out to be a further manifestation of spirit’s freedom. But already at the level of physiology, dissymmetry implies a kind of *Bildung*, a reconfiguration of the body that constitute the first moment of the subjective spirit’s sublation of nature. This struggle between the subjective self-conscious will and nature is the central topic of Hegel’s *Anthropology*, the very first section of Hegel’s *Philosophy of spirit*. But the struggle is already anticipated in Hegel’s discussion of animal symmetry and its limits within the *Philosophy of nature*.

The dissymmetry introduced within the symmetry of animal life is, I argue, in fact Hegel’s true interest in Bichat’s distinction. It points toward a new norm which redefines life as a path self-consciously chosen, a project freely willed rather than imposed from the outside. This is what Hegel calls the life of the spirit (*Leben*

⁴¹ See Marx, Karl. 1985. *Selected Writings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.82.

⁴² *Ibid.*

des Geistes) (PG 36).

Certainly, within the realm of nature, the plasticity that animal symmetry allows is put above the rigidity and asymmetry of organic life. However, from the spirit's standpoint, it is the dissymmetry that the human being "[a]s a spiritual being" (Hegel, PhN 458 / Petry 1970₃, 130) introduces in the symmetry of animal life which constitutes the highest manifestation of freedom in this asymmetry/symmetry/dissymmetry triptych. Hegel's argument, based on Bichat's physiological distinction will emerge again in his aesthetic theory where Hegel will differentiate between the symmetry of natural beauty and the dissymmetry introduced by artistic beauty in which the human being, again, as a spiritual being is not merely a spectator or a reproducer of nature's beauty, but a free creator.

THE AESTHETIC NORMS OF NATURAL LIFE AND SPIRIT

From the outset, Hegel's aesthetics is intimately bound to the issue of life within nature and incidentally to physiology. Indeed, life is, for Hegel, within nature the purest manifestation of beauty since the living organism as a rational and harmonious configuration of parts and whole gathers the fundamental criteria of beauty (harmony, consistency, etc.). Following Kant⁴³, Hegel dissociates beauty and pleasure: the beauty of an object should be objectively determined through rational criteria, not subjectively through one's personal feeling of pleasure. In fact, for Hegel, as for Plato⁴⁴, beauty is more or less synonymous with the Good and the True which are all congruent aspects of the Idea. As such, "life in nature is *beautiful* because truth, the Idea in its earliest natural form as life, is immediately present there in individual and adequate actuality" (Hegel, VA 167 / A1 123). Life constitutes the first manifestation of natural beauty, because of its own consistency and rational structure as an organism proper (Hegel, VA 167-70 / A1 124-26; EVC 56-57).

This beauty of life, however, does not merely reveal itself immediately to the average human being, it is conveyed by its rational configuration and consistency which only becomes tangible through a proper knowledge of its physiological organization. Once again, we are brought back to Bichat's distinction between

⁴³ See Kant, Immanuel. 2007. *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.C. Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ See Plato. 1997. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 493-94, 818-19, 913.

organic and animal life, considered this time for its aesthetic implications which pertains essentially to the issue of symmetry (Hegel, VA 183-84 / AI 137-38; EVC 58-59). As Hegel writes in the *Encyclopedia*: “The *exterior* organs, the eyes and ears, like the extremities, the hands and feet, are symmetrically *duplicated*. It may be observed in passing, that it is on account of this that they are a worthy object of art” (PhG 91-92; PhS₂ 137)⁴⁵. Of course, the beauty of life derived from our physiological knowledge of the organism’s regularity, symmetry and consistency is merely “for *us*, for the mind which apprehends beauty” (Hegel, VA 167 / AI 123). This is the deficiency of natural beauty for Hegel: “the living beauty of nature is produced neither *for* nor *out of itself* as *beautiful* and for the sake of a beautiful appearance. The beauty of nature is beautiful only for another” (Hegel, VA 167 / AI 123; see also EVC 61-62). As for Kant, natural beauty appears for Hegel, as “unintended” (*absichtslose*) (Hegel, VA 169 / AI 125), as a “purpose without purposiveness⁴⁶” (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*).

In that respect, symmetry “remains an external determinacy” (Hegel, VA 179 / AI 134) typical of natural beauty rather than artistic beauty. Aesthetically speaking, the symmetry of the external organs exemplifies the limits of natural beauty. Since regularity and symmetry are determined by fixed proportions that are externally imposed, their beauty is “a beauty of the abstract Understanding; for the Understanding has for its principle abstract sameness and identity, not determined in itself” (Hegel, VA 180 / AI 134). For Hegel, the understanding (*Verstand*) values the fixed determinacies entailed by symmetry and regularity.

Interestingly, the symmetry of the external organs which provides from the physiological standpoint a greater freedom to the animal (through movement and perception), constitutes, from the aesthetical standpoint, a limit to freedom as it fixes the concept of beauty to a mere issue of proportion and size. Indeed, for Hegel, “both forms, regularity and symmetry, as purely external unity and arrangement, fall principally into the category of *size*” (VA 181 / AI 135). They both constitute a quantitative measure whose determinate character allow Hegel

⁴⁵ In his comprehensive commentary of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Mind*, Inwood does not take proper notice in my view of the relevance of this in-passing comment of Hegel for Hegel’s own aesthetical theory, see Inwood 2007, 349 which refers to p.65 of Inwood’s revised version of the Wallace/Miller translation of Hegel (Hegel 2007).

⁴⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.57.

to differentiate (VA 467-68), again in line with Kant⁴⁷, between nature's beauty and the sublime.

Natural beauty for Hegel pertains to the harmonious, limited and organized character of natural objects which externally reflect the rationality of the Concept. It is tangible for example in the symmetrical figure of the crystal, in the plant or the animal organism (Hegel, VA 182-84). On the opposite, "the general character of the sublime" is constituted by the "flight beyond the determinateness of appearance" (Hegel, VA 394 / A1 303), it is defined by the idea of excess and disproportion, "immeasurability and unlimitedness" (Hegel, VA 439 / A1 340). As such, the sublimity of nature is formally the opposite of natural beauty. Whereas the latter is defined by measure and determinateness, as a finite well-organized object, the sublime grasps nature as this limitless and boundless reality whose infinity overwhelms us with awe. The "sublimity of the immeasurable and troubled sea, the restful immensity of the starry heaven" (Hegel, VA 177 / A1 131) are proper examples of the boundless character of the sublime.

Hegel thus opposes the boundlessness of the sublime to the determinate proportions of natural beauty, to its regularity and symmetry and by extension to animal life. At the same time, it contradicts the symmetry of the beautiful natural object only by reversing its determinate character as a measure. As Hegel explains, as a measure, symmetry still remains a quantity. As such, its limit is indifferent and can always be artificially extended, theoretically endlessly. This is precisely how a figure of beauty can become a figure of the sublime: "the measure (*la mesure*) becomes excessiveness (*le démesuré*)" (Hegel, EVC 83). The human figure is represented as a colossus, with a thousand breasts, etc. (Hegel, EVC 83).

As such, it would be a mistake to infer from the opposition between natural beauty and the sublime that the latter would be, in Hegel's mind, related to organic life which is, at a physiological level, in opposition to the symmetrical character of animal life. The asymmetrical nature of the internal organs of organic life is not a figure of boundlessness, but, on the contrary, the manifestation of a greater rigidity that bounds and limits further the autonomy of the living organism. Conversely, the boundlessness of the sublime is not necessarily antithetical with symmetry, although the sublime brings symmetry to

⁴⁷ See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.75.

the limits of its determinacy and undermines its proper essence as a determinate proportion. The symmetry between a thousand eyes or arms is far less striking, if not entirely lost, even if the representation of a creature with a thousand eyes or arms is the result of an extension of natural symmetry.

Going from physiology to aesthetic, the priority between organic and animal life in fact becomes inverted for Hegel. Whereas the symmetry related to the external organs is seen as a manifestation of the beautiful within nature, as a fixed determination, it represents, for Hegel, a limit to the freedom of spirit which manifests itself in the ability to determine by itself the criteria of beauty according to its own rational ideal. On the opposite, Hegel will argue that the internal organs of the organic life, the lungs, liver and especially the heart, are “nobler” from an aesthetic standpoint, since they “are not determined by mere types of regularity” (VA 184 / AI 137). Moreover, Hegel justifies the aesthetic superiority of the human body precisely because the internal organs, the manifestation of its freedom and interiority is explicitly apparent at the very surface of the skin (VA 193-94; EVC 61).

It is thus important to notice the shifting meanings between Hegel’s philosophy of nature and aesthetics. Within nature, the rigid organic life constitutes a limit to the expression of freedom as self-movement of the living individual. However, within the realm of aesthetic where the physiological characteristics are not considered for themselves, but as depictions or representations (*Darstellungen*) of the Idea of beauty within reality, the internal organs acquire a new meaning as a manifestation of interiority and subjectivity. This inversion of meaning maintains the relation between spiritual freedom and dissymmetry in opposition to fixed symmetry, but merges into one the notions of asymmetry and dissymmetry that were distinguished within the (physiological) realm of nature. Simply put, *as aesthetical representations*, the heart and the internal organs of the organic life become *symbols* of the subjective and soulful dimension of artistic beauty.

Indeed, the superiority of artistic beauty over natural beauty is justified for Hegel (VA 14, 190) by its intentional, subjective and voluntary character. Whereas, beauty necessarily appears as an external determination within nature, witnessed by a spiritual being, i.e., merely *for us*, as a set of fixed determinations deemed beautiful only extraneously by the human observer, artistic beauty freely

produces itself in accord to its own conventions which it has determined by and for itself and which may express itself in a potentially infinite variety of ways (Hegel, VA 202). As such, artistic beauty must free itself from the boundaries of symmetry and regularity. This is why, for Hegel, the classical beauty of the Ancient Greek statuary which sought to express the spiritual ideal of beauty through the figure of the human body lied not in an adequate representation of the human body *per se*, with its symmetrical configuration, but in the stance taken by the body which precisely unbalanced the effect of symmetry (Hegel, VA 193-94).

Of course, symmetry is also present in arts and, by extension, in artistic beauty (Hegel, EVC 59). But it is mainly associated with the most basic and abstract form of art, i.e., architecture which remains, for Hegel, the most dependent upon nature among the different forms of art (VA 116-17). The functionality of architecture which primarily responds to the natural need for shelter, the necessity to take into account the laws of physics to ensure the building's longevity and security and the natural constraints of the material used are all indications of limits imposed by nature to the spirit's freedom to produce a work of art according to its own rules and regulations. Progressively, for Hegel, artistic production emancipates itself from such natural constraints. While the statuary is still dependent upon rough materials as stone or marble, the ability to transcend the material by giving it a human shape is precisely a manifestation of aesthetic freedom. With painting and music, art is further liberated from material or physical constraints. Finally, with poetry, the rules spirit gives itself entirely supersedes the material condition of the work of art.

Symmetry then, is present in the work of art not as a manifestation of spirit's absolute freedom, but as a remnant of a more primitive form of rational configuration at play in nature. Symmetry is precisely the mark of natural beauty that artistic beauty transcends through the introduction of a certain dissymmetry or asymmetry. The parallel with Hegel's use of Bichat's physiological distinction within his philosophy of nature is blatant: just as freedom within nature relied on the symmetrical character of the animal life, but was sublated by spiritual freedom which introduced dissymmetry within the animal's symmetry, likewise, natural beauty rested, for Hegel, on symmetry, whereas artistic beauty sublated natural beauty by introducing a dissymmetry/asymmetry that pointed toward

the aesthetic autonomy of human agency toward the model of nature.

In his philosophy of nature and organic physics as in his aesthetic theory, Hegel thus uses Bichat's distinction and especially the issue of symmetry to actually go beyond and sublate Bichat's point. Freedom and life actually commingle with one another when human agency subverts the natural symmetry of life to introduce wilfully an element of dissymmetry both at a physiological and aesthetical level for Hegel.

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