

# Some Limits to Hegel's Appeal to Life

*Andrew Werner*

*Yale University*

## Abstract

For two hundred years, people have been trying to make sense of Hegel's so-called "dialectical method". Helpfully, Hegel frequently compares this method with the idea of life, or the organic (cf., e.g., PhG 2, 34, 56). This comparison has become very popular in the literature (in, e.g., Pippin, Beiser, and Ng). Typically, scholars who invoke the idea of life also note that the comparison has limits and that no organic analogy can completely explain the nature of the dialectical method. To my knowledge, however, no scholar has attempted to explain exactly where or why the organic analogy falls short. In this paper, I propose to remedy this lack by exploring in depth two different organic models. In brief, I argue that both versions of the organic model require an appeal to something external to the organism, and no such appeal can be made sense of within the dialectical method.

*Keywords:* The Dialectical Method, Speculative Knowledge, Life, The Organic, Hegel's *Logic*.

## 1. Introduction

Since Hegel first wrote, people have been trying to make sense of his so-called "dialectical method". This method, everyone acknowledges, is incredibly difficult to understand and Hegel says some very puzzling things about it. But, to many, understanding it holds out the promise of solving a vast host of philosophical puzzles—indeed, it can seem like understanding it would yield knowledge of the most fundamental nature of being.

In fact, Hegel preferred to call what now goes by "dialectical method" the "speculative method", as dialectics was the non-ultimate aspect of this method (cf. EL §§81-82).<sup>1</sup> By calling it speculative, he meant in particular to mark out a

<sup>1</sup> Citations of Hegel will be as follows: citations to the *Phenomenology* will use the abbreviation PhG, and cite by paragraph number (e.g. PhG 40). Citations of the *Encyclopedia Logic* will use the abbreviation EL, and cite by the section number (e.g. EL §23). Citations of all other works by Hegel will use the volume/page number of the two versions of his collected works (Suhrkamp followed by Felix Meiner), separated by a '/'. All translations from Hegel are my own, though I have consulted Terry Pinkard's translation of the *Phenomenology* and George di Giovanni's translation of the *Science of Logic*. Finally, when I

special form of knowledge. This in turn suggests that even the term “method” is potentially misleading: method suggests a way of coming to have knowledge of some claim, where a different method might yield knowledge of the very same claim. In fact, Hegel is interested in a distinctive form of knowledge, where part of what is distinctive about this form is that what it knows is inseparable from it and so cannot be known in any other way. Thus, it would be better to talk not of a special method, but of a special form of knowledge. So, rather than using the term “dialectical method”, I will use the term “speculative knowledge”.

In the first instance, the distinctiveness of speculative knowledge was intended by Hegel to mark it off from the two more standardly recognized forms of knowledge: theoretical and practical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is knowledge of what is whether it is known to be so or not. Practical knowledge is knowledge that is productive of its object in the sense that it brings its object about. These forms of knowledge are perfectly valid, Hegel thought, but are not suitable to the distinctive task of philosophy—knowledge of the absolute.<sup>2</sup> Whatever he meant by that, he didn’t think knowledge of it could be either theoretical or practical, and that sets up the problem of explaining just what form of knowledge would comprehend the absolute.

Hegel was writing against the backdrop of both Aristotle and Kant. So it makes sense that to clarify the nature of speculative knowledge, he might reach for various ideas in their work. One idea he invokes fairly often is the idea of life, or the organic (cf., e.g., PhG 2, 34, 56). This idea has become very popular in the literature on Hegel. In particular, scholars appeal to organic models to try to clarify the manner in which speculative knowledge progresses from one concept to another. Here are three representative quotations from scholars:

One of [Hegel’s] frequent complaints about the presumed stability and classificatory “deadness” of traditional categorial schemes is that they do a great injustice to the “organic” nature of thought, that thought should be understood, to say everything at once, as “life” (Pippin 1989: 236).

For all Hegel’s thinking essentially proceeds from an organic vision of the world, a view of the universe as a single vast living organism. Hegel saw the absolute as the “one and all”, the *Hen Kai Pan*, of the pantheistic tradition. But, like Herder, Schiller, Schelling and Hölderlin, he understood this structure in dynamic, indeed organic, terms. The absolute develops in the same manner as all living things (Beiser 2005: 80).

The form of thinking is not dependent on “external objects” for content, but generates and is its own content insofar as it is a living, spiritual object [...]

use the term “*Logic*” I mean to refer to Hegel’s account in both the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel explicitly says that speculative knowledge is neither theoretical nor practical, but he also says that it is “the identity” of both (cf. 6.548-9/12.236). This (and related comments in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit*) might lead one to think that Hegel denies that there is a strict distinction between theory and practice. As I read the claim, however, Hegel is not claiming that speculative knowledge takes the place of theoretical and practical knowledge; those forms of knowledge, in their distinctness, are perfectly valid, but unsuited for philosophy. I will not try to explore the sense in which speculative knowledge is the identity of theoretical and practical knowledge here. (My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.)

[T]hought is said to be living because it gives shape to itself, actualizes itself, and gives itself its own content through this negative process (Ng 2013: 61).

Typically, scholars who invoke the model of life also note that the comparison has limits and that no organic analogy can completely explain the nature of speculative knowledge. Some kind of limit is implicit in Ng's discussion of a life that is also spirit (or of a distinctively human kind of life) and a limit is explicit when Pippin describes the appeal to life as a "highly metaphorical notion" in the sentence following the quoted passage.<sup>3</sup>

To my knowledge, however, no scholar has attempted to explain exactly where or why the organic model falls short of being an adequate model for speculative knowledge. In this paper, I propose to remedy this lack by exploring in depth two different organic models and showing exactly why each falls short of being an adequate model for speculative knowledge. For ease of exposition, I focus on the account of speculative knowledge in the *Logic*, but what I say about it should fairly obviously also hold true of speculative knowledge as it figures in Hegel's other works (e.g., the *Phenomenology*). In brief, I argue that the organic model always requires an appeal to something external to the organism, and no such appeal can be made sense of within speculative knowledge.

One last note before I begin: as I discuss the two models, I will note the respects in which they get something right about speculative knowledge in addition to noting why and where they fail. A consequence of this approach is that one may, for any model, note that we can just accept that model as completely adequate if we abandon whatever feature of it causes it to be inadequate as a model. I have no objections to doing that, so long as we are clear about what we are doing and the argumentative burden it places on us of making sense of the now altered model.

## 2. Speculative Knowledge

In this section, I want to outline two features of speculative knowledge in the *Logic* that will serve as starting points in the sections that follow. In particular, I will argue that the *Logic* offers an explanation of the most basic forms of thought, and that this explanation is meant to avert the skeptical threat that our forms of thought are parochial. These starting points are meant to serve as relatively minimal ways of characterizing the project of the *Logic*: certainly the *Logic* is more than simply an account of the objective validity of the most basic forms of thought, and there are certainly other skeptical challenges that the *Logic* is meant to dissolve. But these minimal characterizations will be sufficient for the arguments that follow.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Noting such limits is not universal among scholars, though: Beiser, for instance, thinks that the analogy has no limits, and that informs his claim that Hegel thinks that the universe is a vast living organism. On this point, as I will show in §§2-4, the texts fairly clearly bear out Pippin and Ng as against Beiser.

<sup>4</sup> To say that these are minimal characterizations is not to say that they are uncontroversial. The second characterization is certainly not accepted by all Hegel scholars. I will try to show that there is good textual evidence in favor of it. If the characterization is nevertheless rejected, then the arguments in the following sections will not (just as they stand) be compelling.

First, the *Logic* offers an explanation of the various fundamental forms of thought. The evidence for this claim is plain. Hegel begins the *Encyclopedia Logic* by noting that one of the ways of describing his *Logic* is as “the science of *thinking*, of its *determinations and laws*” (EL §19; cf. also §§19z2, 23, 24). And, similarly, towards the beginning of the *Science of Logic* he notes that the subject matter (“*Gegenstand*”) of the *Logic* is “*thinking* or more determinately *conceptual thinking*” the concept of which has to “emerge” in the course of the *Logic* itself (5.35/21.27).

That the *Logic* explains the fundamental forms of thinking is not controversial. What is controversial is how its explanation of these forms relates to an account of what is. And, indeed, such controversy makes good sense, since Hegel spends the bulk of his introductions to the two versions of the *Logic* trying to describe the (obviously difficult to grasp) relation between the activity of thinking and what is. Most notably, he spends fifty-two sections (§§26-78) in the *Encyclopedia Logic* describing and challenging the way in which other philosophers have accounted for the relation between thinking and “objectivity” to try to motivate the distinctive way the two are related in the *Logic*. Clearly, Hegel thinks that the fundamental forms of thinking are the fundamental forms of what is, but it is very unclear how he thinks about that “are”. For my purpose in this essay, we do not need to start with any controversial assumptions about this important topic.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the explanation of the forms of thought that the *Logic* offers is meant to avert the threat that they are parochial. A “parochial” form of thought would be such that an adequate explanation for why we judge as we do when using that form would leave open whether the judgment was true. When we err and even when we just accidentally happen to be right, our judging is parochial: our so judging is not explained by the fact that the world is as we judge it to be, but rather by some fact about us which explains why the world seems to us to be that way. For instance, I might err because I have poor eyesight, or because my community raised me to believe in ghosts, or because human beings cannot hear a particular pitch. Such explanations, which appeal to something about me as a way of explaining why I do not judge truly, are incompatible with my judgments being knowledge. Because we judge as we do whether our judgment is true or not, our judgment does not “track the truth” in the way that is required for it to be knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the *Logic* is not meant to avert the very possibility of error—it is not meant to avert the threat posed by the possibility that I have bad eyesight, or was taught superstitious beliefs as a child. But it is meant to avert the threat of parochialism about our fundamental forms of thought: for instance, it is meant to show that the fact that we think about the world as causally structured is not parochial to us, that the world is indeed causally structured.

The worry that our forms of thought are parochial is meant to be generic enough to encompass both Cartesian and Kantian worries.<sup>7</sup> According to Carte-

<sup>5</sup> Further, the issue of how the *Logic* relates to our activity of thinking is extremely important for determining the vexed and complicated relationship between the *Logic* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit*. Again, however, my purpose in this essay do not require that I take a stand on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough development of this idea, cf. Rödl 2007 and 2018.

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful account of the differences between these two kinds of worries, cf. Conant 2004.

sian skepticism, we can form beliefs about the world without being able to exclude the possibility that those beliefs are false. According to Kantian skepticism, we cannot so much as make sense of our capacity to form beliefs about the world, such that we cannot even make sense of our forms of thought as being about the world. Both forms of skepticism share the feature that our forms of thinking reflect something that renders thinking in general (or at least, our thinking in general) unfit to arrive at knowledge of the world. Both, then, are worries about the parochiality of the forms of thinking at which they are directed.

The generic nature of the worry about parochiality as I have spelled it out here does not make it the most incisive tool for examining Hegel's response to skepticism.<sup>8</sup> But its generic nature does enable me to say, without raising many objections, that the method of Hegel's *Logic* is designed to avert the threat that thought is parochial. One sees evidence of some version of the parochialism worry plainly present in Hegel's criticism of the Kantian philosophy, for instance. Hegel writes,

When the critical philosophy understands the relation of these three *terminorum* such that we place the thoughts between us and the matters [*Sachen*] as means in the sense that this means closes us off from the matters instead of merging us with them, this view is opposed by the simple remark that even these matters, which should stand at the other extreme beyond us and beyond the thoughts that refer to them, are themselves thought-things (5.25-6/21.14).<sup>9</sup>

A lot can, has, and should be made of these remarks (which recur frequently in Hegel's discussions of Kant). What I want to note is simply that Hegel is concerned to avoid a conception of thought which locks us up within subjectivity and thereby prevents us from understanding how our thoughts are able to arrive at knowledge of the world.

Moreover, it is clear that he thinks that the method of the *Logic* is one of the keys to overcoming this conception. So he notes that we need to avoid the conception of the forms of thought that "hangs together with" the critical philosophy: we need to avoid the conception of forms of thought "as external forms", forms that are only "*in the content* [*Gehalt*]" and are not conceived of as "the con-

<sup>8</sup> At least, it is not incisive when it is only developed as far as I develop it here, in the interests of remaining non-controversial. I develop a much more controversial account of it in connection to Hegel in other work.

<sup>9</sup> Another helpful formulation occurs in a student transcript of his lectures: "To experience what the truth in things would be is not done [*abgetan*] with mere attention, but rather belongs to our subjective activity which reshapes [*umgestaltet*] the immediately available [*Vorhandene*]. At first glance, this appears totally perverted and to be contrary to the end that cognition concerns itself with. Nevertheless one can say that it has been the persuasion of all times that the substantial is attained first through the re-working of the immediate effected by means of reflection. [...] It is the sickness of our times that has come to despair that our cognition is only something subjective and that this subjective is the final [*das Letzte*]" (EL §22z). The sickness of the times is to think that the nature of the activity of thinking makes thinking parochial, unfit to arrive at knowledge of what is. In this quote Hegel refers to a specific source for this worry, that thinking somehow changes our perceptual representation of the world (cf. EL §22). But we can abstract from that specific suggestion (which is more controversial in the literature) to note that Hegel's conception of thought's relation to the world, as it is developed in the *Logic*, was meant to avert parochialism.

tent itself" (5.26/21.15). One of the principal characteristics of the method of the *Logic* is to take the forms of thought as themselves the "truth" and the content of the investigation (cf. 5.29/21.17). And so it follows that the method of the *Logic* is supposed to avoid closing thought off from the world. Or, positively stated, the method of the *Logic* is supposed to make sense of the objective validity of thought, the capacity to get, non-accidentally, at the true nature of things by thinking.

### 3. Organic Growth

I want now to turn to the first of the two organic models I will discuss in this essay: the Aristotelian model of organic growth. This model is suggested by Hegel's frequent claim that the progress in the *Logic* is self-determining. For instance, he describes "the demand for the *realization of the concept*, which does not lie in the *beginning* itself, but rather much more is the aim and work of the entire further development of cognition" (6.554/12.240).<sup>10</sup> I will first articulate the model and then show in what respect and why it fails to be an adequate model of the logical progression.

In an account of organic growth, we distinguish between immature and mature states of an organism. The immature state is posterior to the mature state in account, or conceptually, because what it is to be the immature state is to be that which tends towards the mature state. So, an account of the immature state must refer to the mature state, as that which makes the immature state intelligible as what it is. Moreover, the immature state tends towards the mature state through its own activity.<sup>11</sup> An acorn, on this view, is an immature oak tree; without grasping that the acorn is an immature oak tree, or at least that it contains a seed and so something that becomes a tree, you would not have any idea what an acorn is. That is, what it is to be an acorn is to be that which tends towards being an oak tree (or, more immediately, tends towards being an oak sapling). Moreover, the acorn becomes an oak through its own activity: by taking in nutrients from the soil, for instance, and—when it is a little more mature—by taking in sunlight.

The first claim, that what it is to be an immature state is defined in terms of the mature state, explains how we can think of the progress as an enrichment—the acorn has not yet realized its nature, to be an oak tree, and in realizing this nature it is enriched, in that it is now actually what it was merely potentially. Moreover, it explains how this can be combined with the thought that the enrichment is already contained (implicitly or in an undeveloped form) in the starting point, since the acorn is defined in terms of the oak tree. Finally, it does this while providing a clear model for thinking about the progress as grounded in the starting point, the immature state (the acorn). The acorn itself tends towards becoming an oak tree. This tendency would explain Hegel's language of "self-determination".

<sup>10</sup> Or, as he puts it a little later, "[T]he progress consists much more in that the universal determines its self and is *for itself* the universal [...] Only in its completion [*Vollendung*] is it the absolute" (6.555-6/12.241). He elsewhere describes the progress in the *Logic* as "this way that constructs its self" and claims that its "self-movement is its spiritual life" (5.17/21.8). Cf. also EL §17, §28z, §238, 5.35/21.27, 5.43/21.33, PhG 2.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*  $\theta 8$  1049b12-1050a16.

However, if we apply this model to speculative knowledge, we make thought parochial. To see this, note again that organic growth is defined by the transition from an immature state to a mature state. These two states are incompatible with one another, and the immaturity is eliminated by the time one arrives at the mature state. So, in organic growth there are distinct states of the existence of the organism, each one exclusive of the others: seed, sapling, tree. The immature state is a way in which the organism can exist, while also being a state in which the organism is a potentiality (potentially mature). So, it belongs to the idea of an immature state that it can fail to realize its potential, that it can fail to become mature.

Aristotle makes this point quite well in his discussion of potentiality in *Metaphysics Theta*. He writes,

Every potentiality is at one and the same time a potentiality for the opposite; for, while that which is not capable of being present in a subject cannot be present, everything that is capable of being may possibly not be actual. That, then, which is capable of being may either be or not be; the same thing, then, is capable both of being and of not being. And that which is capable of not being may possibly not be; and that which may possibly not be is perishable, either without qualification, or in the precise sense in which it is said that it possibly may not be.<sup>12</sup>

When we apply this general point to our example of the acorn, we get the following: the sapling is potentially an oak. That means that it might not be an oak. That is, it might fail in its striving to become an oak.

Since the organism can cease to be without becoming fully mature, there must be conditions outside of or other than it which enable it to become mature: when those conditions are not met, the organism cannot reach maturity; when they are met, it can. I do not mean that there are conditions on the continued existence of the organism in its present state, though there are such conditions: for instance, that all of the air not suddenly become acid, or that the sun not explode. These are enabling conditions on the existence of the organism—in Aristotle's terms, enabling condition on the organism's continuing to be "without qualification". I mean that, in addition to these, there must be distinct enabling conditions on the growth of the organism—those concerned with the possibility that it "perish" in "the precise sense" at issue in maturation, by failing to become mature. The need for these distinct enabling conditions comes with the idea of growth. If the acorn already had that which it needed to be mature, it would not be possible that it would fail to be mature. So, it would not be potentially mature—it would be actually mature, and it would not relate itself to its environment in a process of becoming mature. As merely potentially mature, the immature organism lacks that which it needs to be mature: that is why it must become mature, in an activity of acquiring that which it needs. But this means there are distinct enabling conditions on growth: whatever those conditions are which enable the organism to acquire what it needs to become mature.

So, I have shown that organic growth rests on enabling conditions by the presence of which the organism can mature. Now let's see what happens if we apply this thought to the "maturation" of the forms of thought in the *Logic*. The need to appeal to something external to the mere notion of thought, the appeal

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle 1984: *Metaphysics*  $\theta 8$  1050b8-15.

to an enabling condition, means that the account of thought we start with is not by itself enough to secure the objective validity of the various forms of thought that are developed within the *Logic*. The acorn needs the soil and the sun to grow, and the acorn is not sufficient to secure these for itself. And so, applying this model to the *Logic*, the form of thought requires something analogous to the soil and the sun, some enabling conditions that the form of thought cannot secure for itself. It follows that on this model it is in some sense accidental to the notion of the form of thought that it is actually objectively valid: accidental, because thought does not suffice of itself to explain its objective validity. So for all we know from the bare notion of thought alone it might not be objectively valid, and that means an explanation of it does not suffice to ensure that it can yield knowledge. Hence, it is parochial.

To spell this out a bit: if thought had to rely on something external to itself, which it does not supply, to secure its objective validity, then the mere notion of thought would be compatible with not being able to be objectively valid. To claim this is to claim that the world might well be unthinkable, at least so far as we can tell from the notion of thought as such. We are forced to conclude this from the organic growth model of the development of thought: for if the enabling conditions are absent, then the form of thought cannot come to maturity and so cannot develop those forms requisite to think about the world in general (perhaps we could think only about some aspects of the world). But we cannot actually conclude in that fashion: we cannot so much as think of the possibility of an unthinkable world (or an unthinkable aspect of the world)—that is simply nonsense, since we cannot think of what is unthinkable. And yet we cannot really claim that it is nonsense, or anyway we cannot secure our right to dismissing it as nonsense. Rather, we have to conclude that it is merely a limitation on thought: thought is *unable* to think of an unthinkable world. We are forced to think as though the only way the world could be was by being thinkable, when in fact (but we cannot think this fact) it is only contingently thinkable. It follows that our account of thought makes it parochial: we think as we do only because of the nature of thought and not because of the way the world is. For all we know, for all we are able justifiably to conclude, the world is not thinkable, since we cannot explain or ground or justify its thinkability. And yet we are forced to take up the world as thinkable. This is an unstable cognitive position, to be sure, but it is the one we are forced into insofar as we accept that speculative knowledge essentially requires appealing to something not provided for by the mere notion of thought (some matter to be worked on).

The idea of incorporating matter central to the model of organic growth cannot capture the nature of speculative knowledge. And Hegel describes speculative knowledge in a way which reveals that he would reject the organic growth model: its progression is “unstoppable, pure, taking in nothing from outside” (5.49/21.38). As unstoppable, the non-final stages of the progression are not merely potentially mature (for potentiality implies possibly not, and so it implies that the progression can be stopped). As taking in nothing from the outside, they must rely on no external matter to develop further. The non-final stages must contain within them everything they need to be the final stage.

I think we can see Hegel relying on exactly this point in his discussion of the limits of thinking about life as a model for thinking about the absolute. In the course of discussing arguments for the existence of God, he notes that the “truthful [*wahrhafte*] *determination* of the idea of God” cannot be grasped from



“merely living nature” for “God is more than living, he is spirit. The *spiritual* nature is alone the most worthy and truest *origin* for the thought of the absolute” (EL §50A). His argument for this conclusion is that our observation of the ends of “living nature” “can be contaminated” by “insignificance” (EL §50A). That is, the ends that living beings set cannot demand as their explanation the absolute, because those ends are insignificant enough that something less than the absolute would suffice to explain them. Why? I suggest that these ends are insignificant because they are conditioned by that which they take as their matter. Hegel notes specifically about animals that they do not transform that which they perceive and intuit into anything absolute, but relate to the sensible world as what conditions them (for this reason, Hegel claims, animals “have no religion”) (EL §50A). He must have a similar point in mind for all merely living nature: all of it is conditioned, in its capacity to set ends, by the world which it relates to.

Hegel says that we, on the other hand, are not conditioned by that which we think: we “transform [*verwandeln*]” the “empirical world” in thinking about it by raising it up “into the infinite”, that which is without conditions, the absolute, God (EL §50A). It is hard to understand how we do this in thinking about the sensible world, especially if we take seriously traditional notions of God.<sup>13</sup> But, even without clarifying that connection, we can see that Hegel's claim provides textual evidence for attributing to Hegel the argument against the organic growth model I presented above.

So, the organic growth model breaks down because it involves the idea of external matter, or something not provided for by that which grows, and, with it, potentiality.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the evidence cited at the outset of this section remains: we need to retain from the idea of organic growth that the logical pro-

<sup>13</sup> Hegel's argument should be compared to Kant's discussion of physicotheology and ethicotheology in §§85-6 of the third critique: Kant, like Hegel, notes that we cannot arrive at the concept of God merely from the idea of a natural end, or a living being, because we could conceive of an author of that being which lacked the infinite, unconditioned attributes of God (a being that is relatively more powerful than us, but not omnipotent). Further, Kant, like Hegel, notes that we should instead start with rational nature. Unlike Hegel, however, Kant thinks that the aspect of our rational nature which grounds theology is our moral nature: we must posit God as that which enables us to realize the highest good, a world in which happiness is proportioned to virtue. Hegel rejects this argument from Kant, arguing that we cannot arrive at the absolute from within practical reason in this way but must instead advance to speculative knowledge, thereby grounding (and, even more radically, realizing) God: this is one consequence of his argument about the Idea of the Good at 6.547-8/12.235.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that what makes the organic growth model inadequate is not the bare fact that it involves an appeal to something external to thought; it is that what is external to the organism is not able to be fully provided for by the organism itself. (I try to convey this by noting that what is external serves as material for growth, implicitly referencing the fact that form is dependent upon and does not provide for the matter that it informs, as well as Hegel's claim that the form/content distinction breaks down for speculative knowledge precisely because there is nothing not provided for by the form itself: cf. 6.549-550/12.236-7). There may well be a sense in which speculative knowledge is related to what is external to it, so long as it is sufficient to provide for itself that which is external to it. Perhaps this is involved in Hegel's idea that freedom consists in “being with oneself in one's other”. (My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.)

gression involves a realization of thought, and also that this realization involves thought's own activity. But we need to think of a kind of realization which has no enabling conditions on its realization, such that it is genuinely unstoppable and such that it takes in nothing from outside.

Before moving on to consider the next organic model, I want to note one respect in which my argument in this section is incompatible with some of what Karen Ng says in her recent work on Hegel and life. In particular, if I am right, then her claim that the logical concept of life provides the "formal outlines" for the absolute idea is at least in part wrong (cf. Ng 2016: 10). As she rightly notes, life-form activity is characterized by a relation to what is external to it: "living activity relates itself to an external world to which it stands in opposition" (Ng 2016: 8). But she also claims life-form activity provides us with part of "an understanding of the logical Idea as a philosophical method", that it "shap[es] all our modes of knowledge" (Ng 2016: 10), and that it provides part of a description of "a form of activity that captures reason *in toto*, describing the fundamental shape of reason in *all* of its functioning and development" (Ng 2016: 6). Each of these claims goes too far, because each of them saddles thought in all of its forms—including the form it takes in speculative knowledge—with a dependence on some external matter. Part of her point in claiming that life is central to thought or reason is to note that thinking beings must be living beings. That is an important insight into Hegel's account of life. But we can accept that insight without committing Hegel to the further claim that speculative knowledge is a kind of life-form activity that inherits the traits of life-form activities—including the trait of requiring some external matter. This, I have tried to show, is not how Hegel understood speculative knowledge, because he recognized that this view would entail that our forms of thinking are parochial.

#### 4. Organic Unity

A different model which also invokes the idea of an organism appeals not to organic growth but to the organic unity that binds different organs together in an organism. On this view of the *Logic*, we advance from an account of one part of an organic whole to an account of the entire organic whole. This idea is typically connected to the Aristotelian and Kantian idea that we can only understand a part of an organism through relating it to the whole organism. From this idea, it follows that an account of the part will necessarily lead to an account of the whole.

This model goes back at least to John McTaggart (cf. 1896: §122). More recently, it has been adopted by Christian Martin in his excellent book on the *Logic, Ontologie der Selbstbestimmung*. After noting that the parts of an organic whole are dependent on the whole, he argues that

Knowledge of such a whole is [...] won if one of its aspects is initially so observed as if it were constituted independently from the whole. If such a determination really has its existence only in its connection with others, this must show itself in a (performative) contradiction between its self-standing appearance [*Auf-treten*] and the hidden relations essential for its determinacy—a contradiction that can be corrected [*behoben*] only through the explicit inclusion of further determinations, whereby the starting determination is lowered to an un-self-standing aspect of an overarching connection (Martin 2012: 27-28; my translation).

According to Martin, in speculative knowledge we start with a part of thought and recognize a contradiction in our account of it that drives us forward to an ever richer account that eventually captures the whole of thought. This works, on his view, because the parts are dependent upon the whole in the way that the parts of an organism are dependent upon the whole organism.

So, on this model, we advance from, say, quality to quantity or from concept to judgment as we would advance either from one organ to another, or possibly as we would from an account of one organ to a larger system of organs. Just as I cannot grasp the liver or the heart in isolation from the rest of the body (on this Aristotelian and Kantian view of the organism), so too I cannot grasp one form of thought in isolation from the other forms of thought.

The starting point for these claims might be taken from Kant's account of natural ends in the Critique of the Power of Judgment, in particular §65. In a body judged as a natural end "each part is conceived as if it exists only through all the others, thus as if existing *for the sake of the others* and *on account of* the whole, i.e., as an instrument (organ)" and each part "must be thought of as an organ that *produces* the other parts (consequently each produces the others reciprocally)" (Kant 5:373-4; Guyer-Matthews translation). So, the parts depend on the nature of the whole, such that we can grasp their natures only in grasping the way in which they contribute to producing or sustaining the organism and thereby themselves. Thus, a grasp of the nature of the whole is required to make sense of the activity or functioning of the parts, as the whole is that which the parts produce or sustain in their activity. So, the characteristic activity or functioning of quality is in some sense to produce or sustain thought as a whole.

Within life, there are a multiplicity of organs in an organism and these organs are all interdependent on one another. This interdependence licenses the claim that the nature of the many organs is determined by the nature of the organism, because they all belong to the one organism.<sup>15</sup> This claim in turn requires a contrast between the nature of the organism and the natures of the organs that make up that organism: no organ is identical with the organism, each is merely a part (or "member", in Hegel's terms) of it (6.476-7/12.184). The simplest way to bring out this contrast is to note that there is only one organism, while there are many organs.

The contrast between the organism and its organs makes sense, within life, only because the nature of the organism does not fully and completely determine the nature of the organs. There is something in the organs that is "external" to the nature of the organism, and this externality is essentially appealed to as the only possible grounds for distinguishing one organ from another. If the nature of the whole fully determined the organs, then there could be only one organ: there would be absolutely no difference between the whole and the organ that made it up, and so there could be no sense in saying that one thing, the part, is determined by another at least notionally distinguishable thing, the whole. (What is external or not fully determined by the nature of the organism? As we will see, it is the manner in which each organ sustains the whole.)

Hegel puts this in his own complicated way. He describes the nature of the organism or what he calls the "soul" of the living being as a kind of "being for itself" that is "the identity": that is, it provides the unity such that each organ is

<sup>15</sup> In addition, of course, each organ is determined by the nature of the other organs, but that determination is less germane for my present purpose.

a member of the same, identical organism. And there is nothing that qualifies as part of the living being that isn't informed by the soul. But the identity, or nature of the organism, is "sunken in its objectivity" and it is "the inhering [*inwohnende*] substantial form" (6.487/12.192). That is, the organism "dwells" (*wohnen*) within each of the organs, it is their form, but it is not identical with the organs: the organs provide the matter. That is, there is and must be a contrast between the organism considered as the substantial form, and the organs considered as matter or that which the soul informs.

This point is really quite obvious when we reflect on the kind of progress that can be made within biology. Consider that even after we know what activities characterize an organism we do not yet know how it performs those activities.<sup>16</sup> We might know that a cow eats grass without knowing that it does so by processing the grass through four stomachs. Or we might observe a dog feeding, say, or chasing prey, or breaking down food with saliva. We can then ask how it does these things. We do not know, simply from knowing that it performs these activities, how it does so—figuring that out takes a great deal of scientific inquiry. We might find out that saliva breaks the food down because it contains an enzyme that breaks down certain kinds of chemicals found in the food. We might in turn ask how this enzyme is able to break down these chemicals, and appeal to the relative strength of various chemical bonds, and so on. At each level we have identified a certain kind of activity, and at each level we can ask again how this activity is performed. When we answer that question, we will have uncovered yet another activity (another level) about which we can ask the same question.

Moreover, on the organic model we are considering, each "lower" level of explanation will itself be organic. For example, I might first identify the tongue as an organ of the dog, but then the tongue will serve as a kind of "organism" or whole that is essential for explaining the "organs" or parts that are involved in the tongue's activities. The enzyme in the tongue will have the nature that it does only in its dependence on the nature of the tongue, just as the tongue has the nature it does in its dependence on the nature of the dog. (This is why there can be no Newton for a blade of grass on this way of thinking about organisms: at no point in explaining an organism by its parts (and sub-parts, etc.) do we reach parts that are intelligible independently of the whole they make up.) But despite the manner in which the parts always depend on the whole, we must still investigate the parts to understand how the whole performs its activities. And we do not know the nature of those parts just in knowing the nature of the whole—otherwise we would already know how the dog ate just in knowing that it ate. The fact that we do not reveals that the dependence of the organs on the whole involves an aspect of independence.

Now let's try to apply this model to speculative knowledge. In the *Logic*, the whole would be thought and the parts would be forms of thought—quantitative thoughts as opposed to qualitative thoughts, judgments as opposed to syllogisms. On this model, the nature of thought would not suffice to explain the different forms of thought. Whatever is in those forms of thought that is not explained by thought as such must have a different explanation or basis. This means that the nature of thought does not exclude the possibility of other, possibly incompatible forms of thought—forms of thought that we do not possess,

<sup>16</sup> I owe this consideration to Sebastian Rödl.

that would be alien to or even incompatible with the ones we do possess, but that would be compatible with the very idea of thought. Again, this is obvious, for the fact that a dog runs leaves open many different possible “hows”, corresponding perhaps to different organizations of the bones, muscles and ligaments, about which we have no idea just knowing that the dog runs. Similarly, just knowing what thought is would not in any way rule out the possibility that there are many forms of thought different from the ones we happen to possess; and it would not be sufficient to generate or account for the multiplicity of forms of thought contained in the *Logic*. This makes it impossible for us to know the legitimacy of the forms of thought that we employ, to know that they are ways of arriving at the truth and of knowing the world. For while it is no threat to a science of the dog that there might be other bodies similar in some respects but different in others, the idea of a science of thought (as Hegel understands it) would be ruined if it did not, simply as a science of thought, contain all forms of thought.

So, the model fails because the nature of the whole is distinguished from the natures of the parts, such that it cannot fully explain them. The failure of the model lies again in the parochialism that results from its application: my forms of thought are merely mine, and I cannot exclude the idea and equal legitimacy of other, different forms of thought that I do not possess. Of course, I cannot think of these other forms of thought (for if I could, then they would be available to me, which means they would be mine). But, on this view, that reflects my inability, and the same cognitive instability articulated in the previous section results.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its failure as an adequate model, we need to retain certain features of it in an account of speculative knowledge. In particular, we need to retain the idea that the stages are dependent upon the whole. But we have to reject the externality of the parts from the whole—in particular, we have to abandon the idea that the whole does not suffice to explain the parts.<sup>18</sup>

On the organic unity model, identifying something as one stage rather than another is like identifying something as the heart and not the liver. Properly speaking, however, speculative knowledge does not advance from the part to the whole, for there is no nature to the part different from the nature of the whole, nor is there a nature to the whole that is different from the nature of the part. That is, one stage is not like the heart while the next stage is like the liver; ra-

<sup>17</sup> The failure of the organic unity model does not lie in the fact that, according to it, there could be heretofore undiscovered forms of thought. Hegel's understanding of philosophy involves some appeal to development and philosophical progress. As such, it might well involve the idea of a development in the form of thought itself. I neither want to rule that out nor endorse it. With respect to such a development, were it to be possible for Hegel, my point would be that it must be fully explained by the very idea of thought; it must not admit the possibility of other developments. (Thanks again to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer about this.)

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, McTaggart foreshadows this idea when he invokes the organic unity model, because he claims that the relation of the parts to the whole in the *Logic* is “still more close and intimate” than that found in organism (McTaggart 1896: §122). His elaboration on this claim gives up on the idea of parts, however. He recognizes that the parts are crucial in Hegel's account, but cannot see how that can be. The result is an account of speculative knowledge on which there is really no kind of multiplicity that remains within the whole (a monistic understanding of Hegel's absolute).

ther, each stage is the whole, even and precisely in its difference from the other stage. (Of course, at this point it might be best to abandon talk of “part” and “whole”, as the conditions for their application seem to have fallen away.)

The inadequacy of the organic unity model comes out fairly explicitly at one point when Hegel is describing the special character of the progression of the *Logic*. Unlike other conceptual progressions (for instance, unlike the conceptual progressions we effect when engaged in biology), in the *Logic* there can be no appeal to anything external to the starting point or whole. That is true even though the progression involves a kind of division, or multiplicity. As Hegel puts it, “the *division* must hang together with the *concept* or much more lie in it itself. The concept is not undetermined, but rather *determined* in it itself” (5.56/21.44). So, in the *Logic*, the determinations—the different forms of thought—must not come from “elsewhere” (5.56/21.44). They must rather already lie in the concept—the nature of thought in general—being further determined. That is, jettisoning the appeal to life, we have to say that the principle that unites the forms of thought (their soul) is the same principle that differentiates them (their matter). That is the apparently boggling character of speculative knowledge. Perhaps we can make sense of that. Indeed, I think we can. But here I have only tried to argue that we cannot hope to make sense of that unless we carefully note the ways in which speculative knowledge is unlike life.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have explained why and how the appeal to the organic falls short as a model for thinking about speculative knowledge (“the dialectical method”). Both the organic growth model and the organic unity model fail in that they require an appeal to something outside of the organism as part of the ground for the growth and as part of the ground of the unity. Absent the right environment, an organism cannot grow, and an organism does not by itself suffice to explain the presence of the right environment. Absent some particular manner in which it performs its characteristic activities, an organism cannot live, and the nature of the organism does not by itself suffice to explain that manner (the organs). In each case, the appeal to something external which the organism depends on and does not fully ground is fine for the case of life, but if applied to the forms of thought renders those forms parochial. Hegel, I have further argued, was aware of the respect in which each organic model falls short of providing an adequate model for speculative knowledge. He saw that organic models require an appeal to something not fully provided for by the organism, and that no such appeal can be made within speculative knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

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