

**“I that is We, We that is I.”
Perspectives on
Contemporary Hegel**

*Social Ontology, Recognition, Naturalism, and the
Critique of Kantian Constructivism*

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Freedom and Nature: The Point of View of a Theory of Recognition

Lucio Cortella

Abstract: Morality and freedom are neither natural nor supernatural but are social products, the result of relationships of recognition that are consolidated in phylogenetic and ontogenetic processes of formation and learning. Following the central thesis that Hegel illustrates in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the author shows how the relation of recognition produces not only the constitution of our self-consciousness and the awareness of the distinction between consciousness and world, but also the discovery of the acquisition of our reciprocal dignity and autonomy, the birth of moral sense, and the institution of our fundamental ethical principles.

As is well known, Kant calls a “fact of reason” (*Faktum der Vernunft*) the consciousness of moral law,¹ i.e., our awareness that we feel moral obligations towards actions, behaviors, intentions, choices. Assuming this as a ‘fact’ does not mean that such a consciousness is an empirically observable fact. No scientific observation could attest it. And yet this ‘fact’ is a part of our experience. To be sure, it is not a part of our cognitive experience—one that, thanks to empirical intuitions, reveals to us the existence of things and events. But the cognitive experience is not the only kind of experience that we can have. Before any action we can have at least two completely different types of experience: we can describe the action as a natural event or we can instead react to it morally, approving and justifying it or disapproving of it to the point of indignation. The indubitability of this “fact of reason” is, according to Kant, documented by moral judgments about actions—judgments completely different from descriptive ones, and which are made possible precisely because we can have a type of experience that is completely different from cognitive experience.

1 “The consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason”. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 31.

The great Kantian ‘practical’ investigation sets out from this fact and attempts to reconstruct the transcendental conditions that make it possible. Kant’s answer is well known: the presence of morality in “all finite beings having reason and will”² can be explained only if these beings are free, only if there is *freedom* as a condition of moral experience.³

This answer may be, within certain limits, also accepted by us: we can judge an action or behavior from a moral point of view only if we suppose that the subject of that action or behavior is *responsible* for it, if we think that the basis of that action is not a mechanical impulse but a conscious and independent deliberation—in other words, a *free* choice. Moral experience is inseparable from the attribution of freedom: we are moral beings only if we are free, because only if we are free we are responsible for our actions.

If the Kantian rooting of morality in freedom can be reasonably accepted, what for us is difficult to accept is the assumption of freedom as something completely separate from our nature and its assignment to a supersensible dimension, a “realm of ends” placed *beyond* the natural world. Kant’s doctrine of the two realms obviously has its own specific reason: freedom cannot be found within the biological structure of our body, and scientific investigation of our genetic inheritance will never be able to identify something like freedom. If we are free the roots of our own freedom will be rooted in what might be called our ‘spiritual character’. But, here, the problem repeats itself, because either we accept, as Kant did, our simultaneous participation in two different ontological dimensions, or we have the burden of explaining how that ‘spiritual character’ has been formed from our biological nature.

Of course, there is still the alternative possibility of explaining morality in a different way than Kant did, while making it compatible with the instincts of our human nature; for example, by understanding normativity as a cultural variant of the principle of biologicistic self-preservation. Such a naturalistic explanation of morality, understood as the stabilization in rules and practices of what is useful to the survival of the species, eliminates the simple

² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 32.

³ “Instead of this vainly sought deduction of the moral principle, however, something entirely different and unexpected appears: the moral principle itself serves as a principle of the deduction of an inscrutable faculty which no experience can prove but which speculative reason had to assume as at least possible (in order not to contradict itself in finding among cosmological Ideas something unconditional in its causality). This is the faculty of freedom, which the moral law, itself needing no justifying grounds, shows to be not only possible but actual in beings who acknowledge the law as binding upon them”. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 49.

observation that the logic of what is right is completely irreducible to the logic of what is useful and that such a utilitarian explanation makes completely incomprehensible precisely what Kant understands as a moral experience.

Therefore, we are again forced back to the underlying problem. On the one hand we have to do with a moral experience totally irreducible to the logic of instinctual nature (and this is undoubtedly the element of truth of every metaphysical theory of freedom). On the other, we need to make that moral experience compatible with our biological nature and the evolutionary theory of the human race, showing that morality is a specific product of this history, a result that has its roots and its origin in the anthropological structure of the human (and this is what needs to be saved in the naturalistic explanation of morality).

What I shall attempt is not so much to solve this problem as to advance some considerations that can save both these requirements—considerations capable of showing the connection between freedom and nature. To this end, I think that a theory of recognition, retracing the celebrated Hegelian investigation in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, may be the best philosophical instrument to approach the problem. Hegel's central thesis in this chapter is that subjectivity is the product of the recognition carried out by another subjectivity.⁴ The awareness of our individuality, of our distinction from others and from the surrounding world, the perception of our identity and role—in other words the capacity to look at ourselves with the same distance with which we look at objects—is possible only thanks to the recognition carried out by another subject.

This does not mean that our individuality is only the product of a relationship. We are also nature, and this nature precedes that relation. Indeed the relationship of recognition and the centrality of its action in the construction of the self is made possible by certain properties and natural abilities of human beings, first and foremost the ability to communicate. It is true that Hegel does not thematize the nature of the subject that precedes the relationship of recognition in this way. In fact, he thematizes it as a *Begierde*, a kind of lust or desire. This desire, however, is not directed towards things and natural objects, in which the subject cannot find any satisfaction, but rather to other subjects.⁵ He does not look for things but for relations—i.e., he basically expresses the

4 “Self-consciousness is *in and for itself*, in that and by the fact that it is in and for itself for another self-consciousness; i.e., it is only in being recognized.” *PS*, § 178, 111 (*GW* 9, 109).

5 “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.” *PS*, § 175, 110 (*GW* 9, 108).

need for the other.⁶ The Hegelian notion of *Begierde* reveals the specificity of original human relatedness: it does not emerge from an expansion of subjectivity, from its unselfish ‘extension’ towards the other, but because of its structural lack and limitation—its need. But only those who lack something can feel desire, and—in particular—lack the object of their desire. Relatedness is the specific way in which subjectivity attempts to make up for this deficiency and insecurity. It seeks comfort, support, reassurance in the other. The search for the other emerges, then, from subjectivity’s concern for itself, from the perception of its weakness, from the need of support for its instability.

We can summarize the various components of the original human relatedness in the notion of recognition, and more precisely in the *need to be recognized*. Ever since birth, human beings need not only to be cared for, fed, nourished, but also to be supported, encouraged and loved. And this is a need that characterizes not only the initial stages of our existence but is prolonged in all subsequent ones, such as need for affection, friendship, cooperation, sociality.

Now, satisfying such a need leads to a double result. *First*, subjectivity finds self-confirmation and obtains the desired balance to its instability and insecurity, the certainty of being at the center of the attention of others. But, *secondly*, there is then the *discovery of the other*, the discovery that the world around us consists not only of objects to use and manipulate but also of other subjects who are able to turn their attention towards us. The loneliness of the subject is thus questioned and the relatedness to which it is referred back reveals the actuality of a plural world.

Here, a fundamental element characterizing the relationships of recognition appears: the subject cannot ‘feel’ himself recognized without recognizing in turn. You cannot feel yourself recognized by an inanimate object, a plant, or by someone who is not deemed ‘capable’ of recognizing. The condition for feeling oneself recognized is to ‘recognize’ this capability in the other. You cannot get support for your subjectivity without providing support to the

6 “Human Desire, or better still, anthropogenetic Desire, produces a free and historical individual, conscious of his individuality, his freedom, his history and finally, his historicity. Hence, anthropogenetic Desire is different from animal Desire (which produces a natural being, merely living and having only a sentiment of its life) in that it is directed, not toward a real, ‘positive’, given object, but toward another Desire.” Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by R. Queneau, edited by A. Bloom, trans. J.H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 6.

other. *The relationship of recognition is either reciprocal or not.*⁷ The moment in which you feel you are regarded as a subject is the moment in which you have regarded the other as a subject. While the other gives me the *dignity* of the subject I grant this dignity to him/her. This is done independently of the will and intentions of the subjects involved but imposes itself as an objective logic that they must accept if they want to feel recognized. The ‘price’ for the consolidation of our subjectivity is the consolidation of the subjectivity of others. The constitution of intersubjectivity cannot be an action by one side but must necessarily be reciprocal.

This reciprocity has an essentially normative character. In fact obtaining a recognition means that someone has deemed us ‘worthy’ of her attention and her consideration. But since the relation of recognition is necessarily reciprocal, we must ourselves grant dignity to those who have recognized us. While I discover my dignity thanks to the other, I also discover the dignity of the other thanks to myself. The relationship of recognition is therefore not a relation of knowledge, an observational or descriptive experience, of the kind that we have with objects. I do not limit myself to ‘knowing’ the other nor is the other limited to ‘knowing’ me. What occurs is a *reciprocal conferring of dignity*. For this reason recognizing is not only knowing but also consists in establishing a normative relationship, in which both I and the other are recognized as worthy of attention and respect. In reciprocal recognition, then, the first fundamental ethical relation between individuals asserts itself—they have learned to know one another as subjects; that is, to respect one another. The basis of our moral sense is rooted in the relationships of recognition.

Although Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* clearly identifies the objective character of the logic that imposes itself on those who are confronted with one another (what is at stake between the two self-consciousnesses is the objective work of the spirit, “I that is We and We that is I”),⁸ he does not adequately develop the ethical consequences implied in this relationship; that is, he does not see that this objectivity that imposes itself on subjects as the

7 “Thus the movement is simply the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the *other* do the same as *it* does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does *only* insofar as the other does the same. Action by one side would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both”. *PS*, § 182, 112 (*GW* 9, 110).

8 “With this, we already have before us the Notion of *Spirit*. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’”. *PS*, § 177, 110 (*GW* 9, 108).

middle term over the extremes⁹ is, indeed, an ethical objectivity. This is the specific character of human communication, which is not a simple transmission of experiences and cognitive givens but, rather, is a normative communication, a transmission of values and norms.

But with the first relation of mutual recognition a *learning process* (*Bildungsprozess*) has been set in motion, in which discovery of the other is intertwined with discovery of the self. The recognition is not a singular event. The constitution of our self-consciousness, even in the early stages of our existence, is not constituted by a single act but by a sequence of acts, by their iteration, by a process. No one can ever feel him/herself recognized once and for all. And the need to be recognized tends continually to recur even for those who have repeatedly gone through this experience. Recognition is a precarious attainment—fragile, and always questionable. So this process of learning can be strengthened and increased or interrupted and weakened. No recognition can ever guarantee against misconceptions, humiliations, offenses, neither can it immunize us against regressions, relapses, or the questioning of our identity and autonomy. The discovery of the self and of the other is therefore intimately linked to the history of our relations of recognition, a history through which we establish ourselves in our identity, but in which we are also called into question, transformed, reconstituted.

The *first* acquisition of this training process is, as we said, the discovery of the other. But the discovery of the other is not equivalent to the discovery of just any object. Knowing a subject means discovering a *point of view* on objects—it means understanding that things can be viewed from a different perspective from our own. We notice others when we discover that we have become object of their attention, when our subjectivity has become an object of the gaze of others. Sartre thought that intersubjectivity was the result of the experience of being watched. When we become aware of being watched, it is then and only then that we see the other.¹⁰ Now, if we understand this gaze not as a purely observational behavior but as a normatively oriented attitude, we

9 “Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another.” *PS*, § 184, 112 (*GW* 9, 110).

10 “My fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject [...] Being-seen-by-the-Other is the truth of seeing-the-Other”. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 256–257.

can easily subscribe to Sartre's thesis. However, the gaze of the other gives rise not only to our discovery of the subjectivity of others but—at the same time—to awareness of our own subjectivity. By recognizing we acquire the possibility of being observed by an external point of view and, thus, the opportunity to look at ourselves from that point of view. Our subjectivity, originally precluded to our eyes (because totally immanent in them and devoid of the necessary transcendence that is indispensable for any cognitive objectification), becomes accessible to us thanks to the recognition carried out by the other. The vision of itself that was impossible for the single isolated consciousness now becomes possible thanks to another consciousness. We now see ourselves thanks to and through the eyes of the other. Autonomous subjectivity arises precisely because of this gaze. The subject is not the product of itself but of intersubjectivity—i.e., of the special relationship made possible by the meeting between subjects.

In this process our own individual identity is constituted. We learn what we are because of what others say about us. Our internal image is closely connected with our external image. Here, of course, we also have the root of the pathologies of subjectivity, the risk that the person turn out to be the product of the gaze of others, of their representations, their classifications. But this look is never just a single glance, just as recognition is never a single act of recognition. The idea that we have of ourselves is formed thanks to the constant comparison with the plurality of gazes, which are first private (in the family, in friendship, in affection), and then social, legal, and finally political.¹¹ Our identity emerges from this plurality and from the re-elaboration that this very plurality makes possible for each one of us. Identity is thereby multiple, articulated, changeable.

Recognition is therefore also a form of imitation. The specifically human characterization of natural *mimesis* does not only consist in assuming an adaptive attitude towards what is alien in order to survive in a hostile and complex environment. To imitate the other within a relationship of recognition means to make one's own not only the behavior but also the attitude of the other, entering into his point of view, looking at things in the world from the point of view of the other. Adorno, quite rightly, said that "the human is in imitation" and that "a human being becomes a human being only by imitating other human beings".¹² In adopting the other's perspective—imitating it—we learn the practice of recognition, we learn the fundamental mode through

11 See: Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

12 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: Verso, 2006), 154.

which our humanity constitutes itself. The subject thus becomes not just a recognized subject but also a recognizing one, able to give to others what he himself has received from them. Entering into the logic of recognition means being 'infected'; that is, entering and being welcomed into that world of social relations in which we recognize one another.

The *second* acquisition involves our awareness of the characteristics of subjectivity. Learning that the world can be observed and described from different perspectives means putting an end to the identification between consciousness and the world. The world becomes an objectivity that does not coincide with our description of it but that can be interpreted in different ways. The awareness of an objectivity independent of us stems from the conflict of interpretations, from the denials suffered by our understanding of this objectivity, from the awareness that what we thought was objective was just our own point of view. It is here that the subject learns at its own expense that it does not coincide with the whole but is only a small part of it—that is, it learns its *finitude and limitation*. The attention of the other, which on the one hand fulfills our desire for reassurance and stability, on the other makes us perceive the power of the other, its capacity to influence, control, and condition us. In the relation of recognition we discover our dependence on the other, we discover ourselves to be affected, conditioned, and 'invaded' by him.

And yet—here is the *third acquisition*—precisely thanks to this dependence we strengthen our belief in ourselves, we feel comforted and supported. If we are 'worthy' of the attention of another, we feel our importance, our centrality, our dignity. This experience is the basis of our sense of *self-respect*, which is vital to the formation of the *moral image* of human being; that is, the notion of *person*. The moral person is different from the legal person. The moral person not only has the right to equal respect—that right which considers all people equal in legal terms—but is also worthy of regard (of special attention), due to his dignity. We are aware of our status as persons because we have all passed through relations of recognition.¹³

The recurrence of demonstrations of recognition from others and the differentiation of this experience into distinct spheres thus becomes decisive. It

13 "Human dignity, as I would like to show, is in a strict moral and legal sense connected with this relational symmetry. It is not a property like intelligence or blue eyes, that one might 'possess' by nature; it rather indicates the kind of 'inviolability' which comes to have a significance only in interpersonal relations of mutual respect, in the egalitarian dealings among persons". Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (London: Polity Press, 2003), 33.

is essential that the recognition not be carried out exclusively by the persons involved but that it extend from private affective and family-type relationships to the social relations and, beyond them, to the legal and political relationships. It is in these contexts that our *sense of autonomy and independence* arises and is consolidated. I am all the more a subject the more I am recognized, the more I am strengthened in my identity.

Autonomy—freedom—is not a fact of nature, but is the result of a process of learning, an achievement of the relations of recognition. Such freedom is not ours originally—no, nature has only endowed us with the ability to *obtain* it. *Human beings are not born free originally: they become*—indeed, they *learn* to be—free. Freedom is not a property of our nature, nor an attribute of the human substance—it is a *capability*, not a given. It exists only because we are able to exercise it, because we are enabled to act independently. And this kind of freedom is achieved only thanks to the consciousness of autonomy; that is, thanks to the awareness that we can count on ourselves and that we have in ourselves the capacity and resources to choose and act in a completely autonomous way. Self-confidence is the basis of this independence and such confidence is a specific product of recognition. In short, freedom is not something innate but has a relational and communicative genesis.

This has radical consequences for the relations between individuals, and for the way we consider the relationship between our own freedom and that of all others. The theories of original freedom, which claim that human beings are born already free, immediately pose the problem of how to reconcile this individual freedom with similar claims to freedom by all others. If I am born already free then others are nothing but a problem for my freedom, because they will inevitably end up by limiting and conditioning it. But if my freedom is the result of the recognition performed by others, then the perspective changes radically. In fact, others can no longer be considered as limits to my freedom, because they are its very condition. Freedom *lives* in recognition, is strengthened thanks to it, and develops by passing through its various spheres and levels.

Hegel clearly understands this character of freedom when he denies that it can be pure and simple “being-with-self” (*Beisichselbstsein*) in complete independence of the other: when the other is left outside of the self it inevitably is opposed to the self and therefore turns out to be its limit, an external conditioning from which freedom fools itself into thinking it has been emancipated. Freedom, to be truly free, cannot *exclude* the other but must *include* it in its concept. Being free means “*being-with-self-in-being-other-than-self*” (*Beisichselbstsein im Anderssein*): being independent thanks to structural

dependence on the other—not by abstracting from its existence, but by seeing it to be a component of individual freedom.¹⁴

This results in a radical responsibility of every individual towards the other, not only in relation to the specific others who have freed the individual during her learning process, but towards the potential countless others who continue to strengthen her feeling of independence and upon which the responsible use of freedom depends. We are ‘recognizing beings’ in a double sense: capable of recognizing other human beings but also capable of recognizing our debt to others. We are grateful to others, we have a sense of infinite gratitude.

The acquisition of a feeling of ‘gratitude’ towards the other is the basis of the *birth of moral sense*. Morality is formed within and thanks to the relations of recognition. We learn to respect one another because we have ourselves been the object of respect, or rather because we have learned what it means to relate to a non-object, because we have ourselves experienced a non-manipulative and a non-objectifying approach. We feel the duty of attention to one another, because we have gone through processes of respect, care, and consideration. Once again, mimetic practice—which, as we have seen, is intimately linked to the processes of recognition—is decisive. When we come to be recognized we are forced to make the grateful attitude our own; that is, we are immediately involved in a dynamic of reciprocity. And such a dynamic invests all of the aspects that the recognition implies. In this way we learn to love as we were loved, and to respect as we were respected.

All this is confirmed by the fact that we feel much more intensely morally obliged to persons who have themselves been especially attentive to us. Here the mimetic dynamics has precise consequences for our moral sense. In fact, we perceive a moral wound with greater intensity when the injury comes from those who we feel are closer to us. In these cases, the moral offense assumes the characteristics of a veritable betrayal of that bond of trust and reciprocity which the meeting between subjects has determined.¹⁵

14 Hegel discusses the relation of being-with-self with being-other in the last section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, titled “Absolute Knowing”. Here, the superseding of the object’s externality in relation to consciousness is expressed through the inclusion of being-other within being-with-itself as its moment: “Self-consciousness has equally superseded this externalization and objectivity, and taken it back into itself so that it is with itself in its otherness [*Anderssein*] as such” (*PS* 788, 479; *GW* 9, 422). Analogously, the conceptual comprehension of its own content on the part of consciousness comes about when the ‘I’ is with itself in its otherness: “It is only when the ‘I’ is with itself in its otherness that the content is conceptually comprehended [*begriffen*]” (*PS*, § 799, 486; *GW* 9, 430).

15 “This dependency on the other explains why one can be hurt by the other. The person is most exposed to, and least protected from, injuries in the very relations which she is

Recognition gives rise not only to our moral sense but also to our *normative vulnerability*, that is, to our capacity to suffer when we are insulted, humiliated, or treated with contempt. In other words, recognition produces, within the natural human biology, what in Hegelian terms we might call a 'second nature'. By this we mean a normative nature, thanks to which we acquire the fundamental good of autonomy (that is, the strength of identity that accompanies the sense of our dignity), but because of which we are also affected by a particular vulnerability, due only to the presence of morality within us. If we were not normative beings we would not suffer moral wounds, just as other animals do not: they can certainly be affected by physical or mental suffering but cannot be offended by moral abuse.

It is in this reciprocity of mimetic relations that our *fundamental ethical principles* are rooted. Here, I refer to that reservoir of moral intuitions, values, and norms by which we orient ourselves in making choices: respect for the dignity of others, sharing their autonomy, the reciprocal assumption of obligations and rights. Of course, we first learn respect and the assumption of obligations with regard to a single person—that is, to the person who has actually recognized us. But, in reality, what we have experienced is the irruption of the other in our subjectivity. We have learned that not only we but also the other can and must become an object of respect. This experience of what Mead called "the generalized other"¹⁶ is further confirmed by the recurrence and differentiation of the experiences of recognition.

We learn these fundamental moral norms as we come to accept the recognition granted us by another person. If we did not accept these norms the act of recognition could not even constitute itself. This gives rise to a moral sensibility that refers, in principle, not only to those who have recognized us but is addressed to all those who appear to us with the characteristics of the generalized other. It is an experience so universal that it regards also those who—for biological, psychological, or historical reasons—have never experienced a successful recognition. The sense of 'compassion'—the capacity to share the suffering of less fortunate human beings, incapable of the autonomy and the awareness that characterize persons who have experienced relations of recognition—stems from precisely these relations. Just as the growing moral

most dependent on for the development of her identity and for the maintenance of her integrity—for example, when giving herself to a partner in an intimate relationship". Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 34.

16 See: George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. by C.W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), § 20.

sensibility with respect to other living beings—to animals first of all—must be understood in this context.

The experience of recognition thus entails the acceptance of an *ethics of recognition*, an ethics that can be reconstructed on the basis of the assumptions implicit in this relation itself. It is a *fundamental* ethic, because it is the basis of all other individual and contextual ethics, but it is also a *minimal* ethic, because it does not bind us to specific and controversial value assumptions. It is therefore not necessary to ‘construct’ this ethic through the complex process of an argumentative consensus, because any procedural agreement of the moral arguments can only stem from the norms that best correspond to the ethical normativity that already stands behind the backs of the arguers and that constituted itself through recognitive relations. This fundamental ethic should not therefore be ‘constructed’ through an argumentative procedure but, rather, ‘reconstructed’ from the very relations that have formed our subjectivity and the sense of our morality.

We can now answer the *very first question*, with which we began. Freedom and moral responsibility are rooted *in nature* and, to be explained, have no need of a supersensible dimension. Despite their rootedness in nature, however, they are *beyond nature*, because they do not obey mere natural impulses, or any logic of self-preservation, or social or individual utility. Rather, they depend on natural, communicative, relational, and mimetic abilities and, therefore, are in this sense a product of our biology. At the same time they go beyond the mere instinct of self-preservation and respond to a normative logic that does not exist in nature, which we may call the logic of freedom, since it is certainly not explicable in terms of cause and effect.

From nature something non-natural emerges—something that nevertheless becomes an integral part of our human nature: a realm of norms and a universe of social practices, where what matters is right and wrong, good and evil, respect and offense. Morality and freedom are therefore neither natural nor supernatural but social products, the result of relationships of recognition that are consolidated in phylogenetic and ontogenetic processes of formation and learning. This, indeed, is the extraordinary capacity of human nature: its capacity to generate from inside itself something that no longer has to do with nature. Hegel placed this realm within the sphere of spirit, but he took pains not to break its fundamental link with its natural roots, simply calling it ‘second nature’. We are—after all—normative animals. Understanding this dual belonging is a task with which even a post-philosophical consciousness must necessarily settle accounts.