

Transcript of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Podcast, Episode 2

Contents: Jacob McNulty (Dartmouth College) interviewing Karen Ng (Vanderbilt University), whose *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic* (Oxford University Press, 2020) was awarded *JHP's* 2021 Book Prize. The interview was recorded in July of 2022.

Transcribed by Taylor Carman, Department of Philosophy, Barnard College

JACOB MCNULTY: Welcome to the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Podcast. I'm Jake McNulty, and I'm here today with Karen Ng. She's a professor at Vanderbilt, and she just won the *Journal of the History of the Philosophy* Book Prize for 2021 for her recent book *Hegel's Concept of Life*. So, we are going to talk about her book today, about its many interesting arguments and themes. Karen, great to see you!

KAREN NG: Great to see you, Jake. Thanks for taking the time to chat.

JN: Of course. So, I'm meant to teach Intro Philosophy this fall, and one of the things you do when you teach that class is tell people about the classic problems of philosophy. Is there a god? Free will. Are minds identical to brains? And so on. The problem of life isn't usually included on that list, so I thought we might start by just discussing why life has seemed to pose a problem for philosophers. What does it mean to grapple with the topic of life philosophically, in a philosophical context?

KN: That's a great place to start, and in fact I am also thinking about putting together a class on the meaning of life, which is a more introductory class for our undergraduates as well, and I wanted to take a quite cheeky approach to it. I think when undergraduates hear [there's] a class about the meaning of life, they think about their own lives, and I was going to organize it exactly along the lines of this question. Why is life a philosophical problem, as opposed to just a problem of biologists or scientists? One place to start is to think about the way in which the problem of life was already very important for someone like Aristotle. Really early on, already in ancient philosophy. For Aristotle the question of life was connected with thinking about the soul. The nature of life had something to tell us, not just about the nature of the soul, but the nature of activity as such, the relationship between potentiality and actuality. I think for early modern thinkers this has also been recently established in some very interesting scholarship where questions about the difference between what is dead and what is alive, the difference between organic and inorganic substance, the nature of life activity or life force, were also really important questions for early modern thinkers. And the reason it was so important was that many of these of early modern thinkers thought that understanding the nature of living activity was basically essential for understanding what we might think of as distinctly human activity, insofar as we are not merely dead things, or not merely machines or mechanically ordered substances. So, I think there are lots of ways in which the concept of life has a distinctly philosophical significance. I would say in contemporary philosophy one of the ways in which a

philosophical approach to the question of life has been revived is in thinking about the nature of mind. This is something that I think the German idealists were also really interested in, that in order to understand the nature of mind, the nature of consciousness, the nature of thinking, something about living activity is also an incredibly instructive and important place to start, if we want to understand what it is to be a mind, to be a *living* mind in particular.

JN: Thank you, that's extremely helpful. I wanted to follow up by asking about ways in which the existence of living beings has been considered problematic, perhaps especially by modern philosophers. So, in Aristotle's universe there were these teleologically ordered – that is, purposively structured – entities. Organisms and their existence seemed to be beyond doubt, perhaps a template for the existence of many other types of things that should feature centrally in natural science. But by the time we get to modern philosophy we have a new science, a Newtonian science that looks at matter as inert and as acted upon by these external forces. So, life as this self-moving or purposive, teleologically organized stuff, comes to seem perhaps problematic, and I may be wrong about this, but there seem to have been philosophers who were skeptics about the very existence of life, who think that what appear to be living beings, organic beings, are just automata or mechanisms. If we can take them apart and really analyze them, we would see that they're not that different from the inorganic or the inanimate. So, what about skepticism about life?

KN: That sounds exactly right, and I think that is exactly the place in which you could say someone like Kant enters the debate. You're absolutely right that with their desire to have a universal mechanism as a way of understanding nature, if we take mechanism to be *the* paradigm that can explain everything that exists in nature, then it seems like life precisely becomes a problem. How is it possible that things can be, or at least seem to be or appear to, self-moving, seem to be self-reproducing? And I think this is in fact exactly where Kant enters the debate. In my book, the point of departure for my reading of Hegel is Kant's third *Critique*, or the *Critique of Judgment*. And the *Critique of Judgment* is a strange book because it is probably more well known for being a theory of Kant's aesthetics. But of course in the second half of the third *Critique* Kant also takes up this exact problem that you just mentioned, this antinomy between mechanism and teleology. If it's the case that everything in nature is mechanically ordered, then it seems like there is no place for anything like living activity, living form, self-organized, self-reproducing beings. But of course, Kant also wants to leave room for thinking about teleology and purpose in a clearly delimited sense, in his words in a "regulative" sense. And so, this puzzle about the extent to which we can actually talk about living form in teleological terms, or in his own words, talk about forms that are internally purposive, is the point of departure for how I interpret Hegel in the book, but also the point of departure for the puzzle. In what sense and to what extent can teleological thinking or purposive form be applied when we think about living things. And since we're talking about Kant and the idealists, the question always reverberates back onto ourselves. So, it's a question about forms in nature, the extent to which we can use teleology and concepts of purposiveness to understand and know things in nature, but it always reverberates back on ourselves because what's at stake is that if we can't legitimately employ teleological concepts in our study of nature, there is also a question of the extent to which these

of teleology and purposiveness, goal-directedness, can be applied to ourselves, insofar as we want to think of ourselves as a part of nature.

JN: Thanks. So, you've already moved us on to our next topic, which was the role of Kant in laying the groundwork for Hegel's concept of life, and I wanted to ask about Kant's significance for the German idealists because Kant himself seems a little ambivalent about the concept of life. On the one hand, he revives this Aristotelian notion of life. He calls it inner purposiveness as opposed to external purposiveness, and that distinction was so important to the revival of teleological thinking among the German idealists. On the other hand, one can sometimes get the impression (maybe this is incorrect, but) Kant wanted to put the brakes on the certain kinds of teleological thinking, that is, he didn't think our view of the world as containing purposively organized beings was on as solid footing as our view of the world as containing causal laws or deterministic laws, like the ones from physics. So, can you talk about that Janus-faced aspect of Kant's approach to life, and maybe also how it influenced his successors?

KN: I think this is one of the most interesting parts of Kant's philosophy. I like the way that you put it. I think Kant is ambivalent about the concept of inner purposiveness. So, the distinction between external and internal purposiveness is very important for the third *Critique*, and you're right that it revives an essentially Aristotelian distinction where external purposiveness, Kant says, is [when] x is useful for y : sandy soil is beneficial or useful for spruces, is one example that he uses. That's a relation of external purposiveness. It's of instrumental value: x is useful or instrumentally valuable for y . Inner purposiveness – Kant talks about this in different ways – is a relation in which something is both a cause and an effect of itself, as he says. Internally purposive beings are self-organized and self-organizing, and essentially by "inner purposiveness" he just means that when we identify sandy soil as being useful for spruce, that's clearly an external relationship between two things; if I am self-reproducing, or for example the organs – the purpose of the heart is to pump blood, and of course to pump blood helps my organism to continually maintain and sustain and reproduce itself, that's a relationship of internal purposiveness, according to Kant. And Kant's ambivalence, at least the way that he characterizes it in the third *Critique*, is that (you're right), he comes to this – so, we could back up a little bit. The problem he's trying to understand, at least in this part of the third *Critique*, is about how it is that we can judge objects of nature that we take to be living. Insofar as we need to apply something like a concept of purposiveness in order to judge these objects, Kant comes to this puzzle. In the first *Critique*, presumably all we have is universal mechanism, the concepts we apply in order to judge objects of nature have to subscribe to this mechanistic view of things. How is it, then, that there are these certain objects of nature, namely living things, where it seems like we need teleological concepts, or concepts of purposiveness. Ultimately, Kant comes to the conclusion that we can only use these concepts of purposiveness heuristically, or he says we are legitimately entitled to use these concepts regulatively, not constitutively; that's the distinction that he makes. And I think one could argue, and I think this is how the German idealists responded to this, that it was a very unstable position; that Kant understood that we needed teleological concepts and the concept of purposiveness in order to understand living nature and not just nature as mechanism. On the other hand, he had many many reasons, including reasons that he gave us in the first *Critique* for telling us that we can't constitutively

apply these concepts and that we cannot know that objects in nature are purposive in and of themselves. And so, he arrives at this unstable position, and what I try to argue is that the German idealists took this as their point of departure. I think they were very unhappy with the unstable position in which Kant wanted to insist that basically teleological concepts are only regulative concepts. They are heuristics, but we cannot apply these concepts in a way that would actually bring us something like genuine knowledge of nature. And I think ultimately what was at stake for the idealists was that if this was the case, then it barred us from understanding not just objects of nature that we want to identify as alive, but it created a barrier for what we could say about ourselves. And I think ultimately that was one of the things that really bothered the idealists about Kant's unstable position.

JN: Thanks. I think we can now turn to Hegel, and I can begin to ask you about his role in this story. So, when many people of Hegel, they'll think of his category of spirit or *Geist*, which is perhaps something like our common mindedness; it's even been thought of as a collective subject or mind, or perhaps that interpretation isn't in favor any more. But the emphasis would often fall on thinking, self-consciousness, reason, *Geist* or spirit. But there's also this organicist dimension to Hegel's thought. Living beings are important to him, and he's – as you show – following Kant's lead in the third *Critique*. So, can you tell us what it is you have to say about the role of life in Hegel's thought and the theses you're imputing to him?

KN: I think these concepts that you identify as important in Hegel are absolutely right – *Geist*, self-consciousness, reason. If I were to put it most simply, what I want to argue is that in order to understand these central concepts in Hegel, and for the purposes of the book I actually don't talk too much about spirit, but I do talk about self-consciousness, and I also talk about what Hegel calls, in this very odd technical sense “the Concept,” or *der Begriff*, and what I want to argue is that in order to understand these central concepts of Hegel's philosophy, we have to understand him as articulating them in relationship to the concept of life. I think that is one of Hegel's innovations. Hegel is known to be a sort of hyper-, arch-rationalist, and I think there are certainly many ways in which that is true. But what I wanted to show in the book was that the way in which he is a rationalist is thoroughly informed by the way that he understands the concept of life, and that in fact many of what we could read as merely metaphors, that he wants to talk about thinking as alive, so everything that is (this is putting it a little bit simplistically, but) everything that Hegel wants to defend, everything that's good, for Hegel, is living, dynamic, fluid, and alive. Everything that he wants to criticize is always merely formal, it's dead, it's fixed in a certain kind of way, and anyone who's read Hegel can identify these as important metaphors that he uses in his work. And what I wanted to show was that their significance was not merely metaphorical, that actually Hegel meant for us to take him literally, in a sense, when he says that thinking is alive, that reason is alive, that reason is a form of purposive activity, and that some of the problems that he took to be characteristic of earlier thinkers was that they treated features of human activity like thinking and reason and self-consciousness in terms that he took to be dead. So, that's in a very quick nutshell what I wanted to show in the book: that the metaphors of aliveness and dynamism were not mere metaphors, but actually important for understanding how Hegel understands key phenomena like self-consciousness, reason, thinking, and even logic.

JN: Thank you. So, picking up on that last remark of yours, one of the things that's most surprising about your book is that you focus on the role of life in Hegel's *Logic*. He wrote a book called his *Science of Logic*, there was a shorter version called his *Encyclopedia Logic*, but it's commonly thought to be the core work of his philosophical system. The earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which many people are more familiar with, seems to have been a kind of introduction to the system. His *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* are a kind of offshoot of the system. But the *Logic* is the heart of it, or the foundation, and even though Hegel likely meant something very different by "logic" from what we mean today, people might balk at the idea that there could be something like a logic of life. I mean, one thing I think you bring out well is that even Hegel is alive to this concern. He says, life is so concrete, how could there ever be a logic of it. And he's talking about things like the concept of life or the idea of life. There's even the suggestion, which I think you develop really well, that life is somehow *a priori* in something resembling the way that Kant thought causality or space and time are *a priori*. So, can you talk a little bit about the issues and problems connected with the idea of life as a logical category, as something thought comes equipped with, perhaps?

KN: Great. There are maybe two reasons that I went to the *Logic*, because you're right, one could turn to many different places to think about the problem of life in Hegel. One reason I turned to the *Logic* was almost as a challenge, because if it is the case that life was as important as I thought it was, and that the core of his rationalism can only be understood in relation to life, I thought that it was very important to show this with respect to the *Logic* and not just, say, another part to the system, where he's talking about not the nature of pure thinking, but things that are much more concrete, everything from nature to history, and social institutions, and so on and so forth. The other odd thing about the *Logic*, which you just mentioned, is that it's an odd feature of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which was a puzzle that I wanted to think about, was why there is a chapter on life, there's chapter on teleology, so Hegel seems to think that these questions pertain not just to our knowledge of nature, but to the very nature of thinking itself. You mentioned that one way of thinking about this logical approach to life is to think about it as *a priori* in connection with the way that Kant thinks about the conditions of possibility. I think that's a very helpful way of putting it, and I do talk about it this way in the book. I think [there are] a couple of reasons why the concept of life is important for the *Logic*. At the highest level of generality, I think Hegel want to argue that something about life constitutes a kind of condition for intelligibility; that life actually has a role to play in our understanding of what it is to render things intelligible at all. This makes sense of why he turns to the concept of life when he's turning finally in the *Logic* to this final category of the Idea, and the very infamous Absolute Idea. He wants to argue that life is the immediate shape of intelligibility as such. I think that's quite a radical argument for him to make, especially in the *Logic*, but at the time I was trying to figure this out in my book, I thought that it was something in Hegel's philosophy that had been underappreciated or undertheorized.

A second way in which I think the concept of life is important for the *Logic* is, earlier I mentioned Hegel's technical notion of the Concept. One way of thinking about what he means by "*the Concept*," which is a very odd way of talking, is to think about something like a minimal

unit of intelligibility. We have to be able to identify something as having the unity of what he calls “the Concept” in order to make something intelligible, and he argues that the unity of the Concept has to do with the unity of the relations between something’s being universal and particular and individual. And I think Hegel also has a very interesting argument of trying to present this unity in organic terms, to show us that this minimal unit of intelligibility is connected to the unity of a living thing, or the unity of an organism. So, those are some of the ways in which I think the concept of life is relevant for logic, in his sense, which again in the broadest possible sense is just interested in thinking about the conditions of intelligibility, the nature of thinking as such.

JN: So, it now sounds as if – I mean, you were saying before that Kant in a sense demoted the concept of life, it becomes a mere heuristic, it only has a regulative rather than a constitutive use. So, it isn’t on quite the same footing as these conditions for the possibility of experience, things like space, time, causality. But obviously things are very different in Hegel. It seems like Kant revives interest in this concept of Aristotle’s, but then tries to put the brakes on our use of it, and Hegel is now arguing for something like an unrestricted use of it, or a more ambitious employment. How does he justify that? What’s his argument against Kant’s skepticism that we could ever really know, in the fullest sense of the term that there are purposively organized beings, or living beings. What’s Hegel’s rejoinder to Kant on this score?

KN: This is a huge question in the scholarship. It’s probably one of the most difficult questions to tackle. My approach to it in the book was to begin with trying to understand Hegel’s idealism. So, there are different approaches, right? We can argue that we’re not trying to restrict mechanism, but we’re trying to say that in some cases it’s legitimate to employ teleological concepts. My way of going at it – and I’m not sure that it was ultimately successful, but my way of going at it – was to try to say that Hegel tries to show that rather than arguing with Kant about the extent or degree to which the concept of purposiveness was applicable to nature, Hegel instead takes this idealist approach to trying to defend the concept of life and show that the very concept of self-consciousness – and he picks self-consciousness in a sense because he wants to go with Kant a certain way: self-consciousness is the highest principle, it’s the highest principle of unity that allows us to have something like unity of experience. Then what Hegel wants to say is that, well, in order to understand self-consciousness, we actually already need something like the concept of life; that the concept of life is constitutive for our understanding of self-consciousness. And so, it’s built into that ultimate highest principle that Kant does in fact subscribe to, rather than trying to argue with Kant about the extent or degree to which teleological concepts are applicable to nature. I think Hegel ultimately does think that we can legitimately employ teleological concepts in our knowledge of nature, but I think his best argument for it is to try to argue that it’s constitutive of the principle of self-consciousness, and in that sense he is trying to go along with Kant’s argument to a certain degree before disagreeing with him further down the line.

JN: Doesn’t this also get at an issue which divides you from a certain camp of interpreters, you call it the “apperception view,” but these are interpreters who think that the inspiration for Hegel’s *Logic*, perhaps even all of his theoretical philosophy, is Kant’s apperception thesis, which

is that the “I think” must accompany all my representations. Kant gives apperception this role in his Transcendental Deduction of the categories. And you seem to want to concede something to that reading of Hegel while also clearing space for introducing a more organicist dimension that’s lacking in those readings. Can you talk a little bit about your controversy with “apperception first” readers of Hegel?

KN: Absolutely, and you’re right to point that I think the apperception view isn’t completely wrong because I do think, clearly, from what I just said in my last answer to you, I do think that self-consciousness is an absolutely central principle for understanding Hegel’s philosophy. The big departure from the apperception view is that once we understand the way in which Hegel understands self-consciousness as living self-consciousness – that’s how he’ll put it in the *Phenomenology* – his argument and his understanding of what self-consciousness is, the self-relation that we’re talking about when we talk about self-consciousness, how self-consciousness comes to be aware of itself, all of his arguments in articulating that are connected to the way in which he understands the problem of life, then I think we have to depart from the way that Kant understands apperception a lot more than what proponents of the apperception view, most notably Robert Pippin, is going to argue for. It not only changes how we understand what self-consciousness is, how judgment operates. Kant takes the unit of apperception to be the source of all unity in experience, and I think what Hegel’s idealism shows us is that apperception is not the sole source of unity of experience; it is in fact living unity and living form that is the source of unity of experience, the source of intelligibility. So, I want to hang on to what I think is important about self-consciousness for an idealist philosophy while extending it out, so that we are not just restricted to questions about the “I think,” but that questions of unity in experience, questions of intelligibility, questions of judgment are connected with the unity that Hegel identifies with life.

JN: On that last point, you suggest at one point in the book that Hegel has his own critique of judgment, and here you draw attention to a portion of Hegel’s *Logic* called his Subjective Logic, and this is a part where Hegel seems to do something like what Kant does when he goes through the different forms of judgment in the first *Critique* and derives the categories from them, but perhaps there’s even a connection to what Kant is doing in the third *Critique*. What does it mean to say that Hegel has his own critique of judgment in this part of the *Logic*? And perhaps you could also say something about how this clashes with the received idea that Hegel is a logician for whom inference or syllogism is the most important thing. Some of us will think here about Brandom’s inferentialist reading of Hegel. So, why the centrality of judgment, and what does it mean to say that Hegel has a critique of judgment?

KN: What I tried to argue in the book is that Hegel’s Subjective Logic – my focus in the book is on the portion of the *Science of Logic* that he calls the Subjective Logic or the Doctrine of the Concept, since, as I said earlier, I’m really interested in understanding what Hegel means by “the Concept,” and I try to argue that we should read Hegel’s Subjective Logic or the Doctrine of the Concept as his critique of judgment. The parallel that I’m drawing there is to the way that Kant in the third *Critique* argues that the principle of purposiveness is a necessary condition for the possibility of judgment. That’s the new transcendental principle that he introduces in the third

Critique. Although Kant distinguishes between many different senses of purposiveness, and there are all of the ambiguities and complications that we've discussed earlier concerning the concept of purposiveness, ultimately what I tried to show was that, for the idealists, Kant's great insight in saying that purposiveness is a condition for judgment is to bring into view the importance of organic unity and the problem of life in understanding the nature of judgment itself. And so, the reason I say that, while Hegel has a version of the critique of judgment – earlier we said that at the very end of the *Logic* there's a very important chapter on life – my interpretation is that Hegel is trying to make the same claim in the Doctrine of the Concept. The Doctrine of the Concept begins by investigating the nature of what the Concept is, the nature of judgment, the nature of syllogism or inference, as you just also mentioned. And by the end of the *Logic* he comes to the conclusion – and so, he doesn't start with this as a transcendental principle, because that's not how Hegel generally argues – but he comes to this in the conclusion to say, well, it turns out that things like what in the *Science of Logic* he calls the Subjective Concept, but basically he's talking about judgment and inference, that these operations actually presuppose something like the unity of life. So, that's the parallel that I'm trying to draw when I say that Hegel has his own version of the critique of judgment in the Doctrine of the Concept in the *Science of Logic*.

In terms of the importance of judgment, one passage that I focus a lot on in my reading is something very enigmatic that Hegel says in the chapter on life. Life, for Hegel, represents not just a minimum unit of intelligibility. By the time we get to end of the *Logic*, Hegel is interested in thinking about the immediate shape of judging activity, and there's this very enigmatic passage that I spend probably too much time on where he says that life is “the original judgment.” The idea of original judgment is itself a little odd. He's clearly making reference to Hölderlin and the way that Hölderlin thinks about judgment [*Urteil*] not in terms of synthesis, but in terms of an original division [*Ur-teilung*]. So, there's a connection to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, but there's another reason I highlight the importance of judgment in my interpretation of the *Logic* is because of this important passage. So, there are two things Hegel is trying to do with the concept of life. One, as I've already said, is to think of organic unity as a kind of minimum unit of intelligibility. But another thing he's trying to do is to understand the nature of judging activity as such, what the power of judgment (*Urteilskraft*) is, and he wants to say that living activity in its immediate shape already manifests or actualizes an immediate kind of judging activity. This idea of original division is very important. In enacting a kind of separation between myself and my environment, he's saying that living things are already primitive judges.

JN: Thanks, that's really helpful and interesting. One of the things that I have found really refreshing about your book is that you don't just have Hegel square off against Kant; you talk about these transitional figures. So, as much as he might have wanted us to believe this, Hegel was not himself the only German idealist; there's also Schelling and Fichte. And people have often followed Hegel's lead in ignoring them, but in more recent decades it's become clear that they're significant figures in their own right and not just stepping stones to Hegel. Can you say a little bit about the role of Fichte and Schelling in your story? And I wonder if this is connected

to what you call the speculative identity thesis, which is something that Hegel maybe inherits from these figures as they grapple with the issue of life, as it's handed down to them from Kant.

KN: Absolutely. Obviously, these are all incredibly complex figures in and of themselves, and I agree with you that we shouldn't just treat them as stepping stones to Hegel, but since my book was on Hegel, one thing that I focused on was an early text by Hegel known as the *Differenzschrift*. It's the first text he published, which is a text on the difference between Fichte's and Schelling's systems of philosophy. I take this early text to be really important for the first presentation of his argument about what you call the speculative identity thesis, which is basically the way in which Hegel understands life as constitutive of self-consciousness; that there's this important relation, identity and difference – identity and nonidentity, if you want to use the Hegelian terms – between life and self-consciousness that is the fundamental principle of his idealism. I argue that he essentially comes to this thesis through a critique of Fichte and that he actually adopts a lot from the early Schelling, or Schelling up to the Identity Philosophy. Schelling's *Philosophy of Nature*, I think, is also very influential for how Hegel understands the relation between life and self-consciousness. So, in a nutshell, I think what's important about his critique of Fichte [is this]. Again, if we want to tell the story in broad strokes, Kant identifies self-consciousness as the ultimate principle of the unity of experience. One problem with Kant is that Kant says this, and he says the "I think" must accompany all of my representations, but we don't really hear much about what self-consciousness is. Self-consciousness becomes something of a black box. It's the source of the unity of all experience, but Kant never really articulates the nature of self-consciousness or what it is or how it operates, beyond saying that it's spontaneity, or something like this. Fichte really takes on this task and articulates what many scholars take to be an absolutely original approach to the nature of self-consciousness. Fichte refers to this as a kind of self-positing activity – [but note] the importance of the concept of activity and trying to work that out. Even Fichte already, I think, needs a little bit of the concept of life in order to articulate what the nature of activity is. But Hegel's criticism, which is something that he and Schelling at this time shared, was that Fichte articulated a merely subjective idealism with his theory of self-positing self-consciousness; and that for self-positing self-consciousness to actualize itself in a way that wasn't merely subjective, what self-consciousness needed was to stand in opposition to a kind of living activity or a living form. They called this, in a very clunky way, an "objective subject-object." So, self-consciousness is a merely subjective subject-object because it's a subjective self-relation. An objective subject-object is a self-relation that is essentially not self-conscious. So, forgetting the jargon for a minute, what's important with Hegel's early grappling with Fichte and Schelling is to try to come to his own understanding of how to understand self-consciousness in relation to living activity, and I think the critique of Fichte's account of self-consciousness is essential for that. I think it's also been somewhat – not entirely, but somewhat – underappreciated how important Schelling's *Philosophy of Nature* is for Hegel's development of his own view about the relationship between life and self-consciousness.

JN: Thank you. We only have a few minutes left. I have the sense there's more to discuss, but I thought I would ask you – this book is so widely admired and discussed in so many quarters. There've been two symposia on it and numerous reviews, and I wondered if there were points of the discussion where you wanted to intervene or respond to criticisms that have been raised, or

areas where people have pressed you for clarification, where you might have something to add to the really vibrant discussion that's arisen around your book.

KN: I think there are two things in particular that I've been asked about a lot that I probably could have done more to be clear about. The first has to do with the nature of knowledge of nonliving things. Insofar as I make life *so* central, as part of an ultimate principle of Hegel's idealism, does that entail that Hegel has this sort of animistic view of nature, that basically we can only understand things as living, and we can't understand things as dead? And I think in responding to a lot of my critics, I've taken a bit more time to try to show why that's not the case. I mean, I didn't take that to be the case when I was presenting the thesis in the book. But [if] life is a principle of intelligibility, we run into the opposite problem. Before, we were worried about knowledge of living things; we treated living things as if they were dead things. And now, do we run into the opposite problem, that we treat dead things as if they were alive? Because if life is a principle of intelligibility, then it seems like the way in which we unify things under concepts is to treat them all as if they were alive. And in responding to my critics, I've had to do a lot of work to try to show why that's not the case. One reason why that's not the case, I think, is presented in the *Logic* itself. Life as a principle of intelligibility is constitutive of how we understand self-consciousness, but it's very clear in the *Logic* that for Hegel the concepts of mechanism and also he has a chapter on chemism, that those are essential categories for how we understand nature. And so, it's not the case that the point of making life so essential to how we understand self-consciousness and knowledge, the goal is not then to do the opposite, treating everything as dead *versus* treating everything as alive. I think there's lots of room in his philosophy, and hopefully in my interpretation, to show that that's not the case.

The second issue – I've actually been really grateful for the questions and to my critics – is on the nature of the *a priori*. I think I underestimated the degree to which it was very controversial to argue that life was *a priori* for Hegel. I think what's controversial about it is the term *a priori* itself. What a lot of critics have convincingly shown me is that the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* can't just be straightforwardly applied to Hegel, and because he's so critical of the way that Kant uses that distinction. And so that is something that has been really helpful for me in terms of rethinking – I don't want to abandon the term *a priori*, but I had to acknowledge that even though we might think, if it's the science of pure thinking, we can just say that, well, the *Logic* operates in the domain of *a priori* principles. I think Hegel just has a much more complicated understanding of the relationship between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, and that is something that, since publishing the book, my critics have helped me see that a lot more needs to be said about saying that life is an *a priori* concept for Hegel.

JN: Great. So, my very last question is just an invitation for you or us to move beyond the nineteenth century and just ask about the afterlife of something of these ideas, or if there are areas of contemporary philosophy where you think they might be relevant. I've seen you give a number of talks in the last year or so about the young Marx and his notion of species being, and I've also read work of yours on Critical Theory, Frankfurt School. Notions of social pathology have certainly come back into the conversation about those authors, and there's a clear connection there to life. So, I'm just curious what you see as the enduring significance of these

ideas from the first half of the nineteenth century for us today, or maybe just for subsequent philosophers.

KN: Spending all this time thinking about organic conceptions of nature and the concept of life in Kant and German idealism has helped me see how important this tradition is for thinking about subsequent developments in the nineteenth century. One you mentioned that I've been thinking about a lot is the idea of species being, and how there's a very important German idealist background for understanding this idea that I'm interested in exploring. I don't think I've used this term yet because it's such a controversial term, but I do think that the way that Hegel and the German idealists thought about the concept of life is important for thinking about forms of critical naturalism, nonreductive forms of naturalism, liberal naturalism. There are so many different ways to put this, but I think they had a very novel way of approaching the problem of naturalism, wanting to understand everything that we identify with human powers and human capacities as being part of nature without having a reductive view of what nature is. I think there's a lot more to be done to think about German idealist contributions to those debates. I also think – this is not something that I work on directly, but – it's clear that a lot of contemporary work in philosophy of mind and philosophy of biology is moving (they wouldn't put it this way, but *I* think it's moving) in a kind of German idealist direction, insofar as this absolutely essential relationship between mind and life is now increasingly acknowledged in philosophers interesting in thinking about the nature of mind and consciousness. And I think it's really extraordinary, the way in which the German idealist tradition tried to think about this over two hundred years ago in a way that I think is incredibly relevant for the ways we think about the connection between life and mind today. Those are just some of the directions that I think are exciting.

JN: Great. I think we're just about out of time, so all that remains to be done is to thank Professor Karen Ng for speaking with us today about her book, *Hegel's Concept of Life*.

KN: Thanks so much to you, Jake, for taking the time to chat.

JN: Wonderful. Ok, goodbye, everyone.

KN: Bye.