Lebendiges Selbstbewusstsein

Hegel über die selbstbewusste Form menschlichen Lebens

Isabel Mira Sickenberger & Dr. Jonas Held

Project Summary

According to a long philosophical tradition starting with Aristotle, what is thought to be distinctive of human beings compared to other living creatures is their rationality, i.e., their capacities to deliberate, using concepts, acting for a reason, and so on. The human being is therefore called the rational animal. In recent times, the question how to understand this distinctive characterization of the human being was asked anew. So-called Additive Theories of Rationality take rationality to be a special power only human beings have in addition to their mere animality, which we share with other living creatures (such as our sensuality). Contrary to this account, Transformative Theories of Rationality take rationality not just to be an extra feature but something that fundamentally or categorically transforms our way of living and being. Such theories claim that reason can neither be reduced to some animal capacity, nor treated as an additional capacity over and above our animal capacities. Rather, the distinctiveness of human beings manifests itself in the way all capacities of a human being form a self-conscious unity, i.e., a rational form of life.

Within this research field broadly speaking, two opposing positions can be distinguished.

1. Transformative naturalism of second nature: Reason and the form of a rational life form are essentially the result of education and the formation of a second nature.

2. Neo-Aristotelian naturalism of first nature: Reason and the form of human life is essentially already part of the first nature of human beings.

The former position argues that the formal distinctiveness of human beings is essentially the result of the formation of second nature. Education therefore is to be understood as a process that metaphysically transforms a mere sensual being into a rational, self-conscious being. The latter position of first nature, by contrast, holds that this transformation is to be understood as a transformation that has already been accomplished and which is already part of the “human” species. The so called formal difference already exists at the level of first nature of human beings. The two main goals of my project are to show that both positions face serious problems, and that we can find an anticipation of these problems in Hegel’s philosophy of subjective mind.

Aims of Project

At the centre of contemporary research is the concept of first and second nature. Nevertheless there is a notorious disagreement regarding the use of these concepts. Generally speaking, the concept of second nature refers to the result of any kind of formation or deformation of first nature. The participants in the debate essentially hold two different positions to describe the reality of the human life form.

- I aim to outline that both contemporary positions think of the formal distinctiveness of human beings as something that is completed at a certain point of human life, which is either in second nature (after a process of education) or already in first nature (the way we are born, as humans).

- I will argue that both positions do not think of the idea of a formal difference decisively enough and that the problem confronting both positions is there understanding of the notion of form, which aims at the seclusion of the human form of life instead of focusing on the distinctive genesis of the self-conscious form of life.

- I will attempt to show that Hegel’s explanation recognizes the inherent problems of the contemporary debate, by looking at the transition from philosophy of nature to the philosophy of mind.

- What makes Hegel’s position significant, I will argue, is that by thinking the genesis of mind as a logical genesis of the concept of mind, Hegel describes the distinctiveness of the form of human life in two different ways. Rational life conveys of a distinctive logical form, which however manifests itself in different forms of life, since the logical form itself is mediated through innumerable transformations and transitions within the genesis of mind.

- In this sense, I want to argue, it is quite true that human life possesses its distinctive life form from the very beginning, but this form is the form of its own transformability, which has to experience realization (Verwirklichung) through the process of its own education.

Progress and Milestones

Phase 1 (March 2019 – April 2019):
- intense reading
- classification of research literature

Phase 2 (May 2019):
- preparation of bibliography
- draft exposé of the planned project

Phase 3 (June 2019):
- elaboration and completion of the exposé
- grant application at Villigst (Evangelisches Studienwerk)

Phase 4 (July 2019 – October 2019):
- preparation of further applications (e.g. Rosa-Luxemburg-stiftung, Hans-Böckler-stiftung, Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes)
- preparation for the selection interview at Villigst (application was approved in October 2019)

Phase 5 (November 2019 – December 2019):
- presentation of my research project at the UCL / Leipzig Graduate Conference

Phase 6 (January 2020 – December 2022):
- doctoral scholarship (Villigst, Evangelisches Studienwerk)