The Notion of a Self-Conscious Genus-Process: Hegel's Concept of the Family

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Abstract

In this text, I interpret Hegel's concept of the family within the context of his theory of freedom. I take family life to entail a certain tension between freedom and nature that makes it necessary to reflect on the role of nature in our understanding of the family. For this, I examine two ways of understanding the family's relation to nature, a conservative and a liberal one, to then offer a third, dialectical way as an alternative. My central argument is that Hegel's concept of the family can be read as a response to the problem of our entanglement with nature and is thereby an integral part of his theory of ethical life and freedom. For this, I outline the normative principle underlying Hegel's family concept that I will call 'the notion of a self-conscious genus-process' (*Gattungsprozess*). This notion enables an immanent critique of Hegel's concept of the family without abandoning his dialectical conception of the relationship between freedom and nature.

Introduction

In recent years, it has become rather common to read Hegel's philosophy in terms of a theory of freedom that provides the basis for a critique of contemporary social life. Most scholars must admit, however, that 'even in the light of his own day Hegel was conservative in his views about women's nature and role' (Hutchings 2003: 134). The most striking example of this is perhaps the chapter on 'the family' in his 1821 *Philosophy of Right*.[1] Clearly posing a challenge to any attempt at appropriating his thought for our times, it is thus hardly surprising that the concept of the family is mostly absent from the discussion on Hegel's theory of freedom and belongs generally to the most neglected parts of his social philosophy. And yet, the family is an integral part of Hegel's concept of ethical life, which after all, is at the core of his notion of freedom. The family concept

can therefore not easily be dismissed without jeopardizing the overall context of his social philosophy.

In the following, I will thus try to make sense of Hegel's concept of the family against the background of his theory of freedom. For this, I will focus on what may seem most in tension with freedom: its reference to nature. In my reading, it is precisely the tension between freedom and nature that is key to understanding the underlying normative claim of the family and therefore allows us to provide an *immanent* critique of it. As I will argue below, the family concept can be read as a flawed or limited solution to a problem correctly posed. That is, the problem of our entanglement with nature that becomes most visible in our reproductive lives, or, as one might put it, the materiality of self-conscious life. It is both what makes Hegel's account difficult to adopt *and* what gives it a distinguished relevance for contemporary accounts of the family. This normative claim is what I will call *the notion of self-conscious genus-process.* Against its background, I believe, we can criticize Hegel's family concept on its own terms and thereby transcend it.

I. The tension between freedom and nature

Referring to nature when discussing the institution of 'the family'—or any of the related matters of reproductive life, such as care, sexuality, the upbringing of children, etc.—has come to be associated with a conservative view.[2] The most prominent argument in this context is perhaps the employment of a supposedly natural sexual division of labour in order to define the social roles we are to fulfil as 'men' and 'women'.[3] This has traditionally been used to the disadvantage of 'women' and served as a justification for limiting their lives to the domestic sphere. The 'natural' is invoked here in a sense that appeals to what is thought to be immutable, factual and therefore necessary (Pierce 2000). Or, in a related sense, that which evolved on its own terms and is thus independent of human willing. 'Nature' then comprises all those aspects of our lives and the world we inhabit, that are beyond our shaping—a merely given 'natural order' of things. Traditional accounts tend to conceive of this order in a more theological and thus static sense, while contemporary conservatives increasingly refer to (supposed) evolutionary facts.[4] Common to both, however, is the way in which they consider the 'natural' to be normative for the way in which we live our lives. That is, a conception of normativity, according to which, what *is* naturally, *ought* to be that way socially.[5] Conceiving of the family as 'natural' in this sense, therefore typically implies that we are to consider a certain shape of family life as *necessary* qua nature. And the family model invoked is usually that of the patriarchal nuclear

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family. As a result, any attempt at changing the shape of family life appears to be 'unnatural' and thus misguided.

Now, if the conservative is right and the family is in fact 'natural', it seems we are limited in our capacity to freely determine the way we—and especially 'women'—want our reproductive lives to be organized. 'Nature' appears to fundamentally delimit our freedom. For the conservative, however, this does not necessarily mean that we cannot consider family life an expression of freedom. For if we, in turn, conceive of freedom—in a way reminiscent of the Stoic tradition—as an insight into and an affirmation of given necessities, we might say: we are free when we align our lives with the way nature 'intended' and thus fulfil our natural purpose—we realize our natural freedom.[6] To be free is to have knowledge of what is 'right' qua nature and act accordingly. Altering the traditional family model according to our preferences would then be regarded not only as 'unnatural', but as a confusion about what it means for us to lead a free life. Freedom and nature are then perfectly aligned.

Due to its close link to the patriarchal family model, many contemporary accounts of the family oppose the conservative's reference to nature. Instead, they highlight the historically contingent character of the family (Satz 2017). They argue that there is no such thing as '*the* family', but only a manifold of ways of organizing our close relationships with other humans that we subsume under one common term.[7] Hence, there is no *one* natural way of living a family life. Rather, these different 'families' are thoroughly shaped by human activity and have therefore nothing 'natural' about them.[8] The norms implied by them are *social* norms. And as such, they are always up for debate. As a result, the shape of our reproductive lives and close relationships is entirely subject to political deliberation and historical change—it is not beyond but part of our activity of determining the way we want to live.

However, by decidedly abstaining from any reference to nature in order to conceive of the family as 'political' or 'social', these accounts implicitly affirm the conservative characterization of the 'natural'. They share the view, according to which the natural is factual, immutable and necessary. Only they deny its normative status. Accordingly, their conception of freedom is one that is entirely opposed to nature. For the liberal—as we may call a view that opposes conservatism—freedom is essentially *self*-determination, *autonomy* (Sensen 2022; Taylor 2022).[9] And since being confined by any supposedly *natural* determinations seems to radically undermine this, 'nature' poses a threat to our freedom. So, while the conservative considers 'nature' a guideline for our social lives, its liberal opponent thinks of it as a problem. The 'natural' appears to be the ultimate limit or boundary of the normative realm. Thus, freedom and nature seem to be essentially in tension with each other. They form two dualistically opposed and irreconcilable realms—the realm of immutable natural facts on the one side,

and the realm of self-determined norms on the other.[10] As a result, freedom is conceived of as the escape from the constraints of nature—it is freedom *from* natural determinations.

In dealing with the concept of the family, we then encounter a dual opposition. On the one hand, we have two opposed views of the family itself—it is either somehow 'natural' *or* it is, above all, 'social'. On the other, we have two very different conceptions of the relation between freedom and nature—they are either in alignment or in tension. The first opposition is internally linked to the second, because each view of the family is based on a certain view of nature. One of the described positions is commonly considered to be conservative, for it seeks to justify a traditional family model, the other can be characterized as liberal, since it widens the scope of self-determination to include our reproductive lives.

Now, if we try to place Hegel's account of the family among these two positions, we face some difficulties. At first glance, his family concept just *is* the conservative view. Clearly, he presents us with a philosophical vindication of the bourgeois nuclear family, in which 'women' take on the necessary care work and 'men' are the sole breadwinners, working outside the family in the public sphere (*PR*: §166, 206–207). And just as the conservative, he refers to supposed natural differences when justifying the social roles of 'men' and 'women' (*PR*: §§165–66, 206–207). Accordingly, he characterizes the relationship between the family members as 'ethical life in its *natural* form', thereby depicting a social relation *as natural* (*PR*: §158A, 199, my emphasis). Yet, by doing this, he at the same time embeds the family in his theory of 'ethical life'—it is 'natural *ethical* spirit' (*PR*: §157, 198, my emphasis). Ethical life, however, is based on a conception of freedom as self-determination, *autonomy* (Pippin 2008; Khurana 2017). And according to this, every modern social institution must be viewed as one in which we realize ourselves as free—as self-determined rational beings—, not one, in which we align ourselves with the natural order (*PR*: §30R, 59). And so does the family. After what I have sketched above, this can then only seem strange to us. For it appears that Hegel's account merges the two sides of the dual opposition into one: for him, apparently, the family is somehow both at once, naturally determined *and* an instance of our self-determination—both 'natural' *and* an expression of freedom. Yet how are we to make sense of that?

An immediate response to this might be to consider it a mere inconsistency in Hegel's work. After all, defining the family as 'natural' seems to contradict the conception of freedom as self-determination. So, either we affirm his account of the family but oppose the way he thinks about freedom, thus reading him as a conservative; or we view his take on reproduction no more than a misogynist lapse of judgement in an overall sound theory of freedom, thus reading him as a liberal. With the latter being the predominant contemporary interpretation,

the concept of the family appears as one of the main conservative elements in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right,* precisely due to its reference to nature.[11] This gives the impression, that if we do not want to simply write Hegel off as a conservative, but instead show the continued relevance of his philosophy, we must revise his account of the family by disentangling it from any reference to nature whatsoever. Meaning, we must provide a thoroughly *social* account of the family in Hegelian terms.

I want to oppose this reading. I argue that it does not give enough credit to the complexity of Hegel's discussion of the family, nor to the insight into the relation between freedom and nature it entails. For one, such revisions conflict with Hegel's overall holism. The way his philosophical system is constructed, one cannot just remove certain unwanted elements without jeopardizing the consistency of the whole. Instead of merely skipping unpleasant passages, we must therefore illuminate their place within his overall philosophy and examine their genuine contribution to it. In doing so, one can recover the basic logic of the argument that leads Hegel to give these formulations in the first place. If we are to criticize certain elements of his philosophy, we are then able to do so not merely from the outside—*externally*—but in accordance with his own way of reasoning—from within, or *immanently*.[12]

In the following, I will employ this strategy for an interpretation of Hegel's family concept. For, I believe, it allows us to see that the reference to nature is in fact not the obstacle to freedom it initially appears to be. As I will argue below, Hegel does not deny the tension between freedom and nature addressed by the liberal. Unlike the liberal, however, he does not view it in dualistic terms. Rather, he situates it *within* the social itself, by considering it the family's defining element. As I read it, Hegel considers the institution of the family a response to the problem posed by the tension between freedom and nature. And *mediating* this tension is what characterizes its genuine 'ethicality', i.e. its specific way of actualizing freedom. Therein lies a conception of normativity different from both the conservative and the liberal account. The fundamental normative notion that shapes Hegel's family concept—i.e. the purpose the family ought to fulfil within 'ethical life'—is that of a practice in which we actualize a *free relationship* to our own entanglement with nature. Pace the liberal, Hegel thus insists on defining the family as 'natural' (to some extent). It is, however, not 'nature' itself that is constitutive of the family, but the challenge it poses to our freedom. Thus, pace the conservative, family life does not consist of our being immediately determined by nature, but by our actualizing an 'ethical' relationship to it. As a result, freedom can neither be sufficiently understood as 'freedom *from* nature', nor as the simple affirmation of natural determinations.[13] Rather, being free entails an ongoing process of appropriating natural determinations in a *free* way—it is the self-determination of a *natural* being.

Now, by this, I certainly do not mean to say that Hegel's views on 'women' and their social roles are not conservative. They clearly are.[14] Also, I do not challenge the impression that the *Philosophy of Right* presents a conservative version of the bourgeois nuclear family model as the supposedly best way of organizing our reproductive lives. Nevertheless, I suggest we read it not solely as an expression of Hegel's own misogynist prejudice, but as a flawed solution to a problem correctly posed—the problem of our entanglement with nature. For the normative notion it is based on—the free appropriation of natural determinations—is itself not conservative but consistent with and constitutive of Hegel's original theory of freedom. And it entails an important insight into the very character of our freedom that we miss when we simply disregard the reference to nature in favour of a thoroughly social understanding of the family. This basic normative notion is what I will call 'the notion of a self-conscious genus-process'.[15]

Against its background, I believe, we can put Hegel's otherwise questionable views into perspective. This allows for an *immanent* critique of his concept of the family that retains its emphasis on nature and thus opens up a third way alongside the dual opposition between the conservative and the liberal, offering us instead a *dialectical* understanding of the family and its relationship to nature.[16]

II. The family as '*natural* ethical spirit'

So far, I have only sketched my reading of Hegel's concept of the family very briefly. I have introduced the idea of a certain normative notion underlying Hegel's family concept that subverts the dual opposition between the conservative and the liberal conception of the family, providing us with a different understanding of the relationship between freedom and nature. This hinges on the claim, that the reference to 'nature' plays a defining normative role within Hegel's concept of the family—an interpretation certainly not without controversy (Novakovic forthcoming). Before examining the family's relationship to nature in more detail, I will therefore first try to illuminate its *conceptual* status.

As Hegel states in §1 of the *Philosophy of Right*, his philosophy is concerned not with '*mere* concepts' but with concepts in their 'actuality'; that is, an 'actuality which is posited by the concept itself' (*PR*: §1, 25). He thus distinguishes between a conceptual core, on the one hand, and its specific actualization, on the other. The latter can be read as the historical shape assumed by the basic concept— the way it realizes itself in history. If we think, for example, of the concept of a 'state', we can describe different historical variants of states and still group them under one concept. These are its actualizations. However, the conceptual core is not merely atemporal, but gains meaning with every actualization it brings to life.

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Our contemporary conception of what constitutes a state differs from that of the ancient Greeks to a degree that could not have been anticipated by them and was therefore not always already implied by the concept. The same applies to Hegel's concept of the family. When trying to make sense of it, we must then employ this distinction and separate its conceptual core from what Hegel considered its actualization.

In §§158–81 of the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel discusses the shape of the family of his time. He describes it as a specific form of sociality, in which loving partners enter a legal bond (marriage), share property and raise children who then inherit their property and build families of their own. It forms a narrow private realm from which anyone who is not considered a family member is excluded. Matters of reproduction, sexuality and mutual care are to take place primarily within this realm. The family thus constitutes what we might call a 'social sphere', and Hegel distinguishes it from two other such spheres: the bourgeois society and the state.[17] Each of these spheres follows its own genuine *principle of sociality*, by which a set of different ways of interacting with others is comprised into one unified practice. Now, if we want to get a hold of the family's own principle of sociality, we must contrast it with the other two spheres and their respective principles.

Broadly speaking, the bourgeois society is described as a public realm in which '*self-sufficient individuals*' (i.e. strangers) pursue their egoistic interests and engage primarily in contractual relations with others (*PR*: §157, 198). Ideally, everyone is included here, with private right assigning each of them the same legal status. The sum of these interactions constitutes some sort of social whole (i.e. 'the market'), albeit only a loose network and not a cooperative enterprise—a mere '*formal universality*' (*PR*: §157, 198).[18] The state, on the other hand, is considered an overarching public institution, in which individuals engage cooperatively. Instead of pursuing only their own objectives, the individuals orient themselves towards a general interest, thereby taking into account everyone else who is part of the state. In Hegel's wording: 'the particular self-consciousness […] has been raised to its universality', submitting itself to the 'substantial *will*' (*PR*: §258, 275). Yet this should not be understood merely as passive submission, but rather as a political process, in which individuals engage in public affairs and actively shape the general interest. The state constitutes one 'self-related organism'—a whole—that regulates and organizes the social process (*PR*: §259, 281). But it consists only of the individuals who take part in it.

Despite the obvious differences, what is true of the state also applies to the bourgeois society, albeit only in a negative form: both represent ways in which individuals are not merely on their own, but part of something that transcends their individuality—some form of (social) *universality*. In Hegel's understanding,

no individual exists outside and independent of its social relations. Rather, individuals gain their individuality only within and against the background of a shared medium. In their actions, they are determined by normative expectations specific to the social context in which they act—a practice (*PR*: §152, 195–96). In it, they adopt social roles that guide them in their lives and shape their individual identities. The aforementioned social spheres are accordingly conceived of as 'ethical' spheres, because they provide the normative framework for individual actions. The norms they imply are not merely given or predetermined, neither by nature nor God (*PR*: §151A, 195). Instead, they are themselves a result of the individuals' practical engagement with the 'existing world', in which they shape a world of their own (*PR*: §142, 189). This *social* world is what Hegel calls 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*). It is a functionally differentiated whole, consisting of a variety of social practices and their respective norms. These practices provide the grounds, on which the individuals go about their lives and adopt different social roles—as family member, *bourgeois*, or *citoyen* (Pinkard 2013: 5). Ethical life therefore constitutes the 'true spirit' (*PS*: ¶444, 266/291) or 'actual spirit' (*PR*: §156, 197) of a community, 'a people' (*PR*: §156, 197). It is what holds them together—an 'objective sphere of ethics' (*PR*: §144, 189) in which every individual has their 'motivating end and foundation' (*PR*: §142, 189).

As a world of 'spirit', it is not something we find 'out there', but it emerges only from our self-conscious actions. And as such, it 'is the realm of actualized freedom'—our spiritual self-determination—, both that of individuals, and that of the spiritual community as a whole (*PR*: §4, 35). Accordingly, Hegel defines ethical life as '*the concept of freedom which has become the existing* [vorhandenen] *world and the nature of self-consciousness*' (*PR*: §142, 189). This entails two important moments. For one, we have the concept of freedom. In §§4–8 of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel presents an original and complex notion of the free will, according to which freedom consists essentially of three elements: It is, first, the abstraction from all determination (*PR*: §5, 37). As rational beings, we can generally negate everything. This is the liberal view of freedom. However, it leaves us merely indeterminate. Thus, we must determine the content of our will, thereby again negating the abstract indeterminacy of the first element. This 'content may further be given by nature, or generated by the concept of spirit' (*PR*: §6, 39). In the case of the former, we would end up with the conservative view of freedom. And yet, Hegel considers both elements as merely one-sided aspects of a more complex notion of freedom. According to it, '[t]he will is the unity of both these moments' (*PR*: §7, 41). That is, it does not merely abstract from or affirm given determinations, but rather appropriates them as his own: 'Freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself [bei sich] in this determinacy' (*PR*: §7A, 42). This is the general notion of freedom at work in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

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The other moment, then, is the sense of 'nature' invoked in the aforementioned quotation. It must be understood in terms of what Hegel usually describes as a 'second nature' (*PR*: §4, 35; §151, 195). Although produced by self-conscious actions and thus not determined by 'nature' itself, the social norms must become 'habitual' for us, so that that in acting we do not have to constantly reflect on them (*ES*: §410A, 134–36; Menke 2013; Novakovic 2017). They become naturalized, i.e. pre-reflexive or pre-conscious. That is, they determine our actions as if they were our nature, albeit a 'second', spiritual nature. Thereby, Hegel offers us a way of considering even that which is thoroughly social as 'natural'. It is natural in the sense of a nature that is entirely of our creation and thus potentially mutable. And with every different historical shape of ethical life becoming naturalized, *our* nature in the sense of 'second nature' changes as well. But, because ethical life is the realm of actualized freedom, this spiritual 'nature' is also inherently related to freedom.

On the whole, the social spheres therefore represent specific naturalized ways in which individuality and (social) universality are mediated in a free manner: The bourgeois society, for example, constitutes the medium in which individuals realize their negative freedom—i.e. their freedom *from* others—while still being part of an overarching social process. The state, on the other hand, realizes freedom by allowing individuals to participate in political legislation; it actively involves them in shaping the universal. These are their respective *principles of sociality*. On this basis, we are then able to ask for the principle unique to the family. So, what is the specific kind of free sociality it actualizes?

The answer to this lies, I believe, not in the family chapter itself, but in the paragraph preceding it. For here, in §157, Hegel contrasts the three ethical spheres and defines each in its character. The family he depicts—as I have mentioned before—as 'immediate or *natural* ethical spirit' (*PR*: §157, 198).[19] Its being 'ethical spirit' should not surprise us. After all, the family is part of ethical life and therefore a social arrangement that arose from human action. Just as with the other spheres, it entails a set of social roles and normative expectations that guide our lives within it. However, the reference to immediacy and nature should catch our eye. For it is unlikely that Hegel uses 'nature' here only in the sense of 'second nature', since the latter equally applies to all social spheres. It would thus be redundant to define the family as such. Characterizing it as both ethical, on the one hand, *and* immediate or natural, on the other, seems to suggest that the specific form of sociality present in the family consists of some sort of intersection between the natural in the sense of 'first nature' and the ethical, i.e. 'second nature', taking place *within* ethical life itself. And as 'nature' in this sense is precisely not of our creation, but confronts us as something given, it conflicts with ethical life's essentially free character. The family therefore contains an inner tension. For how can something that is ethical at the same time be natural?

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In my reading, the phrase '*natural* ethical spirit' provides the family's genuine principle of sociality. It is thus the aforementioned tension, by which Hegel defines the *conceptual core* of the family. Throughout his work, we find various descriptions of different historical shapes of the family: the 'patriarchal state' in early Chinese societies (*LPWH*: 59–83/147–74), the ancient Greek *oikos* (*PS*: ¶¶450–86, 269–95/294–304), the Roman family (*PR*: 3; §180R, 216–17; §180A, 218), and so on. In detail, they differ greatly from the description of the family provided in the *PR*. In the *Phenomenology,* Hegel defines the ancient Greek family in terms strikingly similar to the family chapter of the *PR*. He speaks of the family as 'natural ethical community' (*PS*: ¶450, 268/294). For this reason, I believe it is warranted to read this formulation as providing the conceptual core, which brings forth different actualizations throughout history. The constituting element of the family is therefore a certain intersection between the 'ethical' and the 'natural', actualized in accordance with the respective historical shape of ethical life. And the family concept of the *Philosophy of Right* is best understood as a specific version of actualizing this principle—one adequate to Hegel's own time. In examining the family concept, we must then ask for the relationship between ethical life and nature, i.e. the way in which the family actualizes the tension between freedom and nature.

III.   Immediate natural relationality

How then are we to understand the family's relation to nature? Above, I have argued that it is the family's genuine form of sociality which Hegel describes as 'immediate or *natural*'. Now, the first paragraphs of the family chapter spell out further what he means by this. First, Hegel defines the form of relationship inherent in the family, to then discuss the different aspects or elements of family life in which this relationship 'attains completion' (*PR*: §160, 200). He characterizes the immediate-natural sociality in question as 'love', that is 'spirit's *feeling* [Empfindung] of its own unity' (*PR*: §158, 199). Love is then further described as an 'immediate' way of relating to other individuals, in which we encounter them not as 'independent persons', but as 'members' of a common whole (*PR*: §158, 199). Moreover, it is by being part of this whole—i.e. being a member of a family—, that we have 'self-consciousness' of ourselves as individuals, not independent of it (*PR*: §158, 199). I believe it is important to note the order of steps here: In love we are related to others in a shared *feeling* of unity. Initially, this unity is therefore not primarily a self-conscious or willingly entered relationship, but one that affects us on an *immediate* emotional level. It precedes our self-consciousness of this unity, and our individuality within it. That is, we gain

a sense of self as part of this relationship only after this bond is already established. Individuality and self-consciousness are thus not the starting point, but enabled by a more fundamental form of relationship we have with others—one that exists on the level of mere *feelings*. In the case of the loving couple, this seems rather odd, since we certainly are already individuals before we fall in love for the first time, although the feeling of love might be beyond our conscious control. However, if we take into account the aspect of child-rearing, we can see that every human life begins in a pre-self-conscious relationship, which takes place first on the level of mutual feelings. We are thus always already related to others—i.e. part of a social universality—before fully entering the spiritual world of self-consciousness in which we realize our individuality. The family is the 'paternal soil from which the individual [der Einzelne] gained his livelihood' (*PR*: §238, 263). But even when we have reached full-fledged individuality, we enter into new bonds that again take place first on an emotional level and thus precede our self-conscious grasp of them.

In §161, when discussing the meaning of marriage, Hegel then describes this pre-self-conscious form of relationality further as a moment of '*natural vitality*' (*PR*: §161, 200–201). And he further specifies it as 'the actuality of the *genus* [Gattung] and its process' (*PR*: §161, 200–201). In choosing the term 'genus', he refers to the chapter on the animal's life-process in his *Philosophy of Nature* (*EN*: §367, 410).[20] This is amplified a few years later in the family chapter of the *Encyclopaedia*, where Hegel writes: 'The ethical spirit, when in its *immediacy*, contains the *natural* moment that the individual has its substantial reality in its natural universality, the *genus*' (*ES*: §518, 229). Referencing the 'genus-process' again suggests that Hegel conceives of this relationality in terms of 'first' not 'second' nature. This, however, further deepens the tension between freedom and nature. For now, it seems that, what we encounter in the family is the equivalent of the life-process of non-rational animals. Only now it somehow takes place within ethical life, thus taking on a normative role for our lives. Are we then simply returning to the conservative understanding of the family, immediately inferring from natural facts to social norms?

I suggest we read this as follows. What we encounter in the family is in fact a form of relationality that is not unique to the social world of spirit. Clearly, the fact that we are part of something universal that transcends us is primarily achieved through the process of spiritual mediation. But not only. There is a sense in which we are socially related already as *natural* beings (Khurana Forthcoming).[21] This form of pre-spiritual sociality, however, is only *immediate*. That is, it is not yet *mediated* through the institutions of ethical life, i.e. the self-conscious practices of what Hegel calls 'objective spirit'. While the forms of sociality actualized in the bourgeois society and the state exist only in and through spirit's self-conscious creation, the family, although certainly a *social* institution,

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relates to a form of relationality that precedes spirit itself and is therefore immediately given, i.e. *natural* in the sense of 'first nature'.[22] This poses a problem for us, because the spheres of ethical life entail social roles that determine our actions. And if those are subject to something other than the process of (spiritual) self-determination, ethical life's essentially free character seems radically undermined.

One way of understanding this is the conservative view, according to which the family is defined by natural determinations and freedom consists of aligning ourselves with the natural order. However, this conflicts heavily with the conception of ethical life just described; and it is then entirely unclear how the family can be part of that. Instead, I propose we understand the tension between freedom and nature to be exactly what the family is about and conceive of it as the site of their *mediation*. It is thus no coincidence, that Hegel defines the family in its dual character, as '*natural* ethical spirit'—i.e. both natural *and* ethical. Moreover, in the context of the family, he is speaking of the '*actuality*' of the genus-process, not of this process as such. And in the *Encyclopaedia*, he explicitly states that the immediate natural sociality of the genus must be 'elevated to a spiritual determination' (*ES*: §518, 229). So, on the one hand, he ascribes it to our 'first nature', and thus seemingly beyond our freedom, that we are always already related to others. But, on the other, he embeds this fact of life in an ethical institution and therefore links it to the inherent requirement of ethical life: to actualize freedom. In other words, to say that it gains *actuality*, is to say that we must appropriate our immediate natural relationality *in a free manner*, thus transforming it into a self-conscious and self-determined practice (Bockenheimer 2013: 25–30). The family marks precisely this intersection between freedom and nature. It is an *ethical* sphere not *despite* being somehow enmeshed in nature, but exactly *because* it is related to our 'natural vitality'. Its core task lies in mediating freedom and nature—it is ethical life's response to the problem posed by our entanglement with nature, our *immediate natural relationality*.

IV. The materiality of self-conscious life

If my reading holds true, Hegel considers it the task of the family to actualize the natural genus-process in an ethical or free way. This necessarily raises the wider philosophical question of the relationship between spirit and nature in general. Although it is certainly beyond the scope of this text to discuss this in detail, I think it is important for understanding the exact character of the family's relationship to nature and, in turn, the immediate natural relationality of human life. Since Hegel explicitly defines the natural element of the family as '*actuality*

of the genus and its process', we must turn to his *Philosophy of Nature*. Here, he introduces 'the process of the genus' (*EN*: §367, 410) as a description of the life-process of non-rational animals. The term denotes what we might call the reproductive life of animals: their individual self-maintenance, their relationship to their environment, their process of propagation, as well as matters of sickness and death.[23] By speaking of the 'genus-process' in the context of the family, Hegel therefore suggests that the family has something in common with animal life. This may initially seem ill-advised, since any reference to the reproductive life of animals immediately reminds us of the conservative claim, according to which the social roles within the family are determined by supposed natural facts, such as biological sex differences. But this problem arises mainly when we understand the relationship between humans and animals as one of identity. This, however, is not Hegel's understanding of it.

In a marginal note found in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, he gives a concise description of the human-animal relationship, in which he defines 'humans' as *self-conscious animals*. He writes: 'Man is an animal', and 'because he *knows that he is an animal*', he 'ceases to be an animal and attains *knowledge of himself* as spirit' (*LA*: 80/112).[24] For Hegel, a human being is characterized by a dual nature that may initially seem paradoxical; it is at once an animal *and* not an animal (Khurana 2021). While we share much with non-rational animals, there is something that is unique to us. And it is the latter that changes the meaning of the former. Being self-conscious completely transforms our way of being, so that our animality is one of a fundamentally different kind (Kern and Kietzmann 2017). In my reading, the genus-process takes a special role in this. Hegel discusses it at the very end of the *Philosophy of Nature* because it paves the way for spirit's emergence, presented in the following part of the *Encyclopaedia*, the *Philosophy of Spirit*.[25] Hence, it marks the point of intersection between mere animal life and self-conscious human life (Khurana 2017: 375–79). In my reading, the animal's genus-process anticipates the very structure of self-consciousness, albeit in an insufficient form.[26] It thus contains important insights into our very own lifeform. But it reaches its ultimate shape only in the self-conscious practices of human life, where it is sublated into a higher form: the *self-conscious* genus-process.[27]

Thus, we must first examine the 'insufficiency' of the animal's genus-process, to then gain an understanding of our relationship to it. In the philosophy of nature, the genus-process is initially not presented as problematic. On the contrary, it is discussed as what sets animals apart from the rest of nature—both the dead nature of stones ('geological nature') and the living nature of plants. Unlike the forms of nature that precede it, an animal is an *individual*, or more precisely, a *living individual*. Accordingly, Hegel ascribes to it a simple form of interiority or subjectivity that enables it to have a 'sense of self' (*Selbstgefühl*) (*EN*: §350,

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351). An animal can locate itself in space, move itself, refer to something external, and distinguish itself from its environment. It thus exhibits a basic form of self-relation, albeit merely in 'feeling' (*Gefühl*) (*EN*: §352, 356).[28] Within the genus-process, the animal then relates not only to itself but to other animals—to animals of other genera as 'other' and to those of its own genus as 'same'. By doing this, its self-relation is no longer merely that of an individual, but one that refers to a broader conceptual *universality*—it is representative of a genus. 'Genus' (*Gattung*) (*EN*: §367, 410) is the term Hegel uses to denote the lifeform concept of a specific kind of animal.[29] The cat, for example, relates to another cat *as a cat* and thereby treats itself not only as an indeterminate individual, but as a *cat*. It recognizes both its other and itself as instances of the same universal concept and thereby becomes determined. It is an individual *by instantiating something universal*.[30] And animal life therefore entails a basic form of sociality or relationality.

However, the individual animal can realize its 'genus' only insufficiently, for it is a concrete individual with certain characteristics—a 'merely immediate singularity in which the living being is still only a natural being'—i.e. not fully universal (*EN*: §367, 410). Hegel here emphasizes, above all, the sexual difference that renders each individual a one-sided instantiation of its genus. Mainly for this reason, the animal's life is defined by a feeling of 'inadequacy', which drives it to unite itself with another individual of the different sex (*EN*: §368, 411). This is what Hegel calls the 'sex-relation' (*Geschlechtsverhältnis*) (*EN*: §368, 411). In copulating (*Begattung*) (*EN*: §368, 411), both individuals then momentarily realize themselves as universal in a *feeling* of unity, thereby bringing the genus to existence. But as soon as they part, they are again mere one-sided individuals. The animal is yet unable to hold on to its genus, for it is not represented in thought, but only in *feeling* and in the act of copulation—it fails to grasp its universal concept *as* a concept. Thus, individual and universal fall apart and the genus realizes itself only insufficiently (*EN*: §369, 411). As a result, the animal is immediately determined by its universal, the genus. Despite being a rather complex living being, it realizes its universality not by representing it, but by carrying out its immediate life activity: it is fully dependent on realizing the genus in its natural form, as mere propagation.

Now, by examining the insufficiency of the animal's genus-process, I believe, we gain an insight into the structure of self-consciousness. To overcome its deficient status, the animal needs to grasp the universal that it has hitherto only *felt*; it needs to get hold of its own lifeform as such. In doing so, it develops conceptual capacities that enable it to have a *thinking* self-relation—it refers to itself *by using concepts*. In overcoming this limitation, the non-rational animal transgresses itself; it turns into a *self-conscious* living being, a human. For Hegel, human beings are therefore animals that actualize a more complex form

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of self-relation. That is, we do in fact belong to a specific genus or lifeform, just as animals do. After all, we obviously share certain reproductive activities and needs with non-rational animals. Unlike these animals, however, we do not merely carry out the genus activity, but we represent it *thinkingly*. This completely transforms the relation between individual and universality, or genus.[31] Instead of being immediately determined by our genus, we have *knowledge* of it. And in *thought*, individual and universal are ultimately united. That is, the conception we have of our shared genus informs our sense of individuality. Our self-conception is never that of a mere individual, but that of a representative of something universal.

This knowledge, however, is not only knowledge in the theoretical sense invoked by the conservative. It is not a third personal insight into a given natural order or a set of facts from which we can deduce certain norms. Rather, it is *practical knowledge* in the Aristotelian sense of *phronēsis* (Thompson 2013). As such, it is a first-personal form of knowledge that does not merely receive its object as it is, but instead, is 'the cause of what it understands' (Anscombe 2000: 87). Knowing and acting are thus not distinct but essentially intertwined. Practical knowledge shapes the object of knowledge through realizing it in action. *Knowingly* realizing the genus-process means that we carry it out as a self-conscious practice. That is, in realizing the genus-process, we determine our conception of it. And it is here, in Hegel's understanding, where the most basic form of human freedom emerges. Because *thinking* a concept in practical terms opens it up for (re-)interpretation. The 'genus' of human beings is therefore not immediately given, but to be interpreted. Meaning, it becomes radically indeterminate and must be *determined by* a human's self-conscious activity itself. As a result, we shape our own genus activity—what and how to eat, forms of sexual reproduction, ways of dealing with death, etc. Accordingly, a human self-relation is one of *self*-determination, or *autonomy*: being human consists of shaping what it is to be human—a 'process of self-production' (*PR*: §10A, 45). It is being a self-conscious animal grasping its own nature and thereby radically transforming it (Pinkard 2013).

This may initially seem like a truism. Of course, human beings do not behave the same way animals do, and of course a certain amount of thinking and deliberate action is part of this. But the point I want to make here is a stronger one. In my reading, towards the end of his *Philosophy of Nature,* Hegel describes the process in which nature attains knowledge of itself and as a result turns into spirit. Spirit is *nature grasping itself* or as he says, 'the truth of nature' (*ES*: §381, 9). This reveals an important insight into the essence of our freedom. For Hegel, freedom cannot merely be understood as *freedom from nature*, or more precisely, *freedom from natural determinations.* Above all, we are natural beings. No individual can sustain itself independently of others. We are all radically

dependent on the mutual performance of reproductive genus activities—on feeding each other, procreating, fostering offspring, and healing each other. This precedes our becoming self-conscious individuals. And it is a fact of 'first nature' that we can observe in other animals. Yet, with Hegel, we can understand this as a primitive but prerequisite form of our very own *self-conscious* life activity. Freedom emerges not apart from, but on the very basis of it. It is, first of all, the becoming self-conscious of this very process. For this reason, freedom can only be understood as *freely relating* oneself *to nature*. It is knowing oneself to be an animal and *thereby* transcending animality, i.e. having a self-conscious relation to one's own lifeform. In other words, human freedom is the self-determination of a *natural* being.

Now, this thought has important implications for our understanding of the family. For what Hegel describes as 'the *actuality* of the genus and its process' is, in my reading, the genus-process *in its human form*. Again, with our being self-conscious, the relation that we have to our own life activity changes. As *self-conscious* animals we cannot perform the process of reproduction as immediate execution of a given/natural necessity. Instead, it is inherently linked to our conception of freedom. We must establish a *free* way of relating to our own reproductive nature and thus cease to be mere animals. Because otherwise, we would not live up to our being self-conscious. Lifting reproduction into a self-determined endeavour is then something we must do in order to actualize ourselves as fully self-conscious beings, or humanity as a genus. It is a basic normative notion that is implied in our very way of being—*the notion of a self-conscious genus-process*.

V. Actualizing the genus-process

After examining the animal's genus-process in the *Philosophy of Nature*, we can now return to the family chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*. Above, I have argued that Hegel considers it the task of the family to mediate the tension between freedom and nature, i.e. to *freely* appropriate our 'natural vitality'. Further, I have argued that this is a fundamental aspect of our very nature as self-conscious animals. This has revealed itself as a problem: While non-rational animals are immediately determined by their genus, we must overcome this subjection and freely actualize the genus-process. Yet we remain living individuals and are therefore part of a genus. Thus, we can never fully transform it, but only establish practices that enable us to organize the genus-process in as free a manner as possible. That being said, it can now be stated more clearly what the conceptual core of the family is: its task is to free us from being overly subjected to

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the genus-process not by denying our natural relationality, but by enabling us to freely appropriate and actively shape it.

Recalling the different historical variants of the family described throughout Hegel's work, they must then all be understood as forms of freely actualizing the genus-process—as specific solutions to the problem of our entanglement with nature. The underlying conception of freedom, however, also changes with the course of history and the respective shapes of ethical life. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel presents us with what he considers the most advanced version of this so far. Accordingly, he views the *Philosophy of Right*'s family model as a distinctly 'modern' solution—a development over pre-modern shapes of family life. He considers it to be more complete in that it actualizes the genus-process more fully, or as we might say, more freely. We should keep this in mind, for it implies that the family concept of the *Philosophy of Right* is itself only a historically specific response to the problem of our 'natural vitality'. Despite its conservative surface, it is therefore consistent with Hegel's overall theory of the family to adapt its shape with the state of historical development.

Now, if my reading holds true, the different elements of the family discussed in the rest of the family chapter must be understood as specific ways of actualizing its conceptual core. That is, the legal unit of marriage, the shared-property relation, and the specific form of child-rearing, must be related to the animal's genus-process. In other words, they all need to be explicable as ways of 'elevating' the genus-process 'to a spiritual determination'—as solutions to the problem posed by the natural side of our lives.

The first element, in which the family 'attains completion' is its legal form, *marriage*. So, what is the problem for which marriage is supposed to be a solution? Above, I have argued that, for Hegel, the family is based on our immediate *natural* relationality. And that he characterizes this relationship as 'love' (*PR*: §158, 199). In a loving relationship, we find ourselves recognized in our immediate particularity—as beings with specific needs and wants—and provide for each other. Love, however, is merely a feeling, i.e. something natural. This entails two problems for us. For one, love is therefore not a stable basis for a social relationship. Our being part of a family is, by itself, not secured by any legal status, but merely based on mutual affection. Feelings, however, might evaporate at any time (*PR*: §161A, 201), leaving us on our own. On the other hand, these affectionate bonds with others precede our self-conscious grasp of them. Meaning, they merely affect us and are thus, initially, not freely chosen. To counter these problems, we require a fixed social institution that provides both a certain level of stability and is entered into deliberately: marriage. In the shape of marriage, the loving relationship comes with a codified catalogue of rights and norms, and it attains public recognition. That is, it acquires objectivity. Thus, the mere feeling of love turns into 'self-conscious love' (*PR*: §161, 200) or 'legal-ethical [rechtlich

sittliche] love, […] so that the transient, capricious, and purely subjective aspects of love are excluded from it' (*PR*: §161A, 201).[32] It is no longer a merely given relationship, but one that is based on a free decision— 'its objective origin is the free consent of the persons concerned' (*PR*: §162, 201). Hence, overall, the legal institution of marriage can be explained as a specific way of appropriating our immediate natural relationality in a self-conscious and thus ethical form.

The next element is the specific *property* relation actualized in the family. By marrying, two hitherto independent persons form one legal entity. That is, they freely 'consent to *constitute a single person* and to give up their natural and individual personalities within this union' (*PR*: §162, 201). In 'abstract right', which according to Hegel underlies all of ethical life, the mark of personhood is having property and excluding others of its use. Property itself is defined as a social form or title that acknowledges certain objects as expressing the will of a self-conscious individual (*PR*: §§41–46, 73–77). In order to constitute one single *person*, the individuals must therefore transcend their independence and overcome the mutual exclusion of their respective property (*PR*: §170, 209). Meaning, they must own property together, *as a family*. In the family, we thus encounter a way of sharing 'common property, so that no member […] has particular property' (*PR*: §171). For Hegel, this is not a trivial aspect of family, because property is the external expression of personhood. In having property, the family proves to be *one person*, a true unity—its unity manifests itself in an external object.

However, in sharing property among more than one living being, we face certain difficulties. For if one family member leaves or dies, what happens with the shared property? To whom does it belong, when the unity of the family falls apart? Regular property is indifferent to this question, since it belongs to an individual. In order to properly serve as *family property*, property thus needs to take on a different form. It must become 'permanent property' (*PR*: §170R, 209), or *Vermögen* (*PR*: §171, 209). As such, it secures the 'family resources' against the dissolution of the family, because every family member is equally entitled to it.[33] In the event of death, it belongs either to the remaining partner, or it is inherited by the next generation—a process that is regulated through inheritance law (*PR*: §178, 214).

But how does this relate the family to nature? In one sense, it is quite similar to how marriage is a remedy for the capriciousness of our natural bonds. While marriage is meant to provide stability in terms of an emotional relation, the concept of *Vermögen* is supposed to provide us with *material* stability. It is thus conceived of as a solution to the problem of natural mortality and ensures us with continued access to material resources. In addition, it is meant to freely appropriate the transgenerationality of the genus-process. This becomes clear from a contrast that Hegel draws between the ancient Greek family, discussed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the 'modern' family of the *Philosophy of Right*.

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For Hegel, individuals of the Greek *polis* were overly dependent on their blood relationships (*PS*: ¶452, 270–71/296; §477, 290/316). In this sense, they were still very much subjected to the 'natural' genus-process—to a bond, not freely chosen. 'Modern' ethical life, however, regulates the 'natural blood relationship' (§172, 209–10) through inheritance law and thus casts into a legally mediated relationship. According to it, the 'new family', constituted through marriage, has absolute priority over the '*kinship groups*' (§172, 209–10). Although, we inherit property from a former generation, thereby starting with a material basis, we are first and foremost responsible to our 'chosen' family. By constituting a family through marriage, we therefore gain a certain level of independence from these natural blood-relations and therefore freely appropriate the genus-process.

This points to the third and last element of the family: *child-rearing*. While property expresses the legal unity of marriage in an external *object*, love itself can only be expressed in '*an existence* [eine Existenz] *which has being for itself*' (*PR*: §173, 210), the child. It reflects the unity of the partners back to them and 'in it, they see their love before them' (*PR*: §173A, 211). Now, Hegel writes: 'From the point of view of nature, the presupposition of persons existing immediately—as parents—here becomes the result, a process which runs on into the infinite progression of generations which produce and presuppose one another' (*PR*: §173A, 211). The starting point of the family were two self-sufficient individuals who overcame their opposition by deliberately constituting a family. However, before attaining individuality, they began their lives in a pre-existing family unit, as offspring. This, again, poses a problem: while the 'new family' is sufficiently ethical, expressing the freedom of its members, for the child it is a bond unchosen. Children merely find themselves within a family of origin. The main concern of the paragraphs dealing with upbringing is therefore the parents' task to enable their children to become independent and leave the 'natural bond' of their original family behind: 'their upbringing […] has the negative determination of raising the children out of the *natural immediacy* in which they originally exist to self-sufficiency and freedom of personality, thereby enabling them to leave the *natural unit* of the family' (*PR*: §175, 212, my emphasis). This highlights an important difference between the *natural* genus-process and its ethical actualization. For, while animal reproduction merely aims at bringing forth new members of the genus, ethical upbringing has the ultimate goal of creating *autonomous* individuals. So, again, the genus-process is being freely appropriated.

Overall, family life thus forms a circular movement in which a natural bond is transformed into an ethical one again and again. We start from a family of origin, become independent and create families of our own, bringing children into this world, who then start anew. It is the process of appropriating the given immediate natural relations of human beings in a form that is expressive of spirit's self-determination, of freedom. The normativity of the family concept

therefore consists in its relation to the concept of freedom, in actualizing the natural genus-process in a free and self-conscious form.

VI. Towards an immanent critique of the family

Having identified the underlying normative structure of Hegel's family concept, we are now able to give an *immanent* critique of it. We can readily admit that the problem Hegel diagnoses is valid. As natural beings, we are related to others in an immediate way that is both the presupposition of our freedom, and one of its obstacles. And we can also grant that the specific family concept of the *Philosophy of Right* is intended as a 'modern' solution to the problem posed by our 'natural vitality'. Furthermore, we can appreciate the reasoning behind the different elements of the family. As shown above, they all serve a function within the family's general task of appropriating the natural genus-process. However, we might criticize the specific family model proposed by Hegel in the same way he criticizes 'pre-modern' forms of family life, such as the ancient Greek family (Ravven 1996). For, if we show that the different elements of the family appropriate the natural genus-process only insufficiently; or that they re-inscribe a certain subjection to supposed natural facts; we can demonstrate that the family does not live up to its inherent normative standard. We can then ask for alternative ways of organizing family life that are more complete in terms of actualizing freedom, i.e. freely appropriating natural determinations.

However, it is important to not conceive of this process in overly perfectionist terms. As I have mentioned above, establishing ethical practices such as the family, takes the form of a 'second nature'. Practices are sets of norms that have become habitual for us and therefore determine us again in a way similar to natural determinations. Although we transform the natural genus-process into a self-conscious practice, we are thus nevertheless confronted with something pre-reflexive or pre-self-conscious that is only *potentially* mutable.[34] The appropriation of natural determinations thus has a dual character: it implies that we raise ourselves above the sphere of natural immediacy and attain a certain amount of freedom, but it also shows that we cannot do so by merely leaving nature behind. Instead, spirit posits itself again in the form of nature: 'the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as a second nature' (*PR*: §4, 35). For one, this explains why certain lifeforms, such as the family, are very much resistant to change—they have become part of our nature. But it also shows that we are mistaken, when we understand the process of freely appropriating nature as one that can ever fully attain completion. Rather, every form of life again becomes naturalized. And in the process

of history, we partake in an endless cycle of transforming nature—now in the sense of 'second nature'—into self-conscious practices, thereby developing new forms of life. The family is an integral part of this process and Hegel takes this into account when describing the different historical shapes of it. An *immanent* critique of the form that I have sketched here, is a vital element of this endeavour. Yet, it cannot anticipate a supposed ultimately free form of ethical life, but only serve as a ground for imagining new forms of life that will again have to be criticized by following generations. The guiding principle for any such critique of 'the family', however, stays the same, it is *the notion of a self-conscious genus-process*.[35]

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Notes

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[1] Abbreviations used:

EN = Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature,* trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

ES = Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind,* trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

LA = *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)/*Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

LPWH = Hegel*, Lectures on the Philosophy of World History,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)/*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

PS = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)/*Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988).

SL = Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998)/*Wissenschaft der Logik II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996).

For quotations from the *Phenomenology*, I provide the 'paragraph'-numbers from the Miller translation, although they are not in the original text.

[2] 'Those who have regarded the family as a natural and necessary institution have defined women by their sexual, procreative and child-rearing functions within it. This has led to the prescription of a code of morality and conception of rights for women distinctly different from those that have been prescribed for men. The assumption of the necessity of the family leads the theorists to then regard the biological differences between the sexes as entailing all

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the other, conventional and institutional differences in sex role which the family, especially in its most patriarchal forms, has required' (Okin 2013: 9).

[3] I put 'women' and 'men' in quotation marks to emphasize that these are social gender categories.

[4] In the context of family matters, one often encounters an odd mixture of Christian and evolutionary motives. A striking example is Carlson and Mero (2007).

[5] For accounts of natural normativity that are trying to avoid any conservatism, see Foot (2003). A decidedly feminist version can be found in Hursthouse (1991; 2001) and Nussbaum (1992).

[6] Okin ascribes such a view not to the Stoics but to Aristotle (Okin 2013: Ch.4). See Aristotle (2002: 1253a). In modern philosophy it is often associated with Spinoza. See Spinoza (2018: 4p73s). A decidedly *conservative* interpretation of it can be found in Scruton (2002). For a somewhat more nuanced characterization, see Nadler (2024) and Steinberg (2022).

[7] For an early 'historical' account of the family, see Engels (2021). It has significantly inspired the contemporary debate on family abolition via Barrett and McIntosh (2015: 81–84).

[8] 'Like woman herself, the family appears as a natural object, but is actually a cultural creation. There is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family, any more than there is about the character or role of women. It is the function of ideology to present these given social types as aspects of Nature itself. […] The apparently natural condition can be made to appear more attractive than the arduous advance of human beings towards culture' (Mitchell 1973: 99–100).

[9] For a detailed overview of the tradition of 'autonomy', see Schneewind (1998).

[10] A Kantian legacy discussed by McDowell (1996).

[11] Prominent liberal interpretations are Neuhouser (2003) and Pippin (2008). For a corresponding take on the family concept, see Brauer (2007).

[12] My account of an 'immanent critique' is, of course, inspired by Jaeggi (2018). While Jaeggi primarily depicts it as a method of social critique, I also use it as a tool of interpreting and appropriating classical texts.

[13] Although '[t]he end of Hegel's "actual soul" is a Stoic end: life in a world in which human beings gain freedom through insight into necessity' (De Laurentiis 2021: 191), I believe this applies only to 'subjective spirit'.

[14] On Hegel's disdain for 'emancipated' women, see Pinkard (2000: 70, 112, 192, 299, 314–15, 482).

[15] I use the term 'notion' in a loose non-terminological sense, i.e. not as a translation of '*Begriff*' or '*Idee*'.

[16] See Rahel Jaeggi's conception of *immanent critique*. She briefly uses the family as an exemplary case. In her reading, the institution of the family serves two purposes: (1) The mediation between nature and freedom, and (2) the mediation between dependency and autonomy. In my view, the former grounds the latter.

[17] Usually translated as 'civil society', which, in my view, omits the important association with the rise of the bourgeoisie.

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[18] This, of course, is only a very rough sketch. The bourgeois society itself already entails elements that are meant to compensate its disinterested form of sociality, such as the 'corporation' (*PR*: §250–56, 270–74), which Hegel accordingly describes as a '*second* family' (§252, 271).

[19] In the family chapter of the *Encyclopaedia,* however, Hegel even refers to it as '*natural* spirit', suggesting that not only ethical life, but spirit itself has a natural form (*ES*: §517, 229). It might be worthwhile to work out how the '*natural* spirit' (*natürlicher Geist*) of the family chapter relates to what Hegel calls '*Naturgeist*' (oddly translated as 'natural mind') in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (*ES*: §§393–94, 39–49).

[20] He also references *SL*: 772–74/484–86. I will, however, focus on the *Realphilosophie*.

[21] This runs counter to the widely accepted reading that sociality comes about *only* through the struggle for recognition described in *PS*: §§178–96, 111–19/127–36. I argue, however, that we already encounter a basic form of proto-sociality in the life process of the animal. Unfortunately, this argument must be postponed to another text.

[22] This is not to say that the family is the only place in ethical life where we encounter nature at all. However, it is the only sphere of ethical life that actualizes a natural form of social relatedness.

[23] I use 'reproduction' here in a non-terminological sense. Hegel's own use of it is limited to *EN*: §354A, 371–72; §355A, 373; §366, 409).

[24] Although only a lecture note, I believe it provides a helpful key to better understand Hegel's original texts. It resonates with Charles Taylor's definition of the human as 'self-interpreting animal' (Taylor 1985), recently taken up by Terry Pinkard: 'In a nutshell, this is also Hegel's view about the context of the final ends of life: We are natural creatures, self-interpreting animals, and our final ends have to do with how we are to give a rational account – or, to speak more colloquially, to make sense – of what, in general, it means to be a human […]. Everything hangs on that' (Pinkard 2013: 5).

[25] Often translated as '*Philosophy of Mind*'. This, however, omits important aspects of 'objective' and 'absolute spirit'.

[26] Its insufficiency comes into view only from the perspective of spirit 'looking back', in some sort of 'retroactive teleology' (Aqeel 2020).

[27] Another source would be the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel describes self-consciousness as '[t]his other Life […] for which the genus as such exists, and which is genus on its own account, viz. self-consciousness' (*PS*: ¶173, 109/125).

[28] A striking parallel to the family chapter, which underpins my reading that it has something to do with our 'first nature'.

[29] My reading of this is inspired by Thompson (2012). However, Khurana (2022) has argued that 'genus' denotes something more general than 'species'. While I find his approach very instructive, I do not share his view on the terminological distinction.

[30] According to Thompson (2012), this kind of generality of 'life form concepts' allows for variation and deficiency. It is therefore not necessarily in conflict with evolutionary accounts of biology.

[31] Unlike Aristotle, Hegel is thus not an anthropological essentialist, for he incorporates elements of human self-constitution into his *Anthropology*.

[32] Since Hegel here highlights the family's *legal* form, the translation of 'rechtlich sittliche Liebe' as 'rightfully ethical love' obscures the meaning of the sentence. In my view, it ought to be translated as 'legal' or 'legally'.

[33] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer, I was made aware of §§199–200 of the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel again picks up the concept of *Vermögen* to discuss the necessity of access to resources. Here, it points to the fact that in bourgeois society we all depend on the mutual performance of everyone pursuing their *own* needs, thereby unwittingly realizing the universal. It shows how social relations again become pre-reflexive, i.e. naturalized.

[34] I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to highlight this point.

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