

The Absolute Contradiction of Self-Determination

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Abstract

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

Keywords

Autonomy, Closure of constraints, Hegel, Normativity, Self-determination

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The manifesto for critical naturalism is commendable. I will, however, identify a possible weakness in their construal, relying on Hegel and contemporary biology. The authors write:

The only real, concrete form of freedom with regard to what we are constitutively related to and thus determined by is reconciliation that acknowledges its otherness but overcomes the hostility in the relationship.

Yet, just before writing this, they say:

The concept of freedom as autonomy or self-determination is in this regard no less problematic than the simpler concept of negative freedom: it easily lends itself to the hubristic fantasy of independence from nature (Gregoratto et al. 2022, 121).

I find this peculiar, as the notion of freedom as self-determination, in my view, captures the contradictory nature of living systems, being with oneself in otherness, which the authors endorse. Furthermore, they say that freedom is never given but related to the continuation of life. This dovetails with the notion of self-determination as the ongoing self-maintenance of life presented below. Yet the authors believe that self-determination lends itself to the fantasy that we are independent of nature. I will argue that another reading is more aligned with contemporary life science.

But first, I should note that Hegelian naturalism is a *non-naturalistic naturalism*, i.e. continuous with science but without the aim of reducing everything to physical or chemical happenings. This contrasts with the modern iteration of naturalism, which is narrowly mechanistic (Stone 2013). Irrespective of the larger debate about what we should mean by naturalism, the central point is that Hegel refuses to divide the world into completely heterogenous spheres, culture and nature, while maintaining that they are nonetheless different. Hegel therefore espouses a broad, organicist, kind of naturalism, “whose very core is the notion of life” (Illetterati 2023, 188). In this view, different levels of organisation constrain and enable each other but do not collapse into each other.

We find this naturalism implicit in the notion of self-determination, Hegel says:

The living being is thereby the impulse to posit *as its own* this world which is other than it, to posit itself as equal to it, to sublimate the world and objectify itself. Its self-determination has therefore the form of objective externality, and since it is at the same time self-identical, it is the absolute *contradiction* (Hegel 2010, 684, emphases original).

The absolute contradiction is that the organism remains itself only by changing objective externality. It is not a matter of independence but of co-constitution, where neither is what they are without the other. Hence, there is no clear distinction between a living system and its configuration space (Jaeger 2019).

Hegel states that the individuation of the living is a closed circle (*Kreislauf*) (Corti 2022). It reproduces itself through needful and formative actions. It goes through stages of assimilation and self-feeling to finally gain the capacity for *reproduction* – but only through interaction with the environment. Biological reproduction is, however, not simply the continuation of the species (bad infinity) but also the cyclical and reflexive maintenance of biological organisation (true infinity).

The notion *closure of constraints*, which concerns a closure specific to biological systems, where the whole organisation maintains itself by the interdependence of constraints (Montévil and Mossio 2015), concretises Hegel's definition. While they achieve cyclical organisational closure, living systems maintain themselves only through exchange with the environment. The reproduction relies on thermodynamical openness, the ability to exchange energy and material with the outside. A naturalistic account of teleology follows from this definition since the organism can only reproduce its organisation by acting purposively (Jaeger 2021).

Organisational closure is never complete, but a *tendency towards closure* (Montévil and Mossio 2015). This opens the prospect of including the environment and emergent affordances into the definition of organisational closure, since organisms rely materially (but also cognitively) on the stability of their material surroundings and act to maintain them as part of their ongoing reproduction (Heras-Escribano and Saborido 2023).

Organisms are constrained and enabled by their environments, both materially and cognitively; and as they reproduce and impose constraints in return, they canalise evolution. Actions are directed by practices, and norms “emerge from a particular context which comes from the very

history of this practice” (Tahar 2022, 12). They are internalised and give rise to new activities that produce new constraints. These natural norms, broadly construed, ground other forms of normativity (Ikäheimo 2021).

From an ecological perspective, self-determination is not about independence from the environment. Instead, it concerns the constitutive relationship between the environment and the organism – the *organism-environment system*. Actions and affordances for actions, ecological information, emerge through interaction between the organism and its milieu. Here, the skills of the organism and the properties of the environment are coupled (Saborido and Heras-Escribano 2023).

Normative self-determination emerges from interaction with its other. In other words, *the self of determination* emerges through the process of determination, a cause becoming a result and vice versa. This is a determinate negation that relies on the overall stability of the internal and reciprocal causal interaction between the organism and the niche. Self-determination is tied to self-maintenance or reproduction of organisation (Corti 2022). By acting purposively, the organism alters itself and its environment to reproduce the whole system that enables it.

Critical naturalism rejects “the static conception of nature that identifies nature with a set of unchanging laws and species” (115). The problem, from an angle that emphasises the centrality of life, is that this perspective is insufficiently specific to living systems and fails to explain how they manage to stabilise their interaction with nature. By highlighting that all living systems are agents, *with a degree of self-determination*, we are better able to make sense of *why* the static conception of nature must be abandoned and why a dynamic model, which encompasses the circular causality between an organism and its environment, is more appropriate.

Normativity is grounded in the purposeful actions of organisms, as well as the internal and external constraints that channel different parts towards achieving organizational closure. Hence, we grasp normative functions based on the *closed and differentiated self-maintaining organisation* (Mossio, Saborido and Moreno 2009). This view does not imply independence, as it only emerges and self-maintains through its constitutive relation to the environment. It is a significant source of evolutionary novelty that should be considered by naturalistic approaches.

In summary, the *precariousness* of living organisations both constrains and enables the emergence of self-determination and normativity. Organisms cannot survive without this capacity to canalise the material processes they confront. Thus understood, self-determination allows us to grasp the continuity and difference between nature and culture, and thereby overcome the false dichotomy between realism and constructivism. Finally, by acknowledging the continued importance and problem of nature, we might accomplish what Marx saw as the task of critical theory: “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Marx 1975, 209).

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Biography

Rasmus Sandnes Haukedal has recently completed a PhD in philosophy at Durham University. He works in the intersection between philosophy and theoretical biology, with an emphasis on the historical and conceptual interaction between philosophy and evolutionary biology. In his thesis, he discusses the ongoing change within evolutionary theory, the extended evolutionary synthesis, through a dialectical framework. He also co-convenes the reading group at the Centre for Culture and Ecology at Durham University.