

The Academic Animal is Just an Analogy: Against the Restrictive Account of Hegel's "Spiritual Animal Kingdom"

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Abstract: The "Spiritual Animal Kingdom" is an often-misunderstood section of G.F.W. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Many scholars interpret the 'Spiritual Animal Kingdom' as being analogous to intellectual life. While the intellectual life analogy is useful, the restrictive account takes it to be the sole content of this section. In this essay, I argue that the restrictive account misidentifies what Hegel means by *die Sache selbst* (in English, "the matter in hand"). Such a mistake will affect the ability of consciousness to progress to absolute knowing, the ultimate project for Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom" section comes at the end of the chapter on *Reason*, which can be roughly separated into three sections.¹ In the first section, solipsistic self-consciousness is confronted with an "other" consciousness beyond itself. In the second section, consciousness finds itself as an individual in society and must consider how to act. This is the problem of individuality. In order to be truly free, individuals must choose for themselves how they will act. Such choices, though, are arbitrary.² This section concludes with a selfish morality under which an individual acts out of self-interest.

In the third section of the *Reason* chapter, the socially embedded individual acts, producing a public work. As such, a work's meaning will be interpreted and determined by others. The original goal, which informed the action that produced the work, vanishes. This is the "contingency of action," wherein the action's goal is itself only determined by acting.³ The resulting work is *die*

¹ G.F.W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Except where noted otherwise, all of my translations come from Miller.

Miller translates Hegel's *das geistige Tierreich* as the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom." Hereafter, references to the realm discussed in this section of the *Phenomenology* will be to *das geistige Tierreich*; references to the section itself will be to the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom."

² Terry Pinkard, "Shapes of Active Reason: The Law of the Heart, Retrieved Virtue, and What Really Matters," *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 139.

³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §409, 246.



Sache selbst, or the “matter in hand.” Because it is found in actions, the matter in hand is always obtained; the goal is always achieved. In this way, the action of the individual just is the matter in hand. So while individuals might take themselves to be concerned with the matter in hand, they are really only concerned with it in terms of their own actions.

This is the deception of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” wherein individuals are deceived about why it is that they are acting. In *das geistige Tierreich*, individuals are concerned with the matter in hand only to the extent that they attend to it. Like animals, individuals in this realm are only concerned with their own sustenance.⁴ However, the deception is twofold. Not only are members of *das geistige Tierreich* self-deceived about why they are acting, they are also deceiving others by claiming that they are truly concerned with the matter in hand.⁵ Now, others might express hurt or anger that any individual would act self-interestedly and not for the sake of the matter in hand. However, those individuals would be engaging in the same deceptions, for they too are acting (hurt or angry) out of self-interest. Furthermore, Pinkard notes that *Werk* in Hegel has a “double meaning of [1] something like an artistic or literary product and [2] its quotidian meaning where it simply denotes the results of what one has done.”⁶ The very word Hegel uses here can be understood as the work of intellectuals.

Based on this reading of Hegel, the analogy with the intellectual life is a useful one. Take philosophers as an example. Philosophers might contend that they are concerned with the advancement of philosophy. To this end, they produce articles, books, and lectures. However, what they are really concerned with is their own work and how it is that they *themselves* will advance philosophy. Philosophers then produce works criticizing others and vehemently defending their own works, all for their own advancement, though they might continue to profess their concern with the advancement of philosophy.

So, intellectuals seem like proper members of *das geistige Tierreich*. Just as members of the natural animal kingdom must be the fittest to survive, individuals in *das geistige Tierreich* must “publish or perish.” Or so the analogy goes. Some interpreters, though, take the intellectual life analogy to be the sole content of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” and intellectuals to be the only members of

⁴ J.M. Fritzman, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 68.

⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §416, 250.

⁶ Pinkard, “Shapes of Active Reason,” 144.

das geistige Tierreich. This is the restrictive account of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” which is given by interpreters like Royce, Loewenberg, and Shapiro.

Royce begins his assessment of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” by merely utilizing the intellectual life analogy. Royce likens the individual producing works in *das geistige Tierreich* to “the artist who pursues art for art’s sake, [or] the scholar, who loves learning just for learning’s sake.”⁷ These might be taken as mere examples, yet Royce continues, describing Hegel as a “reflective man who is confessing the only too natural defects incident to his own calling.”⁸ Royce takes this section to be a sort of confession for Hegel (himself an intellectual “animal”).⁹ According to Royce, this section is just about intellectuals. Moreover, in the final paragraph of his assessment of this section, Royce translates *das geistige Tierreich* as “The Intellectual Animals.”¹⁰ Under such a translation, it is no wonder that Royce takes this section to be merely a description of the intellectual life.

Loewenberg starts in a similar vein writing, “Hegel himself definitely belongs to the class of ‘animals’ he castigates.”¹¹ Again, we are told to listen for an autobiographical note being struck in Hegel’s “Spiritual Animal Kingdom.” Loewenberg, too, translates *das geistige Tierreich* to the “intellectual animals.”¹² Professions (like those of scholars and artists) whose members appeal to some abstract higher goals are simply engaging in deception. This deception, though, is merely the deception of others. Scholars and artists, according to Loewenberg, are acting not for some abstract higher goal, but merely for themselves.¹³

Shapiro continues the interpretations of Royce and Loewenberg.¹⁴ According to Shapiro in the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” Hegel is just describing the intellectual life of which he (and the *Phenomenology* itself) is a part. So, Hegel is not describing anything new. As Shapiro observes, Hegel has already developed

⁷ Josiah Royce, “Lecture VIII: The Dialectical Progress of Hegel’s *Phaenomenologie*,” *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 196.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹¹ J. Loewenberg, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: Dialogues on the Life of Mind* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1965), 169.

¹² *Ibid.*, 170.

¹³ That Loewenberg fails to note the double deception in *das geistige Tierreich* might be a product of his engagement with the intellectual life analogy. Nevertheless, this point does not affect my argument.

¹⁴ Shapiro is concerned also with Kojève’s interpretation of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom.” Due to the piecemeal nature of Kojève’s interpretation of this section, I will not consider it here. Suffice it to say that Kojève also engages in the restrictive account.



the animalistic self-interested individual elsewhere.¹⁵ So, according to Shapiro, in the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” Hegel is showing that the problem of individuality exists for even the most educated among us. It is just animal instinct all the way down the line.

Shapiro is quick to sidestep the objection that the interpretations of Royce and Loewenberg are based on a reading of Hegel that holds the *Phenomenology* to be a historical account of Western civilization. Such an objection might contend that [identifying] “the various shapes of consciousness with particular historical developments would rob the work of both philosophical necessity and relevance to the present.”¹⁶ This objection, Shapiro notes, is based on the false supposition that, being historical, we have already moved past this shape of consciousness (the intellectual life). That the intellectual life analogy obtains to this day, though, is an indication that such a historical account remains significant.

Despite the usefulness of the intellectual life analogy, these restrictive accounts fail. Each of the above interpreters suggest (and even outright claim) that in the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” Hegel is just writing from his experiences in the academic community. Nevertheless, *das geistige Tierreich* is more widespread than just the academic community. In his analysis of this section, R.C. Solomon acknowledges that Hegel is describing the “familiar pretensions of the academic life,” but that he only “does this ... as part of a much larger picture. His discussion focuses on the notion of meaningful work and individual expression, which are by no means the unique domain of the scholars.”¹⁷ *Das geistige Tierreich* is not merely inhabited by intellectuals. This would make sense, for, according to H.S. Harris:

Once we take seriously [Hegel’s] claim that Reason now engulfs all the previous shapes— “that its account with them is closed” —it is clear that we must not look for the “spiritual kingdom of animals” in a restricted compass (such as the University, the “learned world,” or the world of art).¹⁸ The “spiritual animal kingdom” is as *universal* as its “natural” counterpart.¹⁹

¹⁵ Gary Shapiro, “Notes on the Animal Kingdom of Spirit,” *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader*, ed. Jon Stewart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 230.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁷ Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 515.

¹⁸ H.S. Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder: A Commentary on Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Volume II: The Odyssey of Spirit*, 136 (footnote 5). The quotations are Harris’s translations of Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §394, 236.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Here, Harris argues that the restrictive account fails to recognize that, in the beginning of the third part of the *Reason* chapter, Hegel takes himself to be discussing a new shape of consciousness. *Das geistige Tierreich* is not just the same account of individuals from the second section of *Reason* dressed up in new clothes (i.e. those of the academic). Instead, *das geistige Tierreich* is yet another universal shape of consciousness that Hegel is considering in the *Phenomenology*. That is, as individuals, we are *all* members of *das geistige Tierreich*. In this way, Hegel's analysis in the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom" is far more widespread than the restrictive account allows.

While the restrictive account might give a narrow interpretation of the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom," this does not by itself constitute a failure for the restrictive account. Both Harris and Solomon recognize that intellectuals are members of *das geistige Tierreich*. As such, the intellectual life analogy is still useful for understanding the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom." That is, the restrictive account fails only if the intellectual life analogy somehow unacceptably misrepresents the content of the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom."

I argue that the restrictive account fails for exactly this reason. Due to its engagement with the intellectual life analogy, the restrictive account mistakenly identifies what the matter in hand (*die Sache Selbst*) truly is. We can easily see this if we distinguish between (a) the initial and (b) the universal matters in hand. The initial matter in hand is that which individuals in *das geistige Tierreich* take to be their goal for acting in the first instance. In the end, though, as Fritzman notes, these individuals (even though they are acting self-interestedly) promote the matter in hand nevertheless.²⁰ Under the intellectual life analogy, the initial matters in hand are intellectual fields of interest. So, in our philosophy example, the initial matter in hand would be the advancement of philosophy. Philosophers, by acting purely out of self-interest, inadvertently advance philosophy, and so achieve the initial matter in hand.

Nevertheless, the intellectual life analogy takes the universal matter in hand to be identical to the initial matter in hand. However, the initial matter in hand is distinct from the universal matter in hand. In the final passage of the "Spiritual Animal Kingdom," Hegel writes that *die Sache selbst* is arrived at not merely by the action of any one individual, but also by *all individuals*.²¹ This is the universal

²⁰ Fritzman, *Hegel*, 69.

²¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §418, 252.



matter in hand, which is determined by the self-interested action of all individuals. Whereas the initial matter in hand is something individuals identify prior to (and that serves as the reason for) action, the universal matter in hand can only be determined retrospectively. So, the universal matter in hand could look nothing like what individuals initially took it to be. Furthermore, any resemblance between the universal and the initial matters in hand would be merely coincidental. In the intellectual life analogy, though, individuals are always advancing their respective fields of interest; moreover, if they do not advance their respective fields of interest, they are not truly achieving the matter in hand. However, these fields of interest are not necessarily the universal matters in hand. The universal matters in hand can only be discovered after the fact, that is, given the self-interested action of everyone. Under the universal matter in hand, then, intellectual fields of interest might not be advanced.

It might be contended, here, that the intellectual life analogy could accept the universal matter in hand. If so, the restrictive account could be salvaged. In order for the intellectual life analogy to accept the universal matter in hand, though, intellectual fields of interest would have to be composed of and advanced by every single contribution from their respective intellectual communities. So, in the example of philosophy, the field of philosophy would be composed of all of the articles, books, and lectures of every philosopher. That being said, each further work within the field of philosophy (that is, by a philosopher) just becomes the field of philosophy.

In response, I argue that this is an untenable conclusion for intellectual fields of interest. Surely, it is not the case that every work by a philosopher advances the field of philosophy. Even though it becomes included in the philosophical corpus (by being published or presented), a philosophical article, book, or lecture cannot be said to meaningfully contribute to the field's advancement merely by existing. Such a conclusion, where every contribution counts, seems less like philosophical advancement and more like chaos.

This response, though, should not to be misunderstood as arguing against the conclusion that every contribution counts toward the universal matter in hand. What my response contends is merely that the universal matter in hand does not look like advancement in intellectual fields of interest. Furthermore, if the matters of intellectuals are not necessarily achieved, then the intellectual life analogy breaks down, and with it, the restrictive account.

My argument thus far has been that the restrictive account fails to represent the content of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” because the intellectual life analogy cannot accept the universal matter in hand. As such, the restrictive account—which takes the intellectual life analogy to be the sole content of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom”—fails. Under the intellectual life analogy, the universal matter in hand is identical to the initial matter in hand, but, according to Hegel, the two are distinct. Therefore, my argument suggests an interpretive shift in reading the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom.”²² Because the intellectual life analogy cannot accept the universal matter in hand, it cannot be understood as the sole content of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom.” With my concluding paragraphs, I will argue that an interpretive shift away from the restrictive account will ensure that the individual consciousness progresses toward the ultimate goal of the *Phenomenology*, absolute knowing.

The “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” is one of the final sections before the chapter on *Spirit*, which concerns societal consciousness. Therefore, the universal matter in hand will be pivotal to the progression from the individual consciousness of the *Reason* chapter to the societal consciousness of the *Spirit* chapter. This progression must take place, for, as Hegel notes in the *Preface*, “each [shape of consciousness] is necessary.”²³ That is, understanding the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” is necessary to progress toward absolute knowing.

Furthermore, the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” might be paramount to understanding the whole of Hegel’s text. While I will not attempt a detailed argument for this claim, I will give two points that might be useful for making such an argument. First, both Donald Phillip Verene and Michael Forster note the importance of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” for the *Phenomenology*. According to Verene, Hegel’s consideration of the universal matter in hand in this section emphasizes a theme that runs throughout the *Phenomenology*. That is, in the progression toward absolute knowing, Hegel is considering distinct shapes of consciousness, each of which is merely concerned with the initial matter in hand. In this way, each shape of consciousness is flawed. It is only the acceptance of the universal matter in hand, which has “no specific object,” that

²² Solomon and Harris might be said to have already made this interpretive shift. Nevertheless, that articles like Shapiro’s (i.e. those that engage in the restrictive account) continue to be recognized in Hegel scholarship suggests that an explicit interpretive shift has not yet been made.

²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §29, 17.



leads us to absolute knowing.²⁴ Similarly, Forster writes that the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” encompasses “the core of Hegel’s own philosophical position.”²⁵

Second, absolute knowing is the dissolution of subject and object, that is, knowledge which sees itself in its content.²⁶ If so, then the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom,” which represents the turning point from individual to societal consciousness, is paramount to understanding the individual’s (subjective) place in the broader framework of (objective) society. While these last two points do not together suffice for an argument for the importance of the “Spiritual Animal Kingdom” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, they do call for a reevaluation of this section and its place in the *Phenomenology* as a whole.²⁷

²⁴ Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 98–99.

²⁵ Michael Forster, *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 346.

²⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §804, 490.

²⁷ I thank J.M. Fritzman, Raymond Torkelson, and the editorial board of *Stance* for their useful comments on previous drafts of this essay.