

## Digestion, Habit, and Being at Home: Hegel and the Gut as Ambiguous Other

JANE DRYDEN

Feminist and posthumanist writers have described the need for a relational ontology that challenges the boundaries of the human self (see e.g. Braidotti, Wolfe, Shildrick). Further support for this comes from recent work in the philosophy of biology, which argues that we must rethink the biological individual beyond the boundary of the species. A key part of our essential functioning is carried out by the bacteria in our intestines—our gut flora—in a way that challenges any strictly genetic account of what is involved for the biological human. It is unclear where to draw the line around individuals if species is inadequate (Hutter et al, Bouchard).

This work is fascinating in and of itself, but it also raises the question of how we are to think of our selves, if much of the activity and essential functioning of our bodies is undertaken by gut flora—especially given the effect of our digestive systems on our moods and attitudes (see e.g. Hadhazy, Kohn, Williams, and Whorton 4-5<sup>1</sup>). What kind of understanding and acknowledgement of this otherness within us will help us make sense of ourselves? The gut therefore serves as a particularly good locus for examining a relational theory of selfhood.

We can draw some prescient insights for this from Hegel's work in the *Encyclopaedia*. His description of our selves as continually mediated through otherness is strikingly compatible with the kind of structure contemporary biology presents us with. His accounts of digestion and habit, contextualized by his logic, help point toward an understanding of selfhood as porous and yet still capable of being sufficiently unified for us to make sense of ourselves, one which allows us to acknowledge otherness within us while still having enough unity for agency.

---

<sup>1</sup> “The mind matters too, as the functioning of the bowel is subject to the individual's emotional state; ‘the gastrointestinal tract,’ a twentieth-century physician has observed, ‘is the primary battleground for the conflicts between the psyche and the soma’ (Whorton 4). Williams provides a historical account of the theories around the connection between the viscera and mental states in 19<sup>th</sup> century French medicine, which includes some of the work Hegel drew from.

Throughout his system, and not merely at the level of interpersonal recognition or political institutions, Hegel describes processes by which something that is exterior to us becomes part of us, and similarly processes by which we exteriorize parts of ourselves, positing otherness within. He characterizes freedom in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* as “being at home with oneself in one’s other” (§24Z 2 [58])<sup>2</sup>: this refers not only to freedom at the level of the self-conscious will but to a metaphysical principle that runs all the way through his system. The boundaries between interior and exterior are porous within Hegel’s thought, as for him purity and atomistic isolation are only ever abstractions created by the framework of the understanding’s manner of thinking and its reliance on categorization and dichotomy. His conception of the ontology of the self—in other words, the way that the self is constituted and structured—is consistently relational and built around interconnection and interdependence.

First I will discuss the distinctiveness of our relationship with our gut, both in terms of its biological makeup and in terms of our experience of it, particularly when it goes awry. I will then turn to how Hegel conceives of digestion, and the way it involves an other coming to be made part of us. This will lead into a discussion of the body in general, and how we come to be at home in it and in the world around us through the development of bodily habits. Both of these—digestion and habit—show how relationships with our others are fundamentally and materially part of us. Hegel’s work can be mapped onto our contemporary understanding of our gut and provide a model for how we might think of our unified agency. I will then consider an objection to the use of Hegel for this purpose, noting that Hegel’s account of humanity is perhaps best known for the hostility depicted in our relationship to an other self at the beginnings of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This famous account of hostility may then loom over the account of digestion, making the move to assimilation seem problematic as a model for a Hegelian account of the unity of the self. In my response I note the limitation of assimilation, and explore the different contexts of the relationship to the ‘other’ at the interpersonal and gut level. As Elizabeth Wilson notes, referring to recent work on the enteric nervous system, “Maybe ingestion and digestion aren’t just metaphors for internalization; perhaps they are ‘actual’ mechanisms for relating to others” (Wilson,

---

<sup>2</sup> References to the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Philosophy of Nature*, and the *Philosophy of Spirit* are given by paragraph number, and page number in the translation where the paragraph is particularly long. “R” stands for “Remark,” and “Z” stands for *Zusatz*, an addition drawn from student notes from Hegel’s lectures and inserted by Hegel’s editors posthumously. Hegel’s editors often joined parts of different lectures together, and so the exact wording and sequence of the *Zusätze* may not be accurate, but the general content is fairly certainly Hegel’s.

*Psychosomatic* 45).<sup>3</sup> When we connect Hegel's ideas back to contemporary biological understandings of the unity of the self, we can see that this focus on digestion as a locus for examining selfhood is a fruitful—and literal—one.

### I. The microbiome

Service animals present an interesting starting point for considering our relationship to our gut flora, one that highlights the ambiguous quality of the human/animal relationship in constituting selfhood. Rod Michalko has written about his now-deceased service dog, Smokie, in a few places, and most at length in his 1999 book *The Two-in-One: Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness*; as the title suggests, Michalko explores an ontology of the self that is multiple. Despite the fact that service animals are often classified as “tools” for legal purposes, Michalko reports a very different relationship with Smokie than to the cane that he used for a time, with which he developed skill but did not experience it as an extension of his body (Michalko 23). As he described his relationship with Smokie, though, “Smokie and I do not merely inhabit a common natural and social world; we depend upon one another for our existence, and together we construct and re-construct the world. Smokie and I are, almost literally, extensions of each other” (5). He reiterates this togetherness later in the book: “My self is now *our* self. Smokie's self too is *our* self. We are ‘at home together,’ which means that we are continually making a home for our self” (91). The dyad that they form is one that can be “alone-together” (8-9). Michalko's words are chosen carefully to highlight and challenge assumptions about what selfhood consists of and what the boundaries of the human and animal might be. As Fiona Kumari Campbell notes about Michalko and Smokie: “Smokie confuses and confounds atomistic individualism and animal spaces” (Campbell 55).

Even with large mammals, then, when the boundary between one species and the other might seem to be obvious, the relationship formed by service animals and their humans challenges the neat line between them: where does Michalko's agency and Smokie's begin, when they are acting and moving together?

Acquiring a service animal, though, requires training both of the animal and of the human, and a process to determine whether this particular human and this particular animal are a good fit for each other.

---

<sup>3</sup> She also notes, in an apparent echoing of Hegel: “What the outside world engenders in the psychological sphere is relations to others, and through this the development of the self. It is the dynamics of intersubjective relations that allow the self to emerge and stabilize. These relations to others are psychologically generative only to the extent that they are internalized (ingested, absorbed, excreted)” (Wilson, *Psychosomatic* 44).

Despite the kind of unity they achieve, therefore, it still makes sense to be able to speak of Michalko-without-Smokie and vice versa. The example of service animals shows how a kind of selfhood can be developed with two species, but one in which the elements are relatively clearly distinguishable, and could have lived their lives separately (Michalko might never have acquired a service dog, or might have acquired a different dog than Smokie).

Human beings have developed such that a key part of our functioning—our digestion—is carried out with the aid of bacteria. While the particular gut bacteria that each of us has is contingent on where we were born, the type of food we eat, and even whether we were born by C-section or not, the presence of gut bacteria is necessary. With this kind of interrelationship, it is harder to distinguish one biological individual from another, since from birth onward, humans are always in relationship with their gut flora, and it makes less sense to try to speak of a human being on their own.

This is not just an issue for human beings, of course. Turner discusses termites of the genus *Macrotermes*, whose digestive symbiosis is performed not within their intestinal tracts but by a particular kind of fungus they cultivate, which serves as a “colony-built extracorporeal digestive system” (Turner 223). This means that, even if the colony itself is conceived of as a kind of superorganism, it is still not possible to draw a neat boundary around it either at the species level or spatially.

So how can this group be conceptualized or recognized as an individual? The theory of evolution by natural selection serves as a framework for understanding the development and organization of individuals, and as Bouchard argues, these individuals need not be single-species. The functional integration achieved by multispecies complex biological systems can serve as the target for natural selection, rather than natural selection picking out an isolated species within the system.

Turner, drawing on the *Macrotermes* colony example, suggests distinguishing individuals (and superindividuals) on basis of being “a social assemblage that is cognizant of itself as something distinct from its environment” (224). He describes the levels of self-awareness in the processes by which the *Macrotermes* colony repairs itself after injury (224-34). The example of the *Macrotermes* colony suggests that “it is more fruitful to approach individuality as a cognitive, rather than a genetic, phenomenon” (235). In this case, self-awareness is what serves to distinguish one living system from another: “The cell, to persist, must have a sense of itself as a system that stands apart in some unique way from the world around it. In short, it must sense itself as an individual” (237). This way of describing individuality and self-awareness challenges common-sense accounts of selfhood as mapping neatly onto one body

within one species. It describes a self that is constituted by relationships and yet still manages to be recognizably individuated.

As we will note in Hegel's description of the relationship between the body and its environment, the individuation of the self—recognizing this particular self as distinctive—does not entail an atomistic conception of the self as separated from the rest of the world; rather it can persist whilst in relation with others. Turner describes this provocatively: “the boundary between an organism and its environment ... is no longer a container for a living thing within, but an adaptive boundary that manages the flows of matter and energy that sustain the living system as a state of dynamic disequilibrium from its surroundings” (235-6). The boundary does not close off, but facilitates relationship.

We can now return to the case of the human individual and what exactly it might be. The relations to others become deeply intriguing when we consider the role played by the human microbiome—the bacterial cells that inhabit the human body—and in particular the intestinal bacteria or gut flora.

As Hutter et al note, given the functional role of the gut microbiome in our digestion and thus our survival, it does not make sense to consider the biological individual as made up solely of one species. They argue that “being a human biological individual is to be a community of *Homo sapiens* and microbial symbionts whose degree of functional integration (and degree of individuality) is a function of the potential of that community to persist and evolve as a whole” (Hutter et al 2-3). Within evolutionary theory, this community is bound together “by a common evolutionary fate,” in which the community stands or falls together “when undergoing a selective pressure” (3). The biological individual is thus not only *Homo sapiens*, but it is “this *integrated symbiotic association* that is able to persist and survive” (3).

A new development in our understanding of this “integrated symbiotic association” is the growing use of gut flora transplants. These transplants are “a donor's feces mixed with a saline and placed into another patient by colonoscopy, endoscopy, or enema” (Bushak). The promises made about cures achievable through transplanting fecal microbiota are quite ambitious—in curing gut infections caused by “bad bacteria” (*Clostridium difficile*), they are reported to have a “90 percent success rate with little to no side effects” (Bushak). The cure is described as “miraculous” (Mayo Clinic). Doctors note possibilities for expanding the use of gut flora transplants beyond *C. difficile* infections and towards dealing with IBS, ulcerative colitis, celiac disease, obesity, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and Parkinson's, describing research as “only limited by our desire, imagination and cost,” and comparing it to “the beginning

of the space program” (Mayo Clinic).<sup>4</sup> We had better become accustomed to working with otherness within the self, and beyond the human. The development of gut flora transplants also suggests more basis for comparison with the relationship to service animals, in that we can begin to think about whether particular bacteria are a good fit for a particular human—whether they can be at home together.

The question is not how the self can be understood as one, but how each of us can seek to be at home with the varied bits of ourselves, not all of which may fit neatly with an idealized self-conception (or an idealized or ableist conception of humanity). The growing understanding of our biological relationality points us toward an ontology of the self that is constituted at the organismic level by its organic and inorganic others, and yet which manages to cohere into a phenomenologically unified subject. On my account, Hegel offers a way into such a view.

As I will argue, Hegel’s way of understanding our wholeness is be highly congenial to Turner’s view of shared community and growing, emergent self-awareness. Through Hegel’s account of digestion and the more contemporary picture of this integrated symbiotic association, we understand that the self is fundamentally porous and is shaped relationally by and through its others. This community however is a cohesive one—not flawlessly united, as anyone who has experienced indigestion can attest—but one which we are able to make sense of and to unite together through the lived process of habituation.

## **II. The experience of the gut as ambiguous other**

Reconciliation and a sense of unity with the body is not automatic, of course, nor is it a static achievement. Catriona Mackenzie, drawing on S. Kay Toombs’s description of loss of mobility due to multiple sclerosis, concludes that “what Toombs’s description of the lived experience of disability illuminates and makes explicit is the way in which we constitute ourselves as persons in relation to the dynamic interaction of our lived bodies and the social and natural worlds” (Mackenzie 119). One of the things Mackenzie also draws out in her analysis is the possibility of alienation from that body, such that “finding ways of achieving a more integrated sense of self seems to be of paramount concern” (121). This

---

<sup>4</sup> A technological and mechanical approach to the mind and body is evident in much of the rhetoric. One writer notes that “as scientists learn more about how the gut-brain microbial network operates, Cryan thinks it could be hacked to treat psychiatric disorders” (Kohn). The language of “hacking” seems unusual in describing biological processes. Elizabeth Wilson gives a brief critical assessment of the work on the effect of gut microbes on mood, noting and challenging the conventional theory of mind implied by the researchers (Wilson, *Gut Feminism* 169-76).

points to the importance of our lived bodily experience to our sense of self (122).

How do we experience our relationship to our gut? It is undoubtedly part of us, but also other to us—biologically, in the sense of our gut microbiome, and phenomenologically, in the sense of not being fully transparent to us nor under our full control.

What is striking about this is what while it is experientially obvious to anyone that has ever had indigestion that our control over this central part of us is limited, it also seems that failure to control it is one of the most stigmatized forms of bodily transgression. A lack of control in this arena is more of a challenge given our values of autonomy and self-control, especially given the way that we often symbolize autonomy via the metaphor of a boundary around the self—as Shildrick has pointed out, selves with “leaky boundaries” are deemed irrational, out of control, and threatening (Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies* 26-7, 42-3; *Embodying* 71). Susan Wendell described the “myth of control” as “the belief that it is possible, by means of human actions, to have the bodies we want and to prevent illness, disability, and death” (Wendell 93-4). She further notes that “the price of the illusion that most of us are in control is the guilt and stigma we inflict on those whose bodies are out of control” (105). The power of the myth of control seems especially strong in the area of gastro-intestinal disorders. Cindy LaCom, who has both multiple sclerosis and Crohn’s disease, notes that there is something about gastro-intestinal disorders that is troubling even if we are generally open-minded about different kinds of bodies. Both she and Amy Vidali note that even Disability Studies does not fully deal with them.

LaCom provides a vivid account of the distinctiveness of gastro-intestinal disorders. In comparing her Crohn’s with her brother-in-law’s paraplegia, she writes:

However, I believe that most see the chasm between themselves and my brother-in-law as far wider and more unbridgeable than the chasm between my uncontrollable bowels and their own. Less than 1% of the general population will develop MS, but all of us poop, and the often desperate attempt to Other those with disabilities becomes far more difficult when a central symptom of an illness is so often, both literally and metaphorically, right under our noses. Shit is filthy, and it represents contagion in ways that many physical and cognitive disabilities do not. I have found it relatively easy to publicly negotiate symptoms of my MS (even bladder incontinence); in fact, many are curious and will pursue conversations about the disease and its symptoms. But when people discover that I might shit my pants or pass gas through an open fistula on my buttocks as a consequence of my Crohn’s,

conversation stops cold and verbal constipation becomes the order of the day.

Susan Wendell, in discussing her chronic pain, notes that some pain literature talks about “making friends” with the pain; while she cannot quite get there, she sees the logic and notes that a “cultivated attitude of acceptance,” relinquishing the attempt to control it, can reduce it (171). She describes finding new strategies for living with her sick body, which themselves become habits (177). Vidali, quoting Wendell in the context of discussing GI disorders, notes that:

I have embraced [Wendell’s] approach to managing pain; however, I am suggesting that we do quite the opposite regarding *rhetorics* of GI disorders, because language has rhetorical and material effects, meaning that reconceptualizing these disorders may influence the experience of pain. By recasting “out of control” rhetorics of GI disorders, we harness the strong directive that we definitively control our bodies, and shift that controlling impulse to rhetoric itself. Put more simply, I believe the way we talk about GI disorders shapes our experience of them; thus, GI rhetorics deserve our attention and influence.<sup>5</sup>

The rhetorics we used around GI disorders discussed by Vidali are part of our habitual relationship to them, part of the way we develop our account of ourselves and avoid making our gut an enemy. Some habits can help reconcile with the gut, and can allow us to live with it autonomously without a pernicious kind of attitude of control.

Our experience with our gut shapes our experience, values, goals and commitments through embodied and affective influences. A sudden flare-up of the gut interferes with plans and schedules. Having to avoid certain foods or needing ready access to the bathroom because of a GI disorder means never being able to take social invitations or receptions for granted: always having to be on guard, and facing awkward choices between going hungry or having to disclose to others about often-stigmatized conditions. As LaCom notes, this disclosure is difficult and often unwelcome. This affects the level of ability and confidence we may have in going out and experiencing new things or testing our limits, and consequently also our sense of what is possible for us. Just as supportive or undermining social and relational ties can increase or decrease our capacity for engaging with the world, so too does a supportive or undermining experience of our gut.

---

<sup>5</sup> Alyson Patsavas makes a similar argument, with respect to chronic pain, that the rhetoric and social discourse around pain contributes to how that pain is experienced, so that critical disability theory can thus help not merely understand the conditions of pain but also help to re-imagine and open up futures for those with chronic pain.



We need theoretical language to describe this relation of both being part of us and yet also other, which does not fall into pernicious rhetorics of control. Hegel gives us tools to describe this ambiguous other within us and our relationship to it, this other which forms a most essential part of our self. According to Hegel, we are continually reaching out to the world and then returning home. Digestion is one of the modes by which we live this.

### III. Hegel's account of digestion

For Hegel, the development of the world is essentially the unfolding and gradual self-realization of Spirit, or consciousness. Exactly what this means is contested in Hegel literature, but the key thing is that Hegel conceives of the world as a whole tending toward greater and greater self-consciousness. This is not only true of the development of human beings (as per the famous *Phenomenology of Spirit*) but also the natural world.

Hegel argues that nature is part of the interconnected whole of Spirit; it is not separated off from mind, but rather is unconscious, or pre-conscious mind. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel moves from mechanical processes in space and time, inert matter, and the solar system, to the physics of individual bodies, to chemical processes, and finally to organic processes.

Hegel does not understand the words “organism” or “organic” quite in the sense that we do now; similarly to others in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, he sees “organism” as referring to a kind of teleological living structure in which the relationship between whole and parts is reciprocal and interconnected (Hegel, *Encyclopædia Logic* §126Z<sup>6</sup>, §135Z, §161Z, §216<sup>7</sup>; *Philosophy of Nature* §337Z [275-6]).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, “organics,” for Hegel, include the *geological* organism, the *vegetable* organism, and the *animal* organism. The geological organism is the Earth as a body and

---

<sup>6</sup> “An animal may, of course, be said to ‘consist of’ bones, muscles, nerves, etc., but it is immediately evident that this is a state of affairs quite different from a piece of granite that ‘consists of’ the stuffs that were mentioned. These stuffs behave in a way that is completely indifferent to their union, and they could subsist just as well without it, whereas the various parts and members of the organic body have their subsistence only in their union, and cease to exist as such if they are separated from one another.”

<sup>7</sup> “The *immediate* Idea is *life*. The Concept is realised as soul, in a *body* ... all of the body's members are reciprocally both *means* and purposes for each other from moment to moment, and that life, while it is the *initial* particularising of the members, becomes its own *result* as the *negative* unity that is *for-itself*.”

<sup>8</sup> “Organic” at this juncture was often connected with “teleological” and contrasted with “mechanical.” Cheung provides an overview of the shifting and developing meaning of organic and organism; Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* contain good examples of this meaning.

system of individual bodies (*Philosophy of Nature* §338), but it is not yet fully life.<sup>9</sup> The vegetable organism is where we get the emergence of life, but not yet the full development of subjectivity (§337). The development of subjectivity through the differentiation of individuals begins with the animal organism (§337). (Hegel includes both human and non-human animals in this section of the *Philosophy of Nature*.) The system of life as an interconnected whole requires this differentiation and flourishing of the parts within as individual subjects.

With the animal organism, Spirit has begun to express itself in more and more individualized ways.<sup>10</sup> The animal, for Hegel, is “a true, self-subsistent self which has attained to individuality” (§351Z, 355). Though the animal is a self-subsistent self, it does not and cannot exist separately from others. Its essence is to be finite, and like all finite things, it is marked by a lack (§359R).<sup>11</sup> This lack propels the animal through its development and toward the world around it. To address its lack it must eat, and make the external into part of itself. The food and the animal must be brought into “living, absolute unity” through assimilation, which is “the conversion of the externality into the self-like unity” (§363). This can occur immediately, particularly in less complex animals, or in a mediated fashion in more complex animals, via “bile, pancreatic juice, etc.” (§365Z [402])

Recall that Hegel glosses freedom as “being with oneself in one’s other”—but he also describes it as something that “is only present where there is no other for me that is not myself” (*Encyclopædia Logic* 24Z [58]). As we will discuss below, this does not mean that the individual shuts itself off from its surroundings, but that it takes its other in and understands it as part of itself. Digestion fits into this pattern, as Hegel calls it “the power of overcoming the outer organism” (*Philosophy of Nature* §354 Z [367]).

To clarify what Hegel is doing here, it is worth a quick comparison to the other place in his system where he discusses taking in and assimilating an other to attempt to address the lack within us due to our finitude. This is the section on the beginning of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (and the correlative section on Phenomenology

---

<sup>9</sup> Hegel describes “the Earth-body as the universal system of individual bodies” (*Philosophy of Nature* §338). It is “non-life, only the corpse of the life-process” (§337).

<sup>10</sup> For example, with reference to bird calls, horse neighs, the hum of insects and the purring of cats, he notes “the animal makes manifest that it is inwardly for-itself” noting that voice “is the utterance of sensation, of self-feeling” (*Philosophy of Nature* §351Z [354]).

<sup>11</sup> “Only what is living feels a *lack*; for in Nature it alone is the *Notion*, the unity of itself and its specific opposite. ... A being which is capable of containing and enduring its own contradiction is a *subject*; this constitutes its infinitude.”

in the *Encyclopædia's Philosophy of Spirit*). Here Hegel describes a form of life in which a consciousness continually reaches out to fulfill its desire by overcoming and assimilating the others external to it. Consciousness begins to have a double object: the desired other, and the self which desires (§167). When it encounters another consciousness, which it cannot assimilate, it reacts with hostility (§187). The encounter leads to a mutual battle to the death, until such point as one party surrenders, setting the stage for the master/slave relationship. Interpretations, extensions, and criticisms of this passage of the *Phenomenology* have had a significant influence in social theory and in authors such as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon. As such, this encounter is more familiar to most readers, and reactions to it flavour impressions of Hegel generally.

Immediately prior to the hostile encounter, though, we have a picture of life as something continually reaching out to and engaging with the world around it, connecting to it by taking it in and consuming it (§171). Life is a “process” which involves a continual flux and reconstitution (§§169-71).<sup>12</sup> This reaching out only becomes hostile as the integrity of the consciousness is challenged. What is striking is the way that Hegel moves in a few paragraphs from an other that we eat to an other that we fight, pointing to the way in which the view of ourselves as relational goes all the way down. This account, in which we both reach out and take in, works in the contexts of both the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Phenomenology*. Our relationship with food and with our digestive system is a key part of our sense of well-being in the world, much as a feeling of being in community with the humans around us—and similarly unsettling and destabilizing when it goes awry. The account developed in the *Philosophy of Nature* is thus not merely about an internal biological process but a key way by which the animal relates to the world and itself.

Assimilation is not a mechanical or chemical process, in which the substances remain external to each other (§363Z and also 365Z [398]),<sup>13</sup> but the work of an organism. It comes in two parts: first the animal takes in the material, and then, in digestion, it makes it into its own,

---

<sup>12</sup> “Thus the simple substance of Life is the splitting-up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences; and the dissolution of the splitting-up is just as much a splitting-up and a forming of members” (§171).

<sup>13</sup> “Assimilation cannot be a chemical process either, because in the living being we have a subject which preserves itself and negates the specific quality of the other, whereas in the chemical process, each of the substances taking part, acid and alkali, loses its quality and is lost in the neutral product of the salt or returns to an abstract radical. There the activity is extinguished, but the animal, on the contrary, is a lasting unrest in its self-relation” (§363Z [394]).

underscoring its own subjectivity in the face of the external world (§364),<sup>14</sup> and thus achieving its unity with itself (§365).<sup>15</sup>

The other that the animal takes in *has* to be other, else it would not satisfy the animal's lack (any more than we are satisfied by nibbling on our fingernails or swallowing our own saliva). And yet the animal must retain integrity in its own self when it takes in that other—it cannot become just a mishmash of fleshy stuff; an organism is organic precisely because of its interconnected structure, which must be preserved. The animal thus has to be *open* to taking in the other, and yet also *opposed* to it (by insisting on its own selfhood, and proving itself against that other). It thus both welcomes an otherness within it and also seeks to reconcile such otherness to its own self.

In addition to taking in the other, the animal also becomes divided within itself: the operation of the saliva, the pancreatic juice in the stomach, and bile, transform the food into the animal substance, but that food continues to be recognized as external (§365Z [402-4]). Along with the food, the digestive processes themselves begin to be taken as an other to the animal proper, as different from the structured, organic whole and thus deemed “non-organic”. As Hegel writes, “the organism is in a state of tension with its non-organic nature, negates it and makes it identical with itself” (§365Z [397]).<sup>16</sup>

This division, this tension, is what marks the organism and helps it develop. It is not a rejection, but a differentiation. Hegel notes: “If the organism were actively hostile to the non-organic, it would not come into its own, for the organism is precisely the mediation which consists in involving itself with the non-organic and yet returning into itself” (§365Z [404]). As seen in the *Phenomenology*, this is the process of life itself.

The animal becomes more *itself* the more it interacts with its others:

Through this process of assimilation, therefore, the animal becomes in a real way *for itself*; for by particularizing itself into the main differences of animal lymph and bile in its behaviour towards the individual thing itself it has proved itself to be an animal individual; and by the negation of its other, it has posited itself as subjectivity, as real being-for-itself. (§365Z [404])

---

<sup>14</sup> “First, the *immediate* fusion of the ingested material with animality ... Secondly, as *mediation*, assimilation is *digestion*—opposition of the subject to the outer world” (§364).

<sup>15</sup> “The result of the process is satiation, the self-feeling which feels completeness in place of the previous lack” (§365Z [406]).

<sup>16</sup> At this point in the text Hegel also makes an interesting comparison of digestion to infection (§365 [395]), and then goes on to similarly comparing reason (and the persuasive force of reasons-giving) to infection as well (§365Z [397]).

This process as Hegel articulates it is described from the point of view of a particular animal. Hegel recognizes that the part being eaten has its origin in turn in other organic wholes, “but for this animal they are relatively its non-organic nature. What is particular and external has no enduring existence of its own, but is a nullity as soon as it comes into contact with a living being” (§365Z [398]).

The body’s whole ability to be the particular sort of thing that it rests on what it finds around it and takes in. In order to understand the body’s relation to what is around it, however, we must move past the *Philosophy of Nature* and look at the *Anthropology* at the beginning of the *Philosophy of Spirit* (this is, fittingly, the next step of Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia*). Here, Hegel discusses the development of what he calls the soul, the not-yet-conscious activity of the mind (Spirit). He stresses the deep connection between the mental and the physiological. For example, he describes sensation as “the healthy participation of the individual mind in its bodiliness” (*Philosophy of Mind* §401R). More pointedly, our viscera and organs are described as a “system of embodiment of the mental” (§401R, 72-3), affecting and being affected by sensation and mood. Our soul is the “subjective substance” of our bodiliness (§409R). This our bodiliness includes all aspects of ourselves—Hegel takes care to note that even thinking is embodied, as demonstrated by the headaches we get when we are out of practice (§410R [133]).

This system, and the soul, is one of deep differentiation. For Hegel: we are, as actual individuality, *in ourselves* a world of concrete content with an infinite periphery,—we have within us a countless host of relations and connections which are always within us even if they do not enter into our sensation and representation, and which, no matter how much these relations can alter, even without our knowledge, none the less belong to the concrete content of the human soul; so that the soul, in virtue of the infinite wealth of its content, may be described as the soul of a world, as an *individually* determined *world-soul*. (§402Z [86])

The system within us is not flattened into homogeneity. It becomes unified for us not through overcoming the world within us but through us getting used to it through habit, which is “being-together-with-one’s-own-self” (§410Z [134]).

#### IV. Habit

Habit similarly helps us to adapt to the circumstances of the world around us, to which we are intimately connected. Because we are limited, we necessarily stand in relationship to the world around us as determined by our individual standpoint, and as Hegel says:

This counterpart of the soul is not something external to it. On the contrary, the totality of relationships in which the individual human soul stands, constitutes its actual vitality and subjectivity and accordingly has grown together with it just as firmly as, to use an image, the leaves grow with the tree; the leaves, though distinct from the tree, yet belong to it so essentially that the tree dies if they are repeatedly torn off. (§402Z [86])

We develop habits of being at home in our bodies and in the world that come to form a second nature for us.<sup>17</sup> Hegel describes the soul's relationship to its habits such that "it does not stand in a relationship to them by distinguishing itself from them, nor is it absorbed into them, but it has them in itself and moves in them, without sensation or consciousness" (§410). Recall that at the level of the soul, we are not yet at the level of self-reflective and aware consciousness; habits work at this level, guiding the development and movement of the soul through repetition and practice (§410). Habit is still part of our natural formation, not our freely chosen self-determination. Habit occupies a somewhat ambiguous space: "habit cannot be identified with either spontaneity or pure receptivity" (Magri 80)—and so while we can cultivate habits we are not fully in control of them.

Through the development of bodily habits, we come to form a fit with our lived environment. Hegel notes ways in which climate, season, and time have an impact on undeveloped aspects of our minds (*Philosophy of Mind* §392R and Z; §§393R and Z).<sup>18</sup> These relationships with our others are never entirely transparent to us, even as we develop in self-consciousness.

Hegel classifies habit into three forms: indifference to immediate sensation (for example, being used to the cold, or used to the humidity); indifference toward satisfaction (the habit of being able to delay our urges); and dexterity (the habit of using our body competently) (§410R). Through habit, I become able to experience myself as united and exercise agency in the world, even as I am porous and constituted through and through by difference and the repeated engagement with otherness. Habit

---

<sup>17</sup> "Habit has rightly been called a second nature: *nature*, because it is an immediate being of the soul, a *second* nature, because it is an immediacy *posited* by the soul, incorporating and moulding the bodiliness that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such and to the determinacies of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied (§401)" (*Philosophy of Mind* §410R). Note that "the body is the *middle term* by which I come together with the external world in general" (§410Z [135]).

<sup>18</sup> A good deal of troubling negative racial commentary is found in the *Zusätze* for §§393-4, but the general sense of the section, that climate and surroundings affect us, seems worthwhile, particularly in light of the growing field of epigenetics. For a discussion of racist views expressed in these sections as connected with Hegel's political philosophy, see Moellendorf.

liberates me from being constantly jarred by these encounters (§410R).<sup>19</sup> Habit eases our bodily actions, so that we do not have to deliberately think about how to hold ourselves while standing or sitting; even thinking is recognized by Hegel as an embodied action, such that it is helped by practice (“deficient habituation and long continuation of thinking cause headaches” [§410R]). Similarly, our guts become habituated to digesting our regular diet, such that we do not have to think consciously about the process of digestion itself most of the time; the consternation caused by bad reaction to a familiar food points to the habit we had previously enjoyed. Much as the work of the gut is beneath the surface of awareness, so too is the work of habit; in both cases, disruption produces disorientation and a sudden jarring awareness.

The indifference allowed by habit and the dexterity of learning to live with our bodies is important even when those bodies work differently. Jennifer Nedelsky, in discussing the nature of autonomy as embodied, suggests that the proper stance to symptoms of chronic illness is one of “receptivity, acceptance, attentiveness and creative responsiveness” (Nedelsky 165). She quotes Jon Kabat-Zinn:

Being the scientist of your own mind/body connection doesn't mean that you have to control it ... What we're learning is a new kind of science. It's an inner science that marries the subjective and the objective, in which you become more familiar with the workings of your own body ... You'll make decisions that are more apt to bring you in touch with the way things work for you in the world. (Kabat-Zinn 126, quoted in Nedelsky 165)

This involves a kind of bodily dexterity, learning how to move in and with the body, conjoined with a kind of indifference to immediate sensation in being able to develop the ability to accept and observe sensations without being taken over by them; in other words, it involves the cultivation of good bodily habits, which will in turn cease to consume our awareness, and just become part of our self. This is a different approach than the myth of control describes.

---

<sup>19</sup> “The unfreedom in habit is partly just *formal*, pertaining only to the being of the soul; partly only *relative*, in so far as it really arises only in the case of bad habits, or in so far as a habit is opposed by another purpose; the habit of right in general, of the ethical, has the content of freedom. ... The essential determination is the liberation from sensations that man gains through habit, when he is affected by them.” Rand clarifies that sensation is an encounter with otherness: “Hegel’s approach here is one that understands sensation as self-sensation that is also sensation of the other. But this is not just sensation of the self *as* other, so that this otherness is also overcome in the sensation, and the sensation remains entirely interior to the animal. Rather, the sensation that is always self-sensation is also sensation of the other as other—sensation of something that is not the animal, something outside the animal.”

As Hegel notes, we need to be in a right relationship with our bodies:

True, I do not have to make my body an end in itself as athletes and tightrope walkers do, but I must give my body its due, must take care of it, keep it healthy and strong, and must not therefore treat it with contempt or hostility. It is just by disregard or even maltreatment of my physical body that I would make my relationship to it one of dependence and of externally necessary connection; for in this way I would make it into something—despite its identity with me—*negative* toward me and consequently *hostile*, and would compel it to rise up against me, to take revenge on my mind. If, by contrast, I conduct myself in accordance with the laws of my bodily organism, then my soul is free in its physical body. (*Philosophy of Mind* §410Z [135])

We make the body a hostile other when we fail to pay heed to its rhythms and perceive it only as something to be controlled. While this is not always easy—and Hegel notes the way that disease is a natural part of the experience of all organisms (*Philosophy of Nature* §375Z)—we can develop habits that work with the bodies we have, so that we can be at home in those bodies. Hegel uses the example of writing, which begins as a deliberate, detail-oriented mechanical process, but after habituation, the details need no longer be present to us; the relationship of mind and body becomes “magical” (*Philosophy of Mind* §410Z [136]).

This does not, of course, mean that the workings of the body can entirely be brought under habitual control, as Vidali and Wendell note, and this is reflected in Hegel’s discussion. Just as the assimilation of food is not entirely complete, so too the pervasion of the physical body by the soul is not complete, and something remains “alien” to it, such that “something of bodiliness remains, therefore, purely organic and consequently withdrawn from the power of the soul” (*Philosophy of Mind* §412Z [140]).<sup>20</sup>

To sum up: we have a world within us that is not fully transparent to us, and world outside us that forms us and is interiorized by us in turn. We learn to be at home with this plurality not through imposition of homogeneity but development of habit. Further, much of this happens beneath the level of self-conscious reflection. If the account drawn from Hegel is correct, then a reconciliation with our guts is particularly crucial to our sense of well-being and being at home with ourselves in the world. This might account for some of the stigma and euphemism around it. Further, if the rhetorics around GI disorders shape our experience of them,

---

<sup>20</sup> This is because “the nature of the logical Idea, developing everything from itself, requires that this difference still be given its due” (*Philosophy of Mind* §412Z [140]).



and by extension if the rhetoric around our relationship to our gut shapes our experience of that relationship, then it is important to develop models of talking about our gut that acknowledge its difference—that it is not fully transparent to us nor controllable by us—and also its unity with us.

### **V. Objections: hostility and overcoming**

Earlier in the paper I made the comparison between Hegel's account of digestion and the sections on the beginnings of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. For those whose primary awareness of Hegel's thought is through those sections, his work is almost inescapably saturated with the hostility of the encounter with the other self, and thus does not seem a good model for genuine and open relations with otherness. Further, the objection could be made that Hegel's discussion of assimilation and the negation of the other is precisely what Continental and feminist philosophy have been resisting for a century. Hegel, as paradigmatic philosopher of the Same, seems to be modeling a kind of violent overcoming in the name of defending individual subjectivity. The worry about this might be particularly acute in considering the language Hegel uses throughout this section, of hostility, anger, and triumph over another.

This language is undeniably unsettling, but it is important to clarify what it means within the context of Hegel's system.

First, Hegel's account of the initial encounter with the other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been criticized in that it seems to base our interrelation with others on hostility, setting up problematic effects throughout the rest of our social existence. This encounter is often taken to represent Hegel's view of humanity as such; for example, the recent editors of an anthology on Spinoza and Hegel note that "Hegel's vision of human life is stamped by the image of the master and slave, engaged in a violent struggle to the death. Even if this is but a moment of Hegel's picture of human existence, it so often remains the defining moment" (Sharp and Smith 2-3). Meanwhile Linda Alcoff notes that while it seems to set up an interdependent, social self, because it relies on the overcoming of the other, "the dependence of self-consciousness on the other is dissolved almost immediately after it is acknowledged" (Alcoff 59).

The description of the animal's state during the digestive process has echoes of this encounter, in particular the way in which the conclusion of the process involves the need to reinforce one's self at the expense of another:

The true externality of animal nature is not the external thing, but the fact that the animal itself turns in anger against what is external. The subject must rid itself of this lack of self-confidence which makes the struggle with the object appear as the subject's

own action, and must repudiate this false attitude. Through its struggle with the outer thing, the organism is on the point of being at a disadvantage; it compromises its dignity in face of this non-organic being. What the organism has to conquer, is, therefore, this its own process, this entanglement with the outer thing. (*Philosophy of Nature* §395Z [403-4])

It is easy to find this language worrisome. But a response can be drawn through comparison to the *Phenomenology*. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel does not intend the initial hostile encounter with the other to be paradigmatic for all other encounters: rather, it is a depiction of a form of consciousness that shows the necessity for the whole context of ethical life, in which we are at home with each other. In his later work in the *Encyclopædia*, the form of the *Phenomenology*'s encounter with the other is preserved, but in the *Zusatz* drawn from his lectures on the subject, we see that Hegel takes care to note that this fight does not arise in civil society and the political state because we already recognize each other (*Philosophy of Mind* §432Z [159]). Here in the *Philosophy of Nature*, this is an autonomic response by an animal concerned with preserving its organic structure. Preserving the structure requires finding a way to integrate and be at home with what has been taken in—which is why the “anger” is not against the food, but against its own reaction to the food. This is why the negation will involve “the repudiation by the organism of its hostile activity toward the non-organic” (*Philosophy of Nature* §395Z [404])—in other words, part of its overcoming the externality of the food involves overcoming its own hostility in a process of reconciliation. Further, while the structures that the gut participates in are logical structures to be found throughout Hegel's system, we are not responsible for them in the same way that we will be responsible for self-conscious actions.

Second, in Hegel's system, *negating* does not mean *erasing* the other itself—but rather, that what has been taken in is no longer *other* to the animal organism—it has been made a part of it; it has been transformed and welcomed into the home of the body. This body is not flatly homogenous, but differentiated within itself. For example, Hegel recognizes the “little brains” formed by ganglia within the nervous system of the abdomen (*Philosophy of Nature* §354Z [364]), citing Bichat and other physicians.<sup>21</sup> These operate outside the complete control of the main brain, and yet are still integrated within the whole of the body: they are a kind of difference within the body's overall unity. Negation of otherness is not negation of difference (differentiation) as such.

---

<sup>21</sup> Williams provides a helpful account of the context of Bichat's work and its influence throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Third, even this transformation into sameness is not total. What is taken in often retains some element of its own identity—Hegel notes that feces often show “the greater part of the food unchanged” (*Philosophy of Nature* §365R), and describes the particular effect that asparagus has on urine (§365Z [401-2]). The assimilation process—despite the totalizing connotations of its name—does not demonstrate total control over the other.

The description of digestion in the *Philosophy of Nature* attunes us to our bodies’ continual renegotiation with the world. Our relationship with food is not merely one of taking in nutrients—the process of assimilation is a complex interplay of identity and difference in which parts of the body appear external to itself and parts of the external world appear part of oneself. It is an interrelation of differentiated parts that can easily go awry, as gut pain and gut disorders attest. Our gut serves for us as a kind of ambiguous other, one which is sometimes experienced with hostility. Rather than endorsing that hostility, Hegel, the philosopher who calls for the unity of unity and difference, is an ally in giving us a theoretical language that helps us to be at home with our gut.

As Amy Vidali points out, the way in which we talk about our gastrointestinal system shapes how we experience it; theory that helps us to make sense of the ambiguous otherness of the gut—how it is sometimes a seamless, almost unnoticed part of our human functioning, and how it is sometimes an unruly antagonist—can thus make a real difference to our sense of our selves and our ability to make our way in the world. Conceiving of the self as including this embodied otherness within allows an understanding of chronic illness that does not require an unachievable mastery of that otherness but does give scope for developing habits of living with it. Hegel’s philosophy allows for the integration of the biological, phenomenological, and social aspects of living with such an other, and deserves a place in the contemporary theoretical landscape.<sup>22</sup>

### Works Cited

- ALCOFF, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- BOUCHARD, Frédéric. “What is a Symbiotic Superindividual and How do you Measure its Fitness?” *From Groups to Individuals: Evolution and Emerging Individuality*. Ed. F. Bouchard and P. Huneman. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2013. 243-264.

---

<sup>22</sup> The author would like to thank her colleague, Robbie Moser, as well as the two anonymous referees at *PhænEx*, for their insightful commentary and suggestions on improving and clarifying this article.

- BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- BUSHAK, Lecia. "How Fecal Microbiota Transplants Boost Healthy Gut Flora and Fight Infections," *Medical Daily*. Medical Daily, 30 Jan., 2015. Web. 8 Jul. 2015.
- CAMPBELL, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- CHEUNG, Tobias. "From the Organism of a Body to the Body of an Organism: Occurrence and Meaning of the Word 'Organism' from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries," *British Journal of the History of Science*, Vol. 39, No.3 (Sept. 2006): 319-339.
- FRIEDMAN, Marilyn. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- HADHAZY, Adam. "Think Twice: How the Gut's 'Second Brain' Influences Mood and Well-Being." *Scientific American*. Scientific American, 12 Feb. 2010. Web. 4 Apr. 2015.
- HEGEL, G.W.F. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature, Part Two of the Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- . *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *The Encyclopædia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*. Trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991.
- . *Philosophy of Mind (Part III of the Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences)*. Trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, revised by M. Inwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- HUTTER, Thiago, Carine GIMBERT, Frédéric BOUCHARD, and François-Joseph LAPOINTE. "Being Human is a Gut Feeling." *Microbiome* 3.9 (2015): 1-4.
- KABAT-ZINN, Jon. "Meditation," interview with Bill MOYERS. *Healing and the Mind*. New York: Doubleday, 1993. 115-143.
- KOHN, David. "When Gut Bacteria Changes Brain Function." *The Atlantic*. 24 Jun. 2015. Web. 25 Jun. 2015.
- LACOM, Cindy. "Filthy Bodies, Porous Boundaries: The Politics of Shit in Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27.1-2 (Winter/Spring 2007): n. pag. Web. 25 Jun. 2015.
- MACKENZIE, Catriona. "Personal Identity, Narrative Integration, and Embodiment." *Embodiment and Agency*. Ed. S. Campbell,

- L. Meynell, and S. Sherwin. University Park (PA): Pennsylvania State Press, 2009. 100-125.
- MAGRÌ, Elisa. "The Place of Habit in Hegel's *Psychology*." *Hegel's Philosophical Psychology*. Ed. S. Herrmann-Sinai and L. Ziglioli. New York/London: Routledge, 2016. 74-90.
- MAYO CLINIC. "Quick, Inexpensive and a 90 Percent Cure Rate." Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, n.d. Web. 8 Jul. 2015.
- MICHALKO, Rod. *The Two-in-One: Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.
- MOELLENDORF, Darrel. "Racism and Rationality in Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit." *History of Political Thought* 13 (2), 1992. 243-255.
- NEDELSKY, Jennifer. "Meditations on Embodied Autonomy." *Graven Images* 2, 1995. 159-170.
- PATSAVAS, Alyson. "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8 (2), 2014. 203-218.
- RAND, Sebastian. "Subjetividade animal e o sistema nervoso na *Filosofia da Natureza* de Hegel," *Revista Eletrônica Estudos Hegelianos* 7:12, 2010.
- SHARP, Hasana, and Jason E. SMITH. "Introduction." *Between Hegel and Spinoza: A Volume of Critical Essays*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 1-20.
- SHILDRICK, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London: Sage Publications, 2002.
- . *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997.
- TURNER, J. Scott. "Superorganisms and Superindividuality: The Emergence of Individuality in a Social Insect Assemblage." *From Groups to Individuals: Evolution and Emerging Individuality*. Ed. F. Bouchard and P. Huneman. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2013. 219-241.
- VIDALI, Amy. "Out of Control: The Rhetoric of Gastrointestinal Disorders." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.3/4 (2010): n. pag. Web. 25 Jun. 2015.
- WENDELL, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. New York/London: Routledge, 1996.

WILLIAMS, Elizabeth A. "Neuroses of the Stomach: Eating, Gender, and Psychopathology in French Medicine, 1800-1870." *Isis* 98.1 (March 2007): 54-79.

WILSON, Elizabeth A. *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2004.

———. *Gut Feminism*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015.

WHORTON, James C. *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

WOLFE, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.