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The Phoenix Complex

A Philosophy of Nature

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Judeo-Christian tradition considers the soul immortal. The resurrection of the flesh, after an indefinite period of separation of the soul from the body beginning with death, is an event, of which the phoenix is a symbol, “a most complete and unassailable symbol of our hope,” in the words of Tertullian (*De carnis resurrectione* 13.1–6). But the phoenix is not only a symbol of resurrection; in a vaster cultural, literary, and philosophical panorama, it is the symbol of the soul as such. For instance, in the so-called Hesiod’s riddle (Frag. 304, preserved in Plutarch’s *De defectu oraculorum*), the phoenix lives “the lifespan of nine ravens” (*De def. orac.* 11.[415c]). Since a raven is said to live 108 years, the life of the phoenix is equivalent to 972 years, which, upon a certain reading, signifies the period of the soul’s peregrinations after death.¹ Similarly, in the Coptic *Untitled Gnostic Treatise* found near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945, the phoenix is called “the ensouled animal,” *empsuchon zōon* (170.2), resorting to the same expression as the one with which Plato designated the cosmos in *Timaeus*.

As for Aristotle, who wrote a seminal treatise on the soul (arguably, one of the most important in antiquity), there is only scant circumstantial evidence of his interest in the figure of the phoenix. So, in keeping with fragments preserved by Censorianus and Cicero, Aristotle theorized that the Great Year (*magnum annum*), like terrestrial years, consisted of the periods of cooling down and warming up, a sort of cosmic winter or autumn and spring or summer (*Aristotelis fragmenta* 25). The Great Year, you might recall, was supposed to coincide with one of the phoenix’s hypothetical life spans. If the

phoenix stands for the soul, then she is, at the same time, the symbol of an individual soul and of the cosmic or world-soul, the macrocosm reflecting and reflected in the microcosm. The cosmic soul, too, has its term and limit, temporally marked by the length of the Great Year.

Another piece of evidence reaches us from *De historia animalium*, where Aristotle mentions birds that bring cinnamon to humans (616a.5–10). The indispensability of cinnamon for the phoenix's funereal nest, stressed by Herodotus, Artemidorus, Lactantius, Claudian, and a host of other classical authors, supports the associative link between this kind of birds and the phoenix.²

The third indirect testimony to the fact that Aristotle paid attention to the figure of the phoenix may be found in Plutarch's *Quaestiones conviviales*. Discussing the "freshness and immortality" of the victor's honor, Plutarch compares it to "a palm-tree, which is the longest lived [*o de phoenix makrobion*] of any" and cites "this line of Orpheus": "They lived liked branches of a leafy palm [*phoinikōn*]" (8.4.2). In a somewhat cryptic fashion, the line harkens back to Hesiod's riddle about various life spans. Now, given the phoenix's indeterminate speciation and synecdochic representation of nature, it may, of course, be an animal, a plant, or a combination of the two as in iconic depictions of the phoenix bird sitting atop a palm tree. For our purposes, though, the word that is crucial is *makrobion*, "long-lived." This is the very word that appears in the title of Aristotle's minor text from *Parva naturalia*, "On the Length of Life [*makrobiotētos*] and the Shortness of Life." Here, Aristotle states, probably also with an acknowledging nod to Hesiod, that "on the whole, the longest-lived are to be found among plants [*ta makrobiōtata en tois phutois estin*], namely the palm tree [*phoinix*]" (466a.9–10). In its singular vegetal incarnation, the phoenix thus exemplifies the long life of plants in general. And it is to this marginal text that we should turn in an attempt to schematize the dynamics of life through the long life of a vegetal phoenix.

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Before proceeding, it is imperative that we address an apparent lapse in argumentation. It has already been established that the phoenix is a synecdoche of

nature by virtue of gathering in the same figure plants and animals, miscellaneous elements, as well as a territory and its inhabitants. It has been further pointed out that the phoenix is a synecdoche of the world, the Greek *kosmos* or the Latin *universitas*—a connection that becomes apparent through the associations of the Great Year with the phoenix's age. The new claim is that the phoenix is a symbol of the soul. How is this possible?

At the core of the question is the surprising affinity of nature and the soul, of ancient physiology and psychology. In later theologico-metaphysical systems (even those that, like Avicenna's are heavily influenced by Aristotle) the soul will appear as something supernatural, indeed as a tendency or an entity that moves *contranatura*, against the laws governing interactions of physical elements. For Aristotle, though, the soul is not an abstract metaphysical entity somehow conjugated with the body, but an activating (or actuating) principle of life, differentiated into kinds of vitality or vital movements.³ Physiology, understood as the logos of the body, gathered or assembled in itself across its various organs, is nothing other than a psychology, provided that we hear in *psuchē* one of the senses Aristotle imbues it with, namely "the first actuality of a natural body with organs [*entelecheia hē prōtē sōmatos phusikou organikou*]" (*De anima* 412b.5). What nature/*phusis*, *kosmos*, and *psuchē* have in common is life, distributed in them along disparate scales, dimensions, and kinds (or, in some instances, touching upon the everlasting and the immortal without much of a regard for kinds and divisions between and within kingdoms, genera, species).

Let us now go back to Aristotle's *Parva naturalia* and, especially, to his text on longevity and the shortness of life. More than his approach to the duration (or the durability) of living beings, what is remarkable about this piece of writing is the efficiency, with which it stages the drama of the phoenix with respect to life, lives, living as an afterlife, and ruptures in vitality indistinguishable from its seamless continuation. According to Aristotle, "Living beings are naturally moist and warm [*zōon esti phusei hudron kai thermon*]" (466a); "by nature," life conjoins opposites in a living being. Old age and the impending death announce themselves in the weakening fire of vitality—a biochemical fire that gives life while slowly burning the living up—and in the drying up of life's moisture until the total exhaustion of these

elemental forces in a cold, dead body. Just as a fire destroys the substratum in which it burns, so “natural warmth . . . consumes the matter in which it is [*to phusikon thermon . . . analiskei tēn hulēn en hē estin*]” (466b.33–34).

At the beginning of his text, Aristotle has already made clear how futile it is to resist the mortiferous tendency of life itself on its own terms: only “the upper fire” (*to pur anō*), is indestructible because it has no contrary (465b.2–3). Seeing that life is constituted by oppositional elements, it contains the principle of its own destruction and, therefore, of death. Implicit in Aristotle’s argument is the insight of Diotima that mortals cannot preserve themselves by keeping fast to their identity and sameness. The greater longevity of plants (and of the phoenix-plant, or the palm tree, in particular) is due to the fact that they “are constantly reborn [*aei ta phuta ginetai*: also, come into being]” (467a.13). Every plant is a miniature phoenix, and the palm tree is the phoenix of vegetal phoenixes. What seems to be an uninterrupted duration of their lives is actually a kindling of many new vital fires where the older ones are nearly extinguished. At the same time dying and being born (*to men phtheiromenon to de ginomenon*), a tree perseveres in being (*diatelei*), continues existing while letting go of its existence and getting a new lease on life (467a.17–18).

While Aristotle shares the argument concerning the vegetal phoenix with Diotima, the mechanics of overcoming finitude are patently his own. From the empirical observation that plants, as well as some insects and other animals, maintain themselves alive even after they are physically divided into parts Aristotle deduces the conclusion that “the plant possesses potential root and stock [*echei kai rizan kai kaulon dunamei*] in every part” (467a.23–24) and that, consequently, “the vital principle exists potentially [*archē dunamei*] in every part of the plant” (467a.29–30). Plants enjoy their longevity to the extent that they give up life in exchange for lives: this is the means (*mechanē*: mechanics and machinations) by which they are able to reignite and to keep reigniting their vital fires almost indefinitely. They are the consummate beginners, recommencing their existence time and again, imperceptibly leaping across the chasm of dead time without as much as getting out of the places of their growth. In every vegetal part, a potential root is awaiting actualization, which may never happen.

Within the context of Aristotle's philosophy, the assignment of potential vitality to every part of the plant is highly charged. In the first place, the potential existence of the vital principle in every part of a plant puts it on the side of matter that, in *De anima*, is identified with potentiality in contrast to the actuality of eidetic form: "Matter is potentiality, while *eidos* is actuality [*Esti d' hē men hulē dunamis, to d' eidos entelecheia*]" (412a.9–10). In plants, the potentiality of matter—or matter as potentiality—comes into its own, also in light of Aristotle's use of a colloquial word for wood or for woods (*hulē*) in this more specialized, philosophical sense. Nevertheless, and in the second place, this very feature of vegetal vitality distances plants from the aforementioned conception of the soul as "the first actuality [*entelecheia hē prōtē*]" of a natural body with organs." The first "first actuality," which is vegetal vitality in charge of organismic nutrition and reproduction (*to threptikon* and *to genetikon*), borders on potentiality. How will Aristotle cope with this source of (potential) confusion?

The answer comes into view in another text from *Parva naturalia*, titled "On Youth and Old Age: On Life and Death," where Aristotle solves the conundrum of actuality and potentiality. According to him, in plants and some insects, the divisible part "is actually one, but potentially many [*energeia men echei hen, dunamei de pleiō*]" (468a.29), which means that "the nutritive soul must be actually one [*energeia men hen*]" in beings that possess it, but potentially many [*dunamei de pleious*]" (468b.3–4). If the empirical division of living beings into separate parts does not result in their death, then the metaphysical division of the activating or actuating principle of their life is equally possible. Actual unity must be sacrificed to potential plurality for the phoenix effect of spanning the gap of death to be achievable. But, together with unity and actuality, it is the *uniqueness* of the mythic phoenix and of finite existence that goes up in flames on the pyre of survival.

Heavy reliance on potentiality in the Aristotelian version of the phoenix, equated to the bodies and souls of plants and some animals, speaks volumes about the energy at work in the phoenix complex. Having coined the word *energeia*, Aristotle defines it in a roundabout way in *Metaphysics* as "the presence of the thing not in the sense which we mean by 'potentially' [*mē outōs hōsper legomen dunamei*]" (*Met.* 1048a.31–32). The association of energy

with potentiality and dynamism is a quintessentially modern one, inverting the Aristotelian comprehension of energy in terms of actuality.⁴ The phoenix complex is a complex of energy restricted to potentiality, including the potential rebirth of an organism or parts of an organism despite their finitude. What matters is not actual existence but its projection into the future by way of multiplication, of copying in part or as a whole the one who, as a consequence of this procedure, will become *more* than one. The mechanics and machinations that Aristotle discloses replace actuality with potentiality, slipping the many in the place of the one. The vegetal soul is responsible not only for nutrition but also for reproduction because, in itself, it is already potentially reproducible, being potentially many. The conflation of progenitor and offspring phoenixes, taken to be both the same and other, the same and not the same, one and more than one in the texts of Tertullian and Lactantius, belongs within this psychoenergetic framework.

The persistence of fire, which is a facet of vitality in Aristotle and which serves as a medium of rebirth in the dominant strand of phoenix narratives, is commensurate with the survival (indeed, the self-survival and resurrection) of plants and certain animals that gives the illusion of uninterrupted longevity. “Fire,” Aristotle writes in the essay from *Parva naturalia* devoted to youth and old age, “is always coming into being [*pur aei diatelei ginomenon*] and flowing like a river, but its speed is so great that it is not noticed” (470a.4–5). Fire is plantlike insofar as it is constantly dying and being born at such a speed that its intermittencies and discontinuities are perceived as smooth, riverine flows. And plants are firelike, proximate to its vital impulse; matter is wood and the woods on fire. A flaming rebirth of the phoenix spectacularizes these events of the vegetal soul, rendering them phenomenal.

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What is the fate of potentiality (and, hence, of the energy animating the phoenix complex) in a perpetual fiery and vegetal rebirth that guarantees longevity and survival, if not longevity as survival of oneself? A pure potentiality is as unthinkable for Aristotle as totally formless matter, which would be, similarly, mere potential. Potentiality is always of or for something (*Met.* 1049a-1049b). In the case before us, potentiality is to some extent actual

when it is hemmed into the terms of a birth—an incessant rebirth of fire, plants, and the rest of phoenix-nature, defined by its activity of birthing or sprouting into being (not least from death and obscurity). Beyond their identification with causes and principles, and beyond, also, their circumscription to the “developmental” arc extending from a prior to a subsequent actuality via the detour of potentiality, *phusis* and *natura* are snarls of potentialities and actualities. In the vegetal soul and in plant bodies, this unavoidable confusion reaches its highest point, and *this feature fuels the phoenix complex*.

Debunking in *De anima* an earlier theory of the soul as a “self-moving number,” Aristotle reiterates the idea that “plants and many animals continue to live even when divided, and seem to have the same soul as before [*dokei tēn autēn psuchēn echein tō eidei*]” (409a.9–10). Aristotle’s point is that numeric or extensional division does not diminish the ensoulment of vegetal and certain animal beings whose bodies are fragmented: each fragment retains the same degree of vitality as that before the division. Nevertheless, his statement also has far-reaching unintended consequences.

For one thing, the vegetal soul is the site of excess, not only distributed throughout the entire body of the living being who has it but also concentrated as a whole in each part of that body. Thanks to this excess, plant matter rapidly proliferates, with reproduction being, at the same time, the function and the effect of the vegetal soul. *To threptikon* and, especially, *to genetikon* do what they do best because they are more than themselves and, in this noncoincidence with themselves, overflow into the other, whether this other is a nourished being surviving itself or a being generated afresh.

For another thing, Aristotle’s statement insinuates that, in the actual existence of plants and some animals, unity is only potential, and a potential never to be actualized at that! Certainly, as he will explain in the essay on youth and old age, the nutritive soul is an actual unity and a potential multiplicity, an assertion that is repeated in *De anima* 413b. But the explanation does not sit well with the notion that “the soul seems rather to hold the body together” [*psuchē to sōma sunechein*]; at any rate, when the soul is gone, the body dissolves and decays (*De anima* 411b.8–10). The provisional unity of a vegetal body renders it nearly immortal on this view. And, furthermore, as a potential multiplicity, the vegetal soul no longer does the work of the

soul according to Aristotle, notably the work of holding the body together. Instead, potentially multiple, no longer uniting the body with itself and letting it be many bodies, this soul *is* the body, matter as the woods and as wood.

For Aristotle, the substantive sense of the soul is “a form of a natural body potentially having life [*eidos sōmatos phusikou dunamei zōēn echontos*]” (*De anima* 412a.20–21). The soul is the actualization of that bodily potential—of a body as potentially living—as a result of (a) the equation of *eidos* with actuality and (b) the “universal” definition of the soul as the body’s “first actuality.” In the vegetal soul, however, potential multiplicity lingers on, precipitating the potentiality *of* actuality as actuality and spawning the body of the soul itself. A soft version of the phoenix complex belongs at this level, at which vegetal vitality is indistinguishable from reproducibility in the plant itself or in another plant it gives rise to, since, in itself, it is already a host of others.⁵ A hard version of the phoenix complex, skipping over the gradual movements of growth, decay, and metamorphosis, and crafting a model of energy out of pure potentiality, is alien to Aristotle. Nevertheless, it is the one we are most familiar with, be it in the form of myth or in the prevalent sources and practice of energy production.

The vegetal soul epitomizes the potentiality of actuality as actuality. While he denies the possibility that the soul is a self-moving number, Aristotle is willing to contemplate parallels between the soul and geometrical figures. He writes, “The facts regarding the soul are much the same as those relating to figures; for both in figures and in things which possess soul, the earlier type always exists potentially in that which follows [*huparchei dunamei to proteron*]; e.g., the triangle is implied by the quadrilateral, and the nutritive faculty by the sensitive” (*De anima* 414b.28–32). In other words, the earlier type of the soul, which is the body’s “first actuality,” leads potential existence within a later type, assuming the role and the place of psychic matter or a psychic body. This is what the nutritive vegetal faculty (*to threptikon*) becomes in an animal, and this is what the sensitive animal faculty (*to aesthetikon*) becomes in the human. In us, the vegetal soul is a potentiality twice over, having passed along the way through an animal instantiation. Rather than a confirmation of the teleological structure of Aristotle’s thought, this

means that the nutritive and genetic faculties proper to the vegetal soul are doubly othered in the human: the phoenix complex works by not working and does not work by working. The past becomes the future: the deeper the past (say, vegetal or animal) in the crosshairs of Aristotle's philosophical biopsychology, the more open and indeterminate the future it announces in and for the human.

On a grand scale, that which Aristotle defines as life is coextensive with the vegetal soul in its nutritive and genetic aspects. "By life we mean self-nourishment, growth, and decay [*autou trophēn te kai auxēsīn kai phthīsin*]" (*De anima* 412a.14–15). If so, then, in the animal and human modes of vitality, where the vegetal soul leads potential existence, life itself turns into a potentiality, the energy of life—its putting to work, actualization or actuality—converted into anti-energy. The grounds for the harsh version of the phoenix complex, sustained by pure potentiality that remains unthinkable for the Greek philosopher, are prepared by Aristotle.

Within the vegetal soul itself, which is the first actuality of a plant body, the nutritive and genetic faculties, often assimilated into a single faculty by Aristotle, are capacities, the potentialities of that actuality qua actuality: "The capacity to absorb food may exist apart from all other powers [*allōn dunaton*], but the others cannot exist apart from it in mortal beings. This is evident in the case of growing beings [*phuomenōn*], for they have no other capacity of the soul [*dunamis allē psuchēs*]" (*De anima* 413a.31–33). The fundamental *dunamis*, without which no others can exist, is not a secure foundation. In its unity, as the only capacity of living beings viewed primarily from the perspective of growth, it is already many, falling apart as it does into the nutritive and the generative faculties.⁶ Now, as Aristotle has taught us, the manifold of the one *is* potentiality (recall that the body and the soul of the plant are actually one, but potentially many). The vegetal soul is, thus, in itself (in and as the first actuality of growing bodies) potential before its subsumption to other sorts of vitality.

Nourishment is the basic capacity of the soul that renders a body living. But it is also a capacity that betrays this same body as dying; hence, in the same breath, Aristotle invokes not only growing beings, but also mortals (*thnētois*). The refrain in Homer's definition of mortals in *Odyssey* is that

they are those “who eat bread” (9.190–191; 10.101, etc.). In the Hebrew Bible, eating bread earned “by the sweat of your brow” is on a par with the return of one’s mortal body to the earth, meted out as punishment to Adam and Eve for their original sin (Genesis 3:19). To make of death but a brief detour from life to life, as some versions of the phoenix story do, it is necessary to deal with the problem of nourishment. So, according to Pliny, the Roman senator Manilius reports that “there is no one who has seen [this bird] eating [*neminem extitisse qui viderit vescentem*]” (*Historia naturalis* 10.ii.3). In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid notes that the phoenix “lives not from fruit nor herbs but from drops of frankincense and cardamom” [*non fruge neque herbis, sed turis lacrimis et suco vivit amomi*] (15.393–394). Claudian, for his part, presents a vegetal take on the phoenix’s nourishment: “He needs no food to satisfy hunger nor any drink to quench thirst; the sun’s purer heat is his food [*purior illum solis fervor alit*], and he drinks the windy nutriment of Tety’s, taking nourishment from innocent vapors” (*Carmina minora* 27.13–16).

Minimal or elemental nourishment is meant to extract the phoenix from the category of mortal beings, while retaining the fundamental *dunamis* of the living. The energy of the phoenix in the classical accounts is not a potentiality, but an actuality, very much in keeping with Aristotle’s original coinage and interpretation. Even when eating or drinking, the phoenix lacks nothing. Energy predicated on fullness on the hither side of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is energy as actuality, and it is only fitting that it be rooted in the sun, the paragon of energetic plenum and excess. Solar heat directly supplies and supplants the fire of vitality in a vegetalized phoenix, even as “innocent vapors” transported by the wind or by drops of frankincense provide moisture—the two elements that, following Aristotle, are invariably conjugated in the living. Instead of the heat of digestion—“all food requires digestion and that which produces digestion is heat [*thermon*]” (*De anima* 416b.28–29)—the external warmth of the sun yields a fire that does not burn up the substratum in which it burns, or, at least, does not burn it up as quickly. Longevity depends on the mode of energy a living being employs and on the proximity of that energy to actuality, on the one hand, and potentiality, on the other.

The reproductive capacity of the vegetal soul, sometimes assimilated to the nutritive capacity in Aristotle's writings, is also linked to longevity within the scheme of discontinuous existence. In this respect, the Platonic influences that are merely implicit in *Parva naturalia* are fully explicated in *De anima*: "Since they [living creatures] cannot share in the immortal and the divine by continuity of existence [*adunatei tou aei kai tou theiou tē sunecheia*], because no perishable being can remain numerically one and the same, they share in these in the only way they can . . . ; what persists is not the individual itself, but something in its image [*eidei*], identical not numerically but specifically" (*De anima* 415b.3–8). Emphasizing, once again, that the soul in its generative capacity is not a matter of number (a self-moving number, to be exact), Aristotle confirms that "perishable beings" share in the immortal and the divine by letting themselves go as units of life and by allowing their progeny to take their place, identical in their *eidos*, as opposed to number. When it comes to the phoenix, the identity of the offspring is, nonetheless, both eidetic and numeric: there cannot be more than one. Whereas the discontinuity of existence is accentuated in those renditions of the myth that involve gradual decay, spontaneous generation, and the burial rituals a young phoenix performs for her predecessor, a near continuity is achieved in the moment of combustion and fiery consumption of the phoenix's body, offered to fire as a medium of higher life.

What are the practical means (the mechanics and machinations) for achieving resemblance across the intergenerational gap, thus securing the eidetic-specific identity of the progenitor and the offspring? In *De generatione animalium*, Aristotle lists four hypotheses of pangenesis *avant la lettre*, among which is the view that "the offspring which are produced are like their parents not merely in respect of their body as a whole, but part for part, too; hence, if the reason for the resemblance of the whole is that semen is drawn from the whole [*to aph holou elthein to sperma*], then the reason for the resemblance of the parts is surely that something is drawn from each of the parts" (721b.20–24). Aristotle is ultimately skeptical about the theory, citing plenty of arguments against it—from the impossibility of assembling all the features of both parents in a child to an offspring resembling not the parents but a more distant ancestor. But the theory must have had traction

in the ancient world to have made it into *De generatione animalium* and to have been carefully refuted by Aristotle. Applied to the phoenix, it explains how “genetic materials” for a new life must be drawn from the whole of nature condensed, in the manner of a synecdoche, in this singular figure. Whether in the equation of a plant-based nest with the womb in Tacitus or in the ascription of the phallic function to the sun and to lightning by Tzetzes and Claudian, we see the phoenix’s pangensis expanded to and dispersed in all of nature. Part for part resemblance is incredibly complicated when, in addition to the earlier and the later phoenix, we are dealing with an interplay of part and whole typical of synecdoche.

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Lest we forget, the *eidōs* (image or form) inherited by the offspring is not purely corporeal, seeing that the substantive sense of the soul in Aristotle is “a form of a natural body [*eidōs sōmatos phusikou*] potentially having life” (*De anima* 412a.20–22). And, since the phoenix is a symbol of the soul, its form is that of the soul *as well as* of nature—“a form of the body of nature,” we might say, slightly rephrasing Aristotle. The dynamic sense of the soul as a capacity for nourishment, reproduction, sensation, and thinking does not, for obvious reasons, have a visual equivalent, even though it is tied to the speciation of the being, whose soul it is and whose capacities it fittingly actualizes.⁷ But, as far as the soul’s *eidōs* is concerned, the question of sexualization, intertwined with that of individuality and mortality, is key. Does the soul have a sex? Does it coincide with the image of a sexed body?

As the symbol of the soul *and* the synecdoche of nature, the phoenix is a composite portrait of male, female, and asexual being; she, he, and it, plant and animal, the phoenix unites sexual difference with the lack thereof and with the transposition of sexuality onto the inorganic world of the elements—for instance, the solar blaze or lightning and wind. The asexual reproduction of plants that are not angiosperms and of some animals, such as blackworms that reproduce through fragmentation, migrates into most classical accounts of the phoenix that insist on its uniqueness and singularity. Recall in this respect Pomponius Mela’s observation that the phoenix “is not conceived by copulation nor born through parturition [*non enim*

coitu concipitur partuve generatur” (*De chorographia* 3.72). In early Christianity, this feature goes hand in hand with the purity of the phoenix, who is untouched by the original sin, and the asexuality of the soul. So, Ambrose writes that “the phoenix does not know corporeal coition, nor the lure of libidinal desire [*phoenix coitus corporeos ignorat, libidinis nescit inlecebras*]” (*Expos. Ps. cxviii*.19.13). And Zeno of Verona notes that the phoenix “is not born through intercourse [*non ex coitu nascitur*]” (*Tractatus* 1.16.9).

I will put aside (for the time being) the possible role of the Fall in the sexuation of the soul according to early Christian theologians. The thread I would like to follow is that of the phoenix’s (and, hence, the soul’s and nature’s) self-conception. Ovid writes that the phoenix is the only creature that “renews and reproduces itself [*una est, quae reparat seque ipsa reseminat*]” (15.392). The verb *reseminat* means “reproduces,” but, literally, it says “sows again,” or “reseeds” itself (*ipsa*). Lactantius writes that the phoenix “begets itself [*se tamen ipsa creat*]” (*De ave phoenice* 78). Fourth-century Latin theologian Rufinus of Aquileia also underlines the nonconjugal origin of the phoenix, who “is always one and always follows itself, born or reborn from itself [*semper una sit, et semper sibi ipsa nascendo vel renascendo succedat*]” (*Exp. Symboli* 9).

The act of self-begetting divulges the phoenix’s sex and, with it, that of the soul or of nature. Aristotle supplies a functional (or, perhaps, an energetic), rather than anatomical, definition of male and female in *De generatione animalium*: “They differ in their *logos*, because the male is that which has the power to generate in another [*to dunamenon gennan eis heteron*], while the female is that which can generate in itself [*to eis auto*]” (716a.20–22). This power, this capacity, is actualized or attains its energy *proper* in that which is generated. The phoenix’s self-begetting identifies the creature as female, actualized or energized in herself as her own offspring.

That said, some variations on the myth put the phoenix on the side of the male, who generates in another. According to Tacitus, the other, in whom the phoenix is reborn, is vegetal; the phoenix “pours forth his genital force into the nest, from which the fetus arises [*suis in terriis struere nidum eique vim genitalem adfundere, ex qua fetum oriri*]” (*Annals* 6.28). Fire, as the medium of rebirth, may be likewise considered the other, in which

the phoenix regenerates. In “Praecepta ad virgines” (526–528), Gregory Nazianzus, the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, compares the rebirth of those who are dying in a flaming passion for Christ with that of the phoenix “becoming young again and in fire reborn [*neazein / en puri tiktomenon*]” (*Carmina* 1.2: “Praecepta ad virgines,” 526–527). Claudian states that the phoenix’s lives are “separated in the middle by fire [*separat ignis*]” (*Carmina minora* 27.70–71). And Dracontius concludes that fire is born of phoenix’s actions (*sic nascitur ignis*) of beating its wings against the branches of the nest and that, afterwards, the phoenix is consumed by and reborn in the flames (*Romulea* 10.107–109).

The circularity of Dracontius’s account foregrounds a problem with Aristotle’s definition of male and female. To discern between one sex and the other, it is necessary, *ab initio* to distinguish self from other, generation in oneself *versus* generation in the other. We return here to the tangle of individuality and sexual difference: hyperindividuated to the point of singularity in its own genus, the phoenix is, however, infraindividual, inasmuch as she, he, or it encompasses the elemental and vegetal other by blurring the boundaries of classificatory systems (the first path toward universalization) and by standing in for the whole of nature or the soul in a relation of synecdoche (the second such path). Plus, the intergenerational difference between the predecessor and the offspring phoenix is not a given, since the reborn phoenix is often said to be both the same as and other to itself. A critical implication of these nuances is that, regenerating in fire or in the wood of the nest, the phoenix regenerates in the other that is not *entirely* other and is, therefore, feminized or, at the very least, rendered more indeterminate than ever with respect to her or his sex. In Aristotelian terms, “male” and “female” cease being the principles (*archai*) that they are in light of a clear-cut distinction between self and other (*De generatione animalium* 716b.10–11).

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The negation of sexes as *archai*, or principles, happens at the very beginning (as and in a principle, *in principio*) of the invention of sexuality by higher plants. Hegel could not have overlooked this productive contradiction in

his *Philosophy of Nature*, notably in the section dedicated to vegetal nature. In principle, plants fail to develop “the principle of opposition,” defining a mature sexual relation: “The different individuals cannot therefore be regarded as of different sexes because they have not been completely imbued with the *principle* of their opposition [*sie nicht in das Prinzip ihrer Engegensetzung eingetaucht sind*—because this does not completely pervade them, is not a universal moment, not a principle of the *whole* individual [*nicht Prinzip des ganzen Individuums*], but is a separated part of it.”⁸ Because flowers and other sexual parts of plants are easily detachable and apparently inessential to the vegetal organism, the sexual principle—sexuality as a principle—is still merely formal and abstract, neither self-negated in a relation to another sex nor concretely determinative for the entire individual plant. That is why the determination of sexual difference in vegetal life “exists merely as an analogue of the sexual relationship,”⁹ the analogue *preceding* that which it analogizes (i.e., animal sexuality). Instead of a principle, in the beginning we find an analogue, which is what a still undeveloped principle always is from a dialectical point of view. The sexual relation in plants is a strange relation without the relata, sexual difference without the identity of individuals belonging to different sexes.¹⁰

In Hegel’s thought, the knot, tying sexuality to individuality and mortality, is very much intact: the formally asexual character of plants, despite the means of sexual reproduction at their disposal, has to do with their nonindividuation, that is, their nonnegation by themselves. This knot, both affirmed and denied in the phoenix complex, is also disavowed in the life of plants as Hegel construes it. Sexual ambiguity (not least, the ambiguity of the difference between sexual difference and lack thereof) belongs together with the confusion between plant self and its other—a distinction, which underlies the capacities of generation and according to which Aristotle assigns to living beings their sexes. Speaking of the “process of formation,” Hegel notes that the “*inner* process of the plant’s *relation to itself* is, in keeping with the simple nature of the vegetable organism, immediately a relation to an outer world, and an externalization.”¹¹ The plant finds itself in an external (elemental) other, and externalizes itself in response to this discovery. Hence, in their very life process, in the course of their own production and preservation, plants

perform a synecdoche, whereby they stand in for nature, albeit without a sharply individuated part *representing* the whole.

Given plant nonindividuation, the dividing lines between vegetal formation process and genus process are virtually nonexistent: for a plant, its production in itself is already its reproduction in the other. “Since the plant, in producing other individuals, at the same time preserves itself, the significance of this fruitfulness is not merely that the plant, by its constant budding [*Verknoten*], transcends itself, but rather that the cessation of growth, the arrest of this sprouting [*Hinaussprossen*], is the condition for that fruitfulness.”¹² What Hegel refers to here, in concrete terms, is the alternation of vegetative growth and sexual reproduction, phases that are mutually exclusive in plant life. This alternation, or temporal negation, should have given the German thinker some pause and should have complicated the assertion of an immediate identity of plant self-production and reproduction. It did not. Hegel still maintains that the mechanics and machinations of overcoming finitude in plants are simple: that, in continuing to be itself, the plant already transcends itself, including its finite life span and spatial confines. The Hegelian plant is a phoenix *in each one of its parts*, a self-renewing creature that achieves this renewal by growing—indistinguishable from “producing other individuals” like it—and that, in producing other individuals, preserves itself. And yet, the “cessation of growth” serving as “the condition for that fruitfulness” indicates that negativity is not alien to vegetal self-transcendence and, therefore, that something like death forms the horizon of vegetal life.

Positing the identity of vegetal self-production and reproduction, Hegel agrees with Aristotle, who collapses the two functions of the vegetal soul into one: *to genetikon* unites under its heading the highly elaborated residues of *to threptikon*. So, the genus process in plants is “on the whole, superfluous, since the process of formation and assimilation is itself already reproduction as production of fresh individuals.”¹³ Even more overtly, in the world of plants, “the sex relationship should be regarded as much, or as even more, a *digestive process*; here digestion and generation are the same.”¹⁴ Life and survival are one and the same, insofar as in being lived, vegetally, life survives itself. This further undermines the logic of firm principles, which we have

seen corroded with regard to sexual difference. To say (well before the advent of deconstruction) that production is, in itself, reproduction is to put repetition, replication, copying at the origin, divested of its originality, just as to brand plant sexuality an “analogue” of sexuality is to begin with similitude, an imitation of “the thing itself.”

Nevertheless, the vegetal phoenix as Hegel imagines it deviates from the phoenix complex in at least one respect. As digestive and generative processes and capacities merge, the element of self-sacrifice evanesces. Comparing plant and animal reproduction, Hegel writes, “Whereas in the genus process of the animal the genus, as the negative power over the individual, is realized through the sacrifice of this individual which it replaces by another, . . . [the plant’s] relationship with the outer world is already a reproduction of the plant itself and therefore coincides with the genus process.”¹⁵ There is no “negative power” in the vegetal individual–genus relation, meaning that the former generation need not pass away (or, more radically put, need not lay its own life on the altar of the future, burning itself to a life-giving death or inflicting a fecund wound on itself) in order to give time and space to those yet to come. But the phoenix complex does not tolerate exceptions. On Hegel’s reading, the nonsacrificial nature of vegetal life in its individuality assigns a sacrificial mission to the plant kingdom as a whole: “The plant is a subordinate organism whose destiny it is to be sacrificed to the higher organism and to be consumed by it.”¹⁶ There are no alternatives to sacrifice: the choice is between being sacrificed to the other and sacrificing oneself (to oneself as other). The fate of a living body ruled by the digestive function is to be digested in another living body. The sacrifice externally imposed on plants by animals and humans is understood, on another plane of dialectical reason, as a self-sacrifice of vegetal nature moving along the path of a self-actualizing concept.

The enigma of vegetal “digestion,” assigned the task of gathering together distinct facets of plant life and subjectivity, is that it does not assimilate nutrients to a psychic or physical inner core, wherein they would be digested; on the contrary, a plant “is drawn out of itself by light, by its self which is external to it, ramifying into a plurality of individuals.”¹⁷ We are no longer dealing, as in Aristotle, with the actual oneness and potential multiplicity of

plant souls and bodies, but with an actual (that is, energy-rich, determinate and determinative) plurality, where synthesis and analysis are one (as in the combination of *photosynthesis* with moisture and minerals osmotically absorbed from the soil). In the elemental domain, the plant is the “concept which has materialized the light principle and has converted the watery nature into a fiery one.”¹⁸ But on the plane of its subjectivity, it is an affirmation of fire as life and of its own self in the medium of fire. “The plant draws from light its specific energy [*Befeuerung*: “firing-up”] and vigor. . . . [T]he plant becomes a self to itself only in light; its lighting-up, its becoming light [*ihr Erleuchten, Lichtwerden*] does not mean that the plant itself becomes light, but that it is produced only at and in light [*am und im Licht*].”¹⁹

The plant’s source of energy is also its self in a sense that is quite dissimilar to the usual notion of autotrophy: the means for its growth, becoming, and self-reproduction is, at the same time, the end, if only endless, unreachable as such. The implication, of course, is that the plant never reunites with its solar self, seeing that, empirically speaking, it does not contain the inner heat of life fueling animal existence. In a vegetal incarnation as a palm tree or in Claudian’s account of nourishment procured from “sun’s purer heat,” the phoenix leads a plantlike existence, becoming “a self to itself” in the light. But in the animal incarnation, as well, external fire provides an opportunity for recharging the heat of life that is all but exhausted in the aged phoenix. If the old bird dies in order to live, that is because cosmic, solar fire is a powerful substitute—a replacement and replenishment of life’s inner heat.

In keeping with Hegel’s dialectics, elemental light and heat are *not* of a higher ontological rank than the warmth of animal vitality. In fact, the latter, despite its finitude, is dialectically more determinate, actualized, energetically fuller, because it has overcome the abstract indifference of the inorganic domain. But elemental fire is more significant to the story of the phoenix: since the provenance of this mythical creature is the religious cult of the sun, the part on “Luminous Essence” (*Lichtwesen*) from the “Natural Religions” section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is particularly relevant. Assuming that Light is Life, it is vacuous until such a moment when “this swaying life [*taumelnde Leben*] must determine itself into *being-for-itself* and must give existence to its vanishing shapes [*un seinen verschwindenden Gestalten*]

Bestehen geben].”²⁰ The phoenix’s fiery transformation is an act of dipping into Life itself, as light and fire. This act is tantamount to death, in which a living being sheds its shape (not this or that shape, but any shape whatsoever), actively participating in the immanent vanishing of its figure. To live again, a fresh shape must be assumed, following the thesis of Life’s self-determination “into being-for-self,” the being that is nonindifferent and, most importantly, nonindifferent to itself. Thus, pure Life is death without the material substratum of a living shape; existence in a living shape is dying; and it is only the speculative reflection of Life into substantive organic shapes—its self-negating self-determination—that energizes the process of living (or of living-dying).

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Along the winding paths of vegetal vitality, plants carry the elements of water and earth up to the air and to solar fire that lends them determinate shapes, textures, colors, smells, flavors. Once the plant is “itself the movement of fiery nature within itself, it proceeds to ferment; but the heat which it gives out of itself is not its blood but its destruction.”²¹ The plant’s “phoenix moment,” if I can call it that, is the interiorization of heat, its partial becoming animal, which brings it to ruin, as Hegel does not fail to recognize, but also preserves it otherwise, as fermented spirits, for instance. Fermentation is the afterlife of vegetal life, materially crucial to the Christian narrative of resurrection: the transubstantiation of Christ’s body in bread and of his blood in wine. The inner heat of a fermenting plant is, indeed, not that of animal blood; it is more akin to divine vitality. Slowly heating up from within, it is life and survival handed over to the process of decomposition in an alternative phoenix complex, not suffering of an allergy to the passage of time nor disgusted with matter.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel will correlate the Eleusinian mysteries of bread and wine with the religion of “a merely *immediate* spirit, the spirit of nature [*nur der unmittelbare Geist, der Geist der Natur*].”²² Vegetal gods—vegetalized divinity or divinized vegetation—such as Ceres and Bacchus are not yet “the strictly higher gods whose individuality includes as an essential moment self-consciousness as such.” “Therefore,” Hegel continues, “spirit

has not yet sacrificed itself as *self-conscious* spirit to self-consciousness, and the mystery of bread and wine is not yet the mystery of flesh and blood [*und das Mysterium des Brots und Weins ist noch nicht Mysterium des Fleisches und Blutes*].²³ Fermentation itself needs to ferment, now in the cultural domain, rather than in the world of nature, in order to attain to the level of spirit's self-consciousness, its return to itself across the abyss of negativity and natural estrangement from itself, marked by death. After all, fermentation serves as a bridge between nature and culture, the "useless" end of a natural process taken up again into cultural works and endowed with new utility.

Hegel's 1831 lectures on the philosophy of religion will vacillate between a designation of Egyptian religion as that of "enigma" and that of "ferment" (*Gärung*).²⁴ Consistent with the statement we have just spotted in *Phenomenology*, however, enigma or mystery *is* ferment and ferment *is* an enigma, judging by Eleusinian rituals. The mystery, in more precise Hegelian terms, is in how spirit comes back to itself from its self-estrangement in external nature, crossing the bridge of fermentation. But it is what Hegel calls "Phoenician religion" that interests us in the present context, because it is there that the German philosopher addresses the figure of the phoenix.

"In the Phoenician religion," Hegel writes, "emphasis is placed on the defeat and estrangement of God and his resurrection." And he continues: "The representation of the phoenix is well-known [*Die Vorstellung vom Phönix ist bekannt*]: it is a bird that immolates itself in the flames, and from its ashes a young phoenix issues forth in renewed vigor."²⁵ Hegel selects the most well-known version of the myth, in which the phoenix is reduced to a determinate species and to a particular way of dying and being reborn. The well-known (*bekannt*) quality of this narrative will be highlighted again in the following paragraph, as well as in other works by Hegel, in which he mentions the phoenix, from *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* to *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. The mythic bird flashes like a meteorite through his texts, incarnating spirit, especially at the end of its wanderings through nature, in which it is alienated from itself. It is highly probable that Hegel focuses on the most popular narrative of the phoenix because he is not aware of alternative renditions of its death and rebirth. That said, we cannot help but notice certain affinities between the dialectical view

of fire as the material medium of ideality, the means of idealizing matter,²⁶ and the bird's self-immolation in the flames, which forms a part of the "well-known" image Hegel foregrounds.

In the 1824 lectures on "Determinate Religion" the phoenix represents a "divine process" whereby death is converted into the ground of rejuvenated life: "This estrangement, this other-being defined as natural negation [*Diese Entfremdung, dieses Anderssein, als natürliche Negation*], is death, but the death that is likewise sublated, in that a rejuvenated new life arises from it. The eternal nature of spirit is to die to itself, to make itself finite in natural life, but through the annihilation of its natural state it comes to itself. The phoenix is this well-known symbol; it is not the struggle between good and evil but a divine process [*ein göttlicher Verlauf*], pertaining to the nature of God himself and proceeding in one individual."²⁷ Death, then, is a "natural negation" (*natürliche Negation*), which can mean a negation within nature and a negation of nature (and, perhaps also, the very movement of the second negation through the first). If the natural negation that is death is so polysemic, its sublation, in the course of which "a rejuvenated new life arises," has a still richer plurality of meanings. The new life that the negation of the negation yields may be the existence of future generations of the same life form, new forms of natural life arising from the "ashes" of the old, or a novel mode of the life of spirit no longer estranged from itself, having come back to itself from its otherness in the natural state. The "well-known" symbolism of the phoenix is the crossroads for these varied senses of biological negation and its negation. It will mark our and, even more so, Hegel's approaches to this religious figure with a unique sort of ambiguity.

Another significant point Hegel makes in this passage is that the phoenix is not only a figure but also a process ("a divine process," no less) folded into a singular being ("proceeding in one individual"). The process is the movement from life through death to another life, reflected into the "estrangement of God and his resurrection." The phoenix makes the procession of nature, as much as that of spirit, visible in a figure that, in addition to being well known, popularly accessible, and widely recognizable, phenomenalizes, lays out in the open subtle and barely perceptible developments, be they microscopic occurrences or, conversely, macroscale events of long duration. In the

figure-process of the phoenix, we see the movement of nature and of spirit; Hegel prefaces his brief discussion of this element in Phoenician religion with the assertion that “spirit consists essentially in coming to itself from its other-being—and from the vanquishing of this other-being—through the negation of negation. Spirit brings *itself* forth [*der Geist bringt sich hervor*].”²⁸ The only quandary is whether this return is “immediate” and, therefore, pertinent to the natural realm, or mediated and, hence, enabling the return of spirit to itself within nature, as culture, or both.

Hegel juggles both alternatives with reference to the image of the phoenix. When in the 1831 lectures on the philosophy of religion, he bestows yet another name on Phoenician religion as “the religion of anguish [*Schmerz*],” he hints at the dialectical means (the mechanics and machinations) of subjectivation through an experienced negativity that abuts but is not identical to death. While repeating the lesson from 1824, Hegel adds something else to it: the one individual, in whom a divine process of life-death-another-life unravels is a subject. “The representation of the *phoenix* [is] a death that is the reentry into a rejuvenated life—and this is what spirit is. Here we no longer have the struggle between two distinct principles but the process in regard to a *subject* itself, and not a human but rather the divine subject.”²⁹ The two principles—life and death—no longer do battle against one another; they are shown in their mutual complementarity within a subject (the phoenix) they constitute. Such complementarity is not a dispassionate, purely substantive fact of nature. To reach its realization, one must suffer, undergoing a pathos-laden experience of anguish, which is the material form of experience as such. Hegel brings himself to conclude about the representation of the phoenix that “this is what spirit is,” because it comprises the dialectical unity of subject and substance, more so than the co-belonging of life and death. In the same maximal sense, seven years prior to predicating spirit on the phoenix, Hegel said about the phoenix and related mythological figures that they embodied “the transition, generally speaking, from vitality, from affirmative being, to death, to negation, and again the process of rising out of this negation [*der Übergang überhaupt von der Lebendigkeit, dem affirmativen Sein zum Tode, der Negation und wiederum die Erhebung aus dieser Negation*]” as “the absolute

mediation [*die absolute Vermittlung*] that belongs essentially to the concept of spirit.”³⁰

Even within this scheme of things, there is plenty of dialectical polysemy. The phoenix is an insignia of “actual spirit,” which, “in order to be actual, must turn away from its estrangement and return to itself. However, this still pertains to the element of natural life as a process with symbolic significance.”³¹ In the architectonics of Hegel’s dialectics, the return of spirit to itself from its estrangement in nature signals the dawn of culture. Nonetheless, he suggests in the text before us, it is still possible for this return to be included under the aegis of nature, with the added bonus of “symbolic” (i.e., culturally assigned) significance contained in the image of the phoenix. The subjectivity, which divine substance gains by handing itself over to the experience of suffering, anguish, and death, is equally multifaceted. It may refer to (1) subjects in nature—nonhuman life-forms that participate in the transition from life through death to renewed life; (2) nature as subject, synecdochally condensed in the phoenix; or (3) the subjectivity of spirit that has come back to itself through nature, as betrayed by the symbolic supplement it is loaded with.

This is how, in lectures from 1824, Hegel interprets the phoenix symbol, alluding to its connection with subjective spirit: “The eternal nature of spirit is to die to itself, to make itself finite in naturalness, but through the annihilation of its naturalness it comes to itself [*sich endlich zu machen in der Natürlichkeit, aber durch die Vernichtung seiner Natürlichkeit kommt er zu ihm selbst*].”³² The return of spirit after its “annihilation of naturalness” entails the rise of another nature or the emergence of the other of nature, relative to the one which was other to spirit or to the one, faced with which spirit was other to itself. The moment of emptying substance—of its negation, annihilation, death—is, positively conceived, the birth of the subject at the cusp of finitude and its “eternal” overcoming. Assuming that this emergent subjectivity concerns another nature, we discover in the natural world not a totality of dumb proliferating organic and inorganic matter, but an articulation of dispersed intelligences, modes of thinking, and consciousnesses. Provided that the subjectivity in question is that of nature’s other, it is no longer of nature in the immediate form, but of spirit denaturalizing itself.

I must admit that the latter reading is more conventional than the former and that Hegel's other writings bear it out as well. So, in the addition to the last paragraph of *Philosophy of Nature* (not included in the A. V. Miller translation), the rise of consciousness cannot be accommodated on nature's own turf, but requires the self-extinguishing of nature: "This [spiritual individuality that results in consciousness] is the *transition from natural being into spirit*, nature has found its consummation in living being, and has made its peace by shifting into a higher sphere. Spirit has therefore issued forth from nature. The purpose of nature is to extinguish itself [*Das Ziel der Natur ist so, sich selbst zu tödten*], and to break through its rind of immediate and sensuous being, to consume itself like a phoenix in order to emerge from this externality rejuvenated as spirit. Nature has become distinct from itself in order to recognize itself again as Idea, and to reconcile itself with itself."³³

It is not by chance that the phoenix resurfaces here, at the very end of *Philosophy of Nature*, which is also the beginning of *Phenomenology*. The self-extinguishing of nature, revealed as nature's overall goal (*Ziel*), is its lighting up afresh in and as spirit. In the shape of the phoenix, it is finally nature that emerges rejuvenated as spirit. Nature's self-negation is its self-renewal as spirit *and* as (another) nature. Spirit denaturalizing itself is nature denaturalizing itself.

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Hegel's lectures on religion and the conclusion of his *Philosophy of Nature* adopt a sympathetic view of the phoenix, at times turning to this mythic figure to illustrate the movement of spirit. Things are different in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, which Hegel delivered in 1822–1823, less than two years before the course on the philosophy of religion. There, in the midst of a melancholy observation on the subject of constant "*change or alteration*—the supplanting of individuals, peoples, and states that arise, linger for a while, attracting our interest, gaining, losing, or sharing it with other, and then vanish,"³⁴ the phoenix flashes by again. The phoenix signifies the positive dimension of such an "alteration and declines [that] at the same time entail the *creation and emergence of new life*," inasmuch as "new life arises

out of death.” This time, though, the “striking” image of the phoenix, who “builds its own funeral pyre but arises anew from the ashes, handsomely rejuvenated and glorious,” is said to relate “only to natural life [*Naturleben*]” and to be “merely Asiatic, Oriental, not Occidental [*nur asiatisch, morgenländisch, nicht abendländisch*].”³⁵ Hegel even calls this image and the insight it captures “the greatest thought the Orient has grasped [*ein großer Gedanke, den die Orientalen erfaßt haben*].”³⁶ But, despite its greatness, this thought, in Hegel’s estimation, does not attain the level of self-conscious spirit, limited as it is to natural life alone.³⁷

Predictably enough, Hegel opens himself to post- or de-colonial criticism by virtue of ascribing a “merely” naturalist metaphysics to the East compared to the spirit of the West, to which the image of the phoenix would be inappropriate. Nevertheless, we should not take this mere-ness for granted, above all, taking Hegel at his word. First, how do we square the presumed mere-ness of natural change passing through the phases of death and life, decline and new emergence, with the symbolic supplement of the image, embodying it? Second, since the matter under discussion is history (and a philosophy of world history at that), how does a merely natural life (*Naturleben*) fit within this framework? Is the process of natural life moving through death to the arising of new life a lens adopted from the comprehension of nonhuman reality to the historical understanding of the “supplanting of individuals, peoples, states”? If so, then, here too, the phoenix is already a transposition (unjustified in Hegel’s view) from the realm of nature to that of human culture. Third, is change in nature insubstantial, resulting in a replication of the same shapes when life arises afresh generationally or on a much longer timescale of evolution (i.e., natural history)?

The last question is, in my view, the most consequential for Hegel’s overhasty distinction between Western and Eastern metaphysics. By way of opposing the Oriental (or, more accurately, the Orientalized) image of the phoenix, Hegel states that Western spirit “does not rise out of its ashes merely rejuvenated in the same shape [*noch steht er nur verjüngt aus der Asche seiner Gestalt auf*]” “but rather elevated and transfigured. . . . The alternations undergone do not merely return it to the same shape but rather reconstitute, purify, and elaborate it.”³⁸

The phoenix, on Hegel's reading, is a figure of preserving a static identity across change, even as radical as death: the offspring is indistinguishable from the predecessor. But, already in the classical sources, the problem of identity and difference is not solved in anything like a univocal fashion, nor is the natural mechanism of reproduction (particularly, of sexual reproduction) faithfully reflected in the image of the phoenix as identical to itself across the abyss of death. What Hegel is getting at, projecting his idea onto a construct of nature and Oriental metaphysics, is a certain change without change, a repetition of the same without transforming or re-elaborating that which is repeated. Whereas, in the 1824 lectures on the philosophy of religion, he is willing to grant that the phoenix represents a dialectical mediation (indeed, the absolute mediation, *die absolute Vermittlung*), in the 1822–1823 lectures on the philosophy of world history, he insinuates that the static identity across change, which it symbolizes, is only possible in a condition of pure immediacy, a dearth or a failure of determinate negations.

The ground for the earlier and rather one-dimensional conception of the phoenix was laid in Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy, which he read in Jena between 1799 and 1806. In these lectures he also remarks on the “well-known [*bekannt*]” image of the phoenix as “one which took its origin in the East.” The “universal thoughts” the image expresses remain too abstract for Hegel's taste, since they boil down “to the idea of rising up and passing away, and thus of making a perpetual circle [*auf di Vorstellung von Entstehen und Untergehen, von einem Kreislauf darin*].”³⁹ The reflections gathered in the myth of the phoenix indicate that “from life comes death and from death comes life; even in being, in what is positive, the negation is already present. The negative side must indeed contain it within the positive, for all change, all the process of life [*aller Proceß der Lebendigkeit*] is founded on this. But such reflections only occasionally come forth; they are not to be taken as being proper philosophic utterances [*für eigentliche Philosopheme sind sie nicht zu nehmen*].”⁴⁰

It is easy to give in to a negative gut reaction to these statements, denying that the East (represented by the image of the phoenix) has a philosophy *proper*. There is, however, nothing to be gained from such righteous anger. We should ask, instead, what is going on with Hegel's forgetting of the

image as image in his critique of abstraction, the forgetting that will find a parallel in his neglect of the symbolic supplement in relation to a purely natural life. As a mediation of abstraction, the mythic image of the phoenix in its singularity envisions a concrete universal. Lending a symbolic body to the perpetual circle of generation, decay, and regeneration, it does what the plant accomplishes within nature, becoming a synecdoche of overall self-emergence. Hegel overlooks these simple but far-reaching indications.

What happens in the intervening period of little more than one year, separating Hegel's disparate approaches to the image of the phoenix? In the summer of 1823 Hegel gave a course on the philosophy of art in Berlin. Although he had lectured on aesthetics before, at least since 1803, a mature dialectical philosophy of aesthetics was first formed in that course. It is this renewed emphasis on art that makes Hegel remember the image as image, as a mediation and a representation (a mediating representation) on the path toward thinking. According to lecture notes made by Hegel's student, Henrich Gustav Hotho, "Art in its appearance points, through itself, toward something higher—that is, toward thought [*Die Kunst in ihrem Scheinen deutet durch sich selbst auf ein Höheres, auf den Gedanken hin*]."41 "That which we call nature," Hegel continues, "the external world [*Was wir die Natur, die äußere Welt nennen*], makes it arduous for spirit to know itself." Art resolves this difficulty: through "singular examples [*in einzelnen Beispielen*]," it presents "what cannot be explained to spirit except through images."⁴² The phoenix is, in this sense, a thought-image, a singular example of nature that, through the singularity of the image, no longer appears as "the external world" but is mediated in aesthetic appearance.

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Our overview of Hegel's tacit and manifest relation to the phoenix complex would not have been complete were we to have neglected the idea of life elaborated in *The Science of Logic*. Here, life itself, life *as such*, is reborn. At least twice. In the philosophy of nature, life "as exposed to the *externality of existence* [*in die Äußerlichkeit des Bestehens hinausgeworfen ist*]" is "conditioned by inorganic nature."⁴³ There is no such conditioning of life in dialectical logic, where the presupposition is the concept (corresponding to inorganic nature

in the philosophy of nature) and where life is “the immediate idea [*die unmittelbare Idee*].”⁴⁴ Finally, “*In spirit*, however, life appears both as opposed to it [to spirit] and posited as at one with it, in a unity reborn as the pure product of spirit [*diese Einheit wieder durch ihn rein herausgeboren*].”⁴⁵ The rebirth of life itself (which, in its syllogism, invariably includes the genus process alongside the living individual and the life process) is a rebirth of rebirth.

As it has been before, the genus process is the philosophical site of our preoccupation, because, in it, the mechanics and machinations of reproduction contain the kernel of the phoenix complex. In the domain of logic, life as a genus process involves two moments: it is “on the one hand, the turning back to its concept and the repetition of the first forcible separation, the coming to be of a new individuality and the death of the immediate first [*das Werden einer neuen und der Tod der ersten unmittelbaren Individualität*]; but, on the other hand, the *withdrawing into itself of the concept* of life is the becoming of the concept that relates itself to itself, of the concept that exists for itself, universal and free, the transition into *cognition* [*das Erkennen*].”⁴⁶ The first movement is that of life itself turning back to its concept, in which and as which it is renewed, phoenix-like, letting one life die away and another to come into being. The concept acts as a flame, out of which the phoenix is reborn, maintaining the focus on the old and the young instantiations of life. The second movement is viewed from the middle of the concept/flame as its self-relation, which is no longer that of life (not even of life conceived on the basis of dialectical logic) but of cognition, of thought thinking itself in and through the logic of the genus process. This is a reworked version of the “absolute mediation,” mentioned in lectures of the philosophy of religion.

The budding of cognition from a self-interiorization of the concept of life at the tail end of the genus process reverberates with what Hegel describes, in the addition to the concluding paragraph in *Philosophy of Nature*, as the issuing forth of spirit from nature under the sign of the phoenix. While natural life is reborn as the life of spirit, the logical concept of life is resurrected in the concept of the concept aware of itself. In each case, the transition is from externality to interiority and self-reflection: of spirit and of the concept. Whatever Hegel has to say about the figure, if not the conceptual logic of the

phoenix, it is operative within the content, the form, and the transformation of life, which it both replicates and doesn't replicate, transposes onto another plane and thoroughly revolutionizes.

A copy and not a copy: this is the speculative formula of the phoenix complex at the level of the genus in Hegel's *Science of Logic*. The particularization of identity happens here as "the duplication of the individual [*die Verdopplung des Individuums*]"—the presupposing of an objectivity which is identical with it, and a relating of the living being to itself as to another living being."⁴⁷ Conceived as duplication (*Verdopplung*), the genus process excludes sexual difference and rehashes the myth of the phoenix born of itself, notably born from its own death. The objectivity of the individual that serves as a self-relational mirror is "an externality in which the individual has certainty of itself not as *being sublated*, but as *subsisting* [*nicht als aufgehobener, sondern als bestehender*]."⁴⁸ Such subsistence without sublation echoes Hegel's critique of the "Asiatic" phoenix, which is merely rejuvenated but does not undergo any substantial changes. Its certainty is the certainty of life's immediate continuation, where it is punctuated and disrupted by death. In *The Science of Logic*, however, this development represents "the truth of life [*die Wahrheit des Lebens*], in so far as life is still shut up within itself."⁴⁹

When the sexual relation does appear in the syllogism of life, it heralds a transition from the generative, or the self-regenerating, concept of life to the reproductive actuality of life's idea: the individualities locked in this relation "satisfy the tension of their longing and dissolve themselves into the universality of their genus. . . . To this extent, it is the individuality of life itself, no longer *generated* out of its concept but out of the *actual* idea [*nicht mehr aus seinem Begriffe, sondern aus der wirklichen Idee erzeugt*]."⁵⁰ In the sphere of reproduction, too, the phoenix complex does not achieve the actuality of energy, does not realize energy *as* actuality, but keeps both the reproducing and the reproduced beings beholden to the virtual reality of the concept. In its unrest, in its noncoincidence with itself, the concept (of the individual, of life, or what have you) spawns a great deal—all the ephemeral exemplars of itself that replace one another without exhausting the inner essence they exemplify. With the individuality of life generated from "the *actual* idea," another energy, contained *in nuce* in the sexual relation, becomes apparent.

The concrete universality of the genus, reflected in the actual idea, is compatible with the singularity of the reproduced life, which is a bearer of essence externalized, of energy converted into actuality.

Nevertheless, in the rebirth of life itself reliant on the sexual relation, the phoenix complex remains at work. “In copulation [*Begattung*], the immediacy of living individuality perishes; the death of this life is the coming to be of spirit [*der Tod dieses Lebens ist das Hervorgehen des Geistes*]. The idea, *implicit* as genus, becomes *explicit* in that it has sublated its particularity that constituted the living species. . . . This is the *idea of cognition*.”⁵¹ That the death of immediate life is the coming to be of spirit means two things: (1) this death is a transition to the life of spirit, (2) this death is the becoming of spirit as the other of life. Earlier in the text, Hegel anticipated this irresolvable contradiction inherent to spirit, which is both opposed to life and posited as one with it. Teasing the phoenix motif out of Hegel’s formulation, we might say not only that death gives way to a new life (another life of the same kind *or* another kind of life) but also that death is endowed with a generativity of its own, when it is frozen, perhaps indefinitely, in a transition between lives, whether of the same kind or of different kinds. This depends, in turn, on the sort of energy that is deployed: the energy of actuality, nourishing a singular universality, or the energy of potentiality, promoting a lethal self-reproduction of the concept.

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