

Death & Desire: Negativity at the Foundation of Life

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ABSTRACT: At the root of all life is negativity, a self (concept, identity) which is the same as the negation of what is other than itself, its object. This negation is not annihilation of the other but as life it is a unity or identity of self-concept and its object. This is how Hegel presents the logical structure of life. Positivist approaches understand living wholes through the lens of mechanism as mere aggregates of externally assembled parts. Approaches embracing negativity recognize the mutually dependent bi-directional internal causal relation among various parts and between parts and whole. A living individual is not just a unitary positive being but simultaneously a negative or differentiated multiplicity, thus the production and dissolution of itself facilitates growth and development as a coherent whole. The boundary of the individual's being for itself and what is other than itself gives rise to a relation as a living process. Determining what something is, also entails what it is not, i.e. taller implies not shorter and day implies not night. Hegel explains that the negative subjective aspect of the objective content of living entities is the concept, i.e. that form which determines/contains an objective content. These two aspects mutually interpenetrate each other in dynamic dialectic relation as an identity-in-difference. Due to the discrepancy between the living individual's being-for-itself and general being-in-itself, it experiences an internal lack, i.e. desire to overcome the discrepancy through reciprocal activity with the environment. One such need or necessity that arises is the unity of its individual life with the same life principle of other organisms – that manifests in nature as reproduction, which perpetuates as the universal genus process. Death of a particular organism emphasizes the universal or collective essence that both transcends and is immanent in all living individuals, which in the externality of nature manifests as the idea of soul in a body.

Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961), Nobel laureate (1933) who developed a mathematical method for calculating quantum mechanical values, characterized the thermodynamic condition of the living state in terms of negentropy. [1] Physical non-living phenomena generally follow the second law of thermodynamics which predicts a spontaneous increase in entropy, a measure of an isolated system's tendency to move from a state of order to one of disorder.

Living organisms tend to promote and maintain system unity and order, resisting the spontaneous increase of disorder or entropy found in mechanical, non-living systems. Thus in a general sense, the organism exhibits a unitive nature that negates the non-unitive or dispersive tendency of the inorganic or non-living world.

We distinguish two types of objects in nature selves and things. Material things, including technological artifacts, have a purpose that originates externally. Technology means mechanics with externally added on purpose. Selves, on the other hand, have their purpose within themselves — what Immanuel Kant called *naturzweck*.

From studies of embryology, we learn that the ontogeny of an organism follows a basic developmental pattern of differentiation and specialization of an initial unity or zygote by way of

division, not aggregation, revealing a continual process of negation of unity while balancing this dispersion with integral unity at the same time. This demonstration of a negative power in living organisms indicates the existence of something at work in organisms that is not explicable in terms of mere positive matters.

A hint to what this negativity might be is given by G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) in his often quoted phrase of Spinoza, “*Omnis determinatio est negatio*” — every determination is a negation. [2] [3] This emphasizes the interconnectedness of positive and negative attributes or qualities.

In this regard, the Greek philosopher Plotinus considered that the One was the first principle of the absolute. Parmenides before him, considered pure Being as the absolute. This simplistic idea was challenged by many philosophers, especially Heraclitus who taught the dynamic ever-changing nature of reality as becoming rather than static being.

If we consider the Western (Greek) positive idea of One from the Eastern side of the world (India), they define One negatively as Advaita or the non-dual. This simple abstract idea was also challenged by succeeding philosophers in terms of identity and difference. Yet here we see the same concept “One” can be stated positively or negatively as not-two or non-dual. This says that the determination “One” is at the same time and equivalently “not dual.” Every determination is simultaneously positive and negative — they are not separable. To pose one is to pose (or oppose) the other.

The ancients understood that everything comes from what it is not. Thus Socrates said that the idea ‘taller’ comes from ‘shorter.’ The modern saint, Bhaktivedanta Swami once gave the example, “If all were blind, we could not say ‘blind.’ We can only understand the word ‘blind’ because someone can see.”

A determinate thought always implies its opposite or negation. Day means it is not night. Being means it is not non-being or nothing. We may state or assert the positive but we ignore that we are also simultaneously affirming the negative. That a subject is not the object is true of the very definition of these terms. The infinite, contains within the word itself its own negation as the not-finite. Self implies it is not other, i.e. the negation of otherness.

For Hegel, his *Science of Logic* uses these negativities in its development of the concept of life. [4] The objective constituent content of an organism has its corresponding negative or subjective aspect called its concept which determines the specific nature of its constituent content. In the living organism the subjective and objective aspects do not externally oppose one another but mutually interpenetrate each other as simultaneously one and different. It is this unity in difference of subject and object that gives rise to primitive feeling or sensation of the living organism in nature.

As a universal, the concept of life in all individual organisms as genus (in general) actualizes itself as the negation of all indifferent objectivity (being in itself) transforming it into being for itself or the concept. This is called cognition. The transformation is brought about by negation — the negation of being-in-itself is being-for-itself. The living organism is not neutral toward its being like a thing that is indifferently identical to its existence. Because the living organism is an active process of negating what it is — its being — it is a self-determining unity or self (since determination is negation). This idea nicely explains Maturana's and Varela's conclusion that "Living systems are cognitive systems and living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with or without a nervous system." [5]

Since the fundamental concept-object identity in difference of the individual living organism is basically an existing concept (identity), it finds itself embedded in an environment (difference) towards which the organism feels a gap or lack of unity within itself, as a concept-object identity in difference. This lack is called desire to emphasize that the subjectivity of the organism is affirmed along with its negative nature, and has to act to overcome this lack which is negatively felt as need and positively described as purpose. This is the basis of the inner teleology of the concept acting to actualize itself. [6] There is a similarity here between Aristotle's conception of the *dunamis-entelechia-energia* relationship and Hegel's concept-activity-objective content.

Hegel distinguishes two levels of life here, the first as the living individual as such, and the second as the living process involving the organism's relation to the environment, although they are both related. A third distinction comes in the organism's relation to other organisms in the reproductive act which is called the genus process. Here death plays the important role of demonstrating the fleeting nature of the particular or specific organism under the universal genus, which is intrinsic to and inseparable from the organism. This is because of the simultaneous universal, particular, and individual features of every concept — in this case, genus, species, and specimen.

The universal is the negation of the particular. It is simultaneously the positive identity of itself. Thus the universal dynamically maintains its identity while negating the particular or specific; the unity of the universal and the particular is the individual (un-dividable universal-particular unity).

This may be difficult to conceive because of the abstract nature of the terms, so it will be easier to think of a concrete example where the movement of thought may be more apparent. A tree standing outside your house is generically called 'tree' like any other similar object in the world. This is the universal tree, although this is not a botanical name, we may loosely call it the genus. But the tree is also a particular species, say oak, or spruce, and a specific specimen or individual of that species that is growing near your house. The universal 'tree' applies to every specimen of tree we experience, in which case we can say that it is and is not each tree because it identifies itself with each specimen and negates it, at the same time, in order to preserve itself for all trees.

The activity we call 'life' is universal in all living organisms, but the death of a particular organism does not affect the universality that is part of all life. In this sense, the death of a particular serves to emphasize the universal aspect of life that is always part of the particular. Thus death is not only the negation of the activity of an organism we call life. It also establishes the positivity of the universal aspect of life, which religion has always maintained is preserved even in the face of death. This universal is the concept and its negative or objective content in logic, while in the externality of nature is manifest as soul in a body. [7] A further level beyond nature, called second nature or culture, we can determine as spiritual, where life takes on a more universal significance in which communal, social, political, cultural, religious, and philosophical life predominate.

There is another level of negativity of death or ceasing-to-be that is more integral to life in its intrinsic dynamic nature. The metaphysical view of the positivist's conception of static, reified being understands death as non-being or nothing — a "long dark night of nothingness." A dynamic metaphysical conception like Heraclites' understands being as a moment of the living reality which is as much a coming-to-be as a ceasing-to-be in the activity or actuality of becoming. The movement of coming-to-be is the transition of nothing to being, while the ceasing-to-be is the transition of being to nothing; the unity of these two movements is called becoming. In other words, being and nothing are not fixed in exclusive opposition but connected in mutual interrelation.

This logical or metaphysical conception is visibly manifested in nature as growth. For example, a seed produces a stem as the seed itself ceases to be, while a leaf comes to be from the stem. The leaf then transforms into a bud, and from the disappearance of the bud, a flower is produced. Life is sometimes understood in terms of metabolism, a continual process in which there is a building up or creation of molecular structure (anabolism) as existing structures are worn down and cease to be (catabolism). The maturation of the human body from childhood to youth, to old age follows the same pattern of creation and cessation of bodies.

Change itself requires negation as part of its essential nature. In this sense death as much as creation is an ever-present feature of actuality as an active, living presence. Time as the coming-to-be of the future and the ceasing-to-be of the past is united in the ever-existent present. The work of negativity is an unendingly necessary part of positive truth, as Hegel reminds us, which otherwise becomes mere edification without the "labor of the negative." [8]

It is necessary to consider the negativity or reversal of the modern scientific view of nature as a network of more or less reified substance without recognition of a more dynamic system of subject-object relational development. Mechanical principles are useful in constructing artifacts such as buildings and machines, but when the science of mechanical and chemical relations attempts to explain wholes such as organisms in terms of aggregating parts, nature does not exhibit herself as constructing organisms in that way. Rather there is a circular reciprocal relation

between wholes and parts in which the whole participates in the production of its parts as much as the parts produce the whole.

Hegel explains the logical elements in the development of the idea of life in his *Science of Logic*. This also shows how life is different from the logic of mechanism, chemism, and teleology. [9] This means that life cannot be properly comprehended in terms of mechanical, chemical, or teleological principles because of its basic subjective or self-conscious nature. Kant explains in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that an organism “is both an organized and a self-organizing being.” [10(5:374)]

Now if we consider a material whole, as far as its form is concerned, as a product of the parts and of their forces and their capacity to combine by themselves (including as parts other materials that they add to themselves), we represent a mechanical kind of generation. But from this there arises no concept of a whole as an end, whose internal possibility presupposes throughout the idea of a whole on which even the constitution and mode of action of the parts depends, which is just how we must represent an organized body. [10(5:408)]

The ontogeny of a living organism exhibits a reciprocal conditioning between interacting parts creating the whole (the unity, the complete organism), while simultaneously the whole causing the parts to develop and emerge.

For a body, therefore, which is to be judged as a natural end in itself and in accordance with its internal possibility, it is required that its parts reciprocally produce each other, as far as both their form and their combination is concerned, and thus produce a whole out of their own causality, the concept of which, conversely, is in turn the cause ... of it in accordance with a principle; consequently the connection of efficient causes could at the same time be judged as an effect through final causes. [10(5:373)]

Kant also raised the problem of the one-sidedness of our own thinking: the Antinomy of the Power of Judgement.

The first maxim of the power of judgment is the thesis: All generation of material things and their forms must be judged as possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws.

The second maxim is the antithesis: Some products of material nature cannot be judged as possible according to merely mechanical laws (judging them requires an entirely different law of causality, namely that of final causes). [10(5:387)]

When the intrinsic subjectivity of life and the capacity for self-consciousness of the human being are properly acknowledged, then the need to go beyond teleological explanations becomes apparent.

Kant understood that abstract or one-sided thinking can only comprehend the world in the direction of mechanism, of parts causing wholes, not in the negation of that direction, of finality, of wholes causing their parts. The parts causing the whole, while at the same time, the whole causing the parts, is not to be understood as two sequential causal lines, but one reciprocal bi-directional cause, that is in fact just one process. In this case, the parts also nurture and nourish each other and not only the whole.

Beyond the organism, life itself is a part or form of the Organic Whole or Absolute Idea, as Hegel shows in the Logic. Here too, there is a circular reciprocal relation between the whole and part, such that the implicit potential of the Absolute Idea is the impetus that drives the development of life to its maturity as the Idea, while the determinations of life and cognition are what explicitly give rise to the Absolute Idea.

A proper understanding of life is not only a satisfying achievement for science but an important contribution to humanity's understanding of itself.

References

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“So since figure is nothing but determination, and **determination is negation** [*Quia ergo figura non aliud, quam determinatio, et **determinatio negatio est***], figure can be nothing other than negation, as has been said.”
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