

## Book Review

**Edgar Maragat, *True Purposes in Hegel's Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-009-30494-8 (hbk). Pp. 272. £85.**

Over the last few years, the domain of Hegel studies seems to have undergone a sea change. In the wake of the Hegel renaissance—engineered by Robert Pippin, fuelled by John McDowell, carried on by Terry Pinkard and made mainstream by Robert Brandom—to be a Hegelian today means in large part to be a neo-pragmatist. This, in turn, implies an emphasis on the linguistic and intersubjective essence of the Hegelian concept of *Geist*, viewed through the lens of the Sellarsian notion of the space of reasons, frequently sidelining nature as an unessential component. These interpretations aim to forge a non-metaphysical approach to Hegel's philosophy, divergent from the spiritualist monism dismissed by Anglo-American philosophy throughout much of the 20th century, thus making Hegel accessible for the analytically inclined philosopher.

For enthusiasts of Hegel's philosophy, it is hard to underestimate the significance of this movement in rejuvenating Hegel studies and the allure of its philosophical proposition, which develops a meaningful and productive connection to contemporary philosophical discourse. This neo-pragmatist depiction aligns with the traditional view of Hegel's philosophy as historicism, where nature assumes a marginalized role as the 'other' of spirit, yet it is presented in a way that resonates with the tastes of the modern philosophical palate. And yet there have been voices—once a minority of isolated incidents but now gradually gaining critical mass—who find this picture limited on both philosophical and textual counts. This breakthrough was largely made possible by scholars who dedicated themselves to taking the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature* seriously, with a particular attention to the sections on teleology, life and living organisms. Maragat's book fits perfectly into this context, and is a welcome contribution to the endeavour of bringing the Hegel renaissance beyond its neo-pragmatist (and in many ways, Kantian) phase. Indeed, where the neo-pragmatist approach tends to divide nature (the world of blind objectivity) and spirit (the world of agency and mindedness), the exploration of natural purposiveness, via a revision of Kant's notion of natural purpose, tends to bring them together once again. Purposiveness is the essence of both life and mind. Hence, an exploration of



the concept of purpose essentially delves into the continuity and interconnectedness between life and mind.

The book is divided into three parts, which are not explicitly marked, but run through the eight chapters that make up the body of the text (besides the introduction). The first part covers the background necessary to approach the concept of purpose in Hegel's *Logic*, particularly Kant's (chapters 2 and 3) and Aristotle's treatments of teleology (chapter 4). The core of the book is found in chapters 5 to 7, where Maragat provides his reading of the teleology section of the *Science of Logic*. The core of his analysis consists in accounting for two major theses that Hegel defends here: 1) Teleology is the truth of mechanism, and 2) Intrinsic purposiveness is the truth of extrinsic purposiveness. The final two chapters address the philosophical aftermath of Hegel's treatment of teleology, namely his significance for our understanding of natural life (chapter 8) and the relation between life and cognition (chapter 9). I will not take issue with particular aspects of the textual reconstruction, which is excellent and with which I generally agree, but rather dwell on some philosophical aspects that emerge from that reconstruction, and which I deem philosophically relevant for us today.

The first of those is the left-Sellarsian distinction between the realm of laws and the space of reasons, which, although never mentioned explicitly, can be seen in watermark by an eye accustomed to these issues along chapter 2, which deals with the relationship between two famous Kantian antinomies: the antinomy of nature and freedom (typical of the first and second *Critiques*) and the antinomy of mechanism and teleology (which makes the central object of the third *Critique*). Maragat's intent is to argue in favour of the Hegelian thesis that these ultimately constitute the same antinomy expressed in two different ways. If this is true, as I believe it is, this Kantian analysis constitutes the foundation for a thesis of great philosophical depth: if we want to overcome the implicit dualism inherent to the Sellarsian dichotomy of logical spaces, it is necessary to reconsider the Kantian notion of natural purpose and its philosophical implications. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the treatment of natural purposes occurs in the third *Critique*, where Kant explicitly states that the main problem is that of reconciling the concepts of nature with the concepts of freedom into a unified picture of humans in the world. The problem is that the Kantian solution leaves something to be desired, insofar as it is not a true solution. Some, including myself, have characterized the Kantian answer to the antinomy of teleological judgment as an unstable position, insofar as on the one hand it strongly points to the seemingly 'purposive' nature of living organisms, while on the other hand strongly denying that the latter can be legitimately affirmed from a philosophical point of view.

As Maragat argues in chapter 3, the origin of this unstable position can be traced back to the fact that Kant ultimately approaches the problem of natural purposiveness from the standpoint of human deliberative capacities, as the original

template by which natural purpose is to be judged. This obviously creates a number of theoretical problems because it seems to anthropomorphize nature. A remedy for this limitation can be found, as Hegel does, by revisiting Aristotle, who posits that the inherent purposefulness within nature takes precedence over human deliberative capacities. In chapter 4, Maraguat primarily focuses on *Physics* B8, yet another valuable reference could have been *De Anima* (which is, in fact, briefly mentioned), where the rational soul is characterized as nested upon the vegetative and sensitive soul that humans share with every other living being. What the concept of soul denotes here, in its original Aristotelian significance, is the organization of a living body, which bestows it with the capacity to be the principle of its own movement—essentially turning it into what modern language would term an autonomous system.

This autonomy epitomizes the hallmark of Maraguat's notion of 'true purposes': systems that embody what Douglas Hofstadter termed 'strange loops'—a circular self-determining structure wherein effects and causes reciprocally influence each other. In a mechanical regime, an effect is (supposedly) determined in a straight line from a cause that lies behind it, perpetuating an endless chain of causal foundation. Conversely, at least in a Kantian framework, freedom—or as we would rather term it today, agency—is considered as something fundamentally spontaneous, which originates solely from itself. The question is then whether such causality can pertain to nature, and the Kantian answer is most certainly in the negative—despite some important hesitations—because the latter can be legitimately understood to behave only mechanically.

In this respect, Hegel's response to Kant (reconstructed in chapter 5) is to question the nature of mechanical causation itself. According to Hegel, reciprocal causation embodies the essence of causality, especially evident in the phenomenon of mechanism, where (at least in his account) the cause itself is also an effect. In fact, the capacity of a mechanical entity to initiate an action is inherently connected to the disposition of the effect to be influenced by that cause. So, in this sense, the capacity to be a cause is intrinsically tied to the particular nature of the caused entity. Another way to put this, as often highlighted in contemporary neo-mechanist literature, is that mechanisms lack inherent causal efficacy, which is bestowed upon them by the overall organization of mechanical entities and activities within a specific system. Consequently, each mechanism can be said to inherently involve a basic form of circular causation itself.

Such circular causation is here called 'elementary' because, in mechanical causation, this structure is not inherently self-sustaining. Should a component within the system malfunction, the entire causal sequence often breaks down. In contrast, a specific kind of systems—namely autonomous systems—possess the capacity (within defined limits) and the inherent drive to uphold organization and functionality from within. It is in this sense, according to Hegel, that teleology

should be understood as the truth of mechanism: goal-oriented behaviour showcases a more robust form of self-determination compared to that exhibited by mechanical entities. The focal point thus shifts to investigating the proper nature of goal-directed behaviour, a pursuit undertaken by Maragat in chapter 7. This pursuit, following Hegel's lead, involves calling into question the conventional understanding of goal-directedness—referred to by Hegel as 'subjective purpose' and by Maragat as the 'transcendental argument'. The key reference here includes Charles Taylor's interpretation of Hegel's action theory, along with the classical treatment of intentionality by Elizabeth Anscombe (which parallels Wilfrid Sellars'). These perspectives share a common ground: a transcendental argument for agency that contrasts with physical explanations based on mechanisms. Here, we encounter a two-fold pathway with parallel tracks: the mechanistic lane, explaining the 'how' of natural occurrences, and the purposive lane, elucidating the 'why' of cognitive events. This perspective marks a strong dichotomy of logical spaces—the realm of laws and the space of reasons—which in turn perpetuates the Kantian duality between concepts of freedom and concepts of nature.

Contrary to this Kantian perspective, Hegel endeavours to construct an account of agency that does not rely on transcendental arguments: while Kant associates agency with mental representation and the deliberative structure of rational personhood, Hegel seeks to ground his theory of agency in the original Aristotelian understanding of intrinsic purposiveness. This Hegelian endeavour is reconstructed by Maragat in chapter 7. What we witness here might be framed as a clash between top-down and bottom-up perspectives on agency: the former starts from fully developed human rational agency and aims to assess how this concept applies to the broader natural world. It is unsurprising that such a concept may not be straightforwardly extended, for instance, to the goal-directed behaviour of a tree (the classical Kantian example), where the category of agency can thus be applied only in heuristic, or as Kant would say 'regulative' terms. Conversely, a bottom-up approach aims to define agency in its most general terms—as the ability of a system to act on its own behalf—before delving into the unique characteristics that distinguish human rational agency from this broader notion. Maragat seems to confirm this reading, when he argues that 'inner purposiveness is the truth of all teleology, and therefore also the truth of the specific teleology of human representations and actions.' This thesis is explored in the final two chapters (8 and 9) of the book, which deal with the idea of life and the relation between life and cognition, respectively.

The primary focus here is to explore the claim that life embodies the regime of intrinsic purposiveness, forming the basis for cognition, as a regime that is both grounded in and decoupled from it. In their original formulation, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela proposed that cognition is intimately linked to the self-production characteristic of autopoietic systems. And yet, recent

advancements in the theoretical framework of biological autonomy, notably the enactive approach in cognitive science, have highlighted the importance of accounting for the distinction between mental life as an autonomous realm and mere autopoiesis. Maragat aptly suggests that Hegel's philosophy offers a fertile philosophical framework to address this critical query. He contends, in particular, that the fundamental distinction between biological and mental life does not reside in their manner of manifestation—given that both are forms of intrinsic purposiveness—but rather in the medium or context of their manifestation. Though both exhibit circular causal regimes, cognitive autonomy showcases a more pronounced level of self-reflection compared to the minimal autonomy observed in biological agency. The transition from biological to cognitive autonomy thus represents an amplification in the process of self-reflection. The critical task, however, involves precisely defining the nature and operational dynamics of this higher-order reflexivity.

The resolution to this quandary lies in the concept of habit—a concept that intriguingly holds a central position in both Hegelian philosophy and enactive accounts on cognitive autonomy. Maragat underscores habit as the rightful mode of being of *Geist* (mind/spirit). While delving into the complex relation between habit and cognitive autonomy goes beyond the scope of this review, it is worth noting that this notion challenges any strict dualistic interpretation of the interplay between nature and nurture. On the contrary, by spotlighting habit as the essence of spirit, we are prompted to question any rigid division between first and second nature, the innate and the acquired. The concept of animal subjectivity as the nexus between nature and spirit, a recurring theme among contemporary naturalist Hegelians, plays a key role here: once a system attains intrinsic purposiveness—i.e., autonomy—it is straight away endowed with a form of minimal agency. From there, it then becomes susceptible to engaging in iterative cycles of sensorimotor dynamics with its environment, forming habits. These habits constitute the behavioural framework that fosters the emergence of an autonomous level of autonomy, namely cognitive autonomy. This autonomy is fundamentally rooted in minimal agency—a system's ability to act autonomously to sustain its own viability—while simultaneously establishing a normative framework that is detached from the simple imperative of self-preservation. It is in this scaffolded landscape of autonomy that the cognitive emerges as an independent causal regime. The emergence of this level is mediated by the process of recognition—as Hegel already realized in Jena, in fact, cognition is essentially recognition—which establishes the normative order of objective spirit, that of institutions and ethical life.

Though my reconstruction has been more of an inspired interpretation rather than a strict adherence to the text, these diverse themes find a coherent articulation in Maragat's book. In closing, I would like to address a point of contention within

this otherwise excellent work, which I happen to disagree with. In the latter part of the book, relying on his argument for biological intrinsic purposiveness as the bedrock of cognition, Maragat suggests that ‘Hegel might be not only the precursor to present “organizational” accounts of biological teleology but also a precursor to present teleological conceptions of the semantic and intentional properties of mental state and processes’ (242). What he implies here is an alignment of Hegel’s account of natural purposiveness with teleosemantic theories of mental content, akin to those advocated by scholars such as Ruth Millikan, Karen Neander and David Papineau. These theories commonly seek to ground cognitive concepts—like intentionality and mental representations—as outcomes selected over generations for their adaptive advantage. I see this as a significant oversight on the author’s part, one that seems at odds with the broader features of his account. Notably, elsewhere in the book, Maragat criticizes perspectives that prioritize lineage as the central element of life, instead advocating for a focus on the individual’s self-production as pivotal to comprehending the nature of life.

Consequently, in this respect, Maragat seems to hold somewhat of an unstable middle position himself. In fact, if we endorse a view of Hegel as a defender of an organizational account of functions—which emphasizes the purposive self-production or autopoietic dynamics of the living individual—we cannot readily label him a teleosemanticist. Instead, his perspective aligns more closely with an enactive account, committed to a non-representational view of cognition as stemming from the intrinsic purposiveness within organisms, i.e., from their autonomy. What I question here, in other words, is Maragat’s stated alignment with Darwinism—which constitutes the theoretical foundation for teleosemantics. In this respect, it is worth stressing that, at least in my view, the Darwinian perspective naturalizes extrinsic purposiveness (design) via natural selection, but leaves intrinsic purposiveness (autonomous agency) largely untouched. To gain a comprehensive understanding of life as the foundation for cognition, it is thus imperative to merge the Darwinian principle of evolution by natural selection with an agential perspective that complements and in many ways enables it. Daniel Dennett and Ruth Millikan are not helpful here, as they are sworn adversaries of a dialectical account of organisms that takes intrinsic purposiveness seriously. In contrast, I would suggest, figures such as Richard Lewontin, Francisco Varela and Stuart Kauffman align more seamlessly with a Hegelian perspective—such as that advanced in this book—invested in articulating a view of organisms as true purposes.

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