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The Unfolding Catastrophe. What Can Hegel Teach Us Today?

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Theme: History

*This year marks 250 years since the philosopher **G. W. F. Hegel** was born in 1770 in Stuttgart, Germany. In light of this anniversary I reassess what Hegel's philosophy of nature can contribute to our contemporary understanding – what it has to say to us as we face a time of unprecedented environmental degradation.*

We are in the midst of a mass extinction; losing species – plants and animals – somewhere between 100 and 1,000 times the naturally occurring background rate of extinction. Clearly, estimates vary widely – but there is a general consensus that anthropogenic climate change "at least ranks alongside other recognized threats to global biodiversity," and is in all likelihood the "greatest threat in many if not most regions."

What can Hegel's philosophy teach us given this unfolding catastrophe? For most philosophers and scholars (not to mention scientists), if there is any area of Hegel's thought that is antiquated and irrelevant it is his Naturphilosophie. Indeed, even in Hegel's own day this part of his philosophy was ridiculed if not ignored, mainly because of his reliance upon a priori (as opposed to empirical) reasoning in constructing an account of the natural world. Consequently, it receives relatively little scholarly attention compared to his other monumental contributions to modern thought. This is unfortunate; for Hegel's approach to nature is anything but a mere curiosity in the museum of ideas, even if parts of it seem dated or worse. Rather, what he has to say is centrally relevant to environmental concerns today.

The root causes of anthropogenic climate change – which has led to the endangering of countless species across the globe – cannot be adequately grasped in isolation from the technological application of modern science. While Swedish activist Greta Thunberg was certainly justified in calling upon American legislators to "unite behind the science," neither can we overlook the culpability of science in bringing about the environmental crisis.

Alison Stone's Petrified Intelligence (2004) offers one of the few sustained and sympathetic studies of Hegel's philosophy of nature. She points out that the problem with the scientific approach is that it rests on inadequate metaphysical assumptions: "Empirical scientists work from a metaphysical assumption according to which natural forms cannot in any sense be considered agents whose behavior has meaning, but rather are bare things whose behavior makes up a mass of intrinsically meaningless events."

In the Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature, Hegel writes that "The wealth of natural forms, in all their infinitely manifold configuration, is impoverished by the all-pervading power of thought, their vernal life and glowing colours die and fade away."

This draining of nature of its inherent richness, its intrinsic qualities occurs paradigmatically

in René Descartes' famous analysis of the piece of wax in his Mediations on First Philosophy. Descartes effectively dissolves the "sensuously resplendent piece of wax into properties (extension and malleability) graspable by the mind's eye alone." Qualitative distinctions are replaced by quantitative ones; so that what we witness is indeed nothing less than the dematerialization of nature and its reduction to a mechanical system which can be fully articulated through the immaterial forms of theoretical mathematics.

Scientific and classical enlightenment views of nature represent it as lacking the qualities – including value qualities – which we generally understand to be present within it. Sensibility embodies a basic understanding of nature as intrinsically valuable, as having its own right and its own voice. The metaphysics of empirical science, by contrast, assumes that the behavior of natural forms is inherently meaningless and exhaustively explained by external causal factors.

Hegel wants to reenchant nature, but not by retrieving an outdated and unacceptable medievalism – rather, the approach that he favors is distinctly modern; and involves reasserting nature's interiority or inwardness: "Matter interiorizes itself to become life," as Hegel puts it. In terms of ethics Hegel's conception of nature is preferable to the rival scientific metaphysics because he recognizes and insists upon the intrinsic value of every natural form. Nature's forms and entities are intrinsically good – which is to say, they are good regardless of any human interests in or feelings regarding them. Indeed, Hegel postulates goodness everywhere in nature – not only in sounds and colors, but in chemical and electrical processes, elemental qualities, and even the passage of time and the immensity of space.

While individual natural forms have intrinsic value, they do so to varying degrees: nature is structured hierarchically, according to Hegel – and the organic is privileged over the non-organic. Hegel is also prepared to say that this hierarchy culminates in the appearance of human beings; so that one criticism of Hegel that environmental thinkers are likely to make is that he adopts a narrowly anthropocentric viewpoint. What this charge fails to appreciate however is that while humanity may represent the highest realization of Spirit (Geist), spirit is already there implicitly in the animal organism.

Animal life is, for Hegel, the truth of the organic sphere: the plant is a subordinate organism whose destiny is to sacrifice itself to the higher organisms and be consumed by them. The animal organism is the microcosm which has achieved an existence for itself, and in which the whole of inorganic nature is 'recapitulated and idealized.' What distinguishes the animal organism is its subjectivity – the animal is ensouled, "having a feeling of itself, whereby it acquires enjoyment of itself as an individual." The plant lacks precisely this feeling of itself, this soulfulness.

To consider this more concretely, look at what Hegel has to say about voice, which he describes as "a high privilege of the animal which can appear wonderful… The animal makes manifest that it is inwardly for-itself, and this manifestation is voice." Hegel draws special attention, in fact, to birdsong – for "the voice of the bird when it launches forth in song is of a higher kind; and this must be reckoned as a special manifestation in birds over and above that of voice generally in animals… birds utter their self-feeling in their own particular element… Voice is the spiritualized mechanism which thus utters itself."

It is noteworthy that what Hegel has to say about birdsong has in fact been reiterated by

more recent ornitho-musicology. Charles Hartshorne – one of the twentieth century's great philosopher-theologians – was also an expert in birdsong. In his book, Born to Sing: An Interpretation and World Survey of Birdsong, he observes that the song "conveys no single crude emotion but something like what life is to that bird at that season." In fact, birdsong expresses feeling, "according to principles partly common to the higher animals... That a bird sings because it is happy is not entirely foolish."

As our knowledge of living Nature grows, we will likely find that those aspects of ourselves which we take to be most distinctly human – such as aesthetic appreciation – may be regarded as an extension and refinement of abilities already present among nonhuman animals. Hegel's philosophy of nature may provide the basis for a more environmentally sustainable way of life, in part by helping us to see how it is our intellectual duty to view living things "within the widest of intellectual and spiritual horizons," as the great Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann put it.

To treat the natural world – and especially living beings – as a mere aggregate of things to be ruthlessly exploited according to our narrow interests cannot but entirely miss the deeper, genuine and philosophical comprehension which views Nature as "in itself, a living Whole." This implies that we must view and treat the animal organism as an irreducible way of being in the world, which cannot be understood solely through the physio-chemical or molecular analysis of life.

The loss of biodiversity is not only an environmental crisis, but an ontological crisis as well – for with the extinction of a species the very interiority of Nature has been diminished, as the world is no longer experienced in the way specific to the life form in question. To avoid this catastrophe we must be prepared to draw on all the resources at our disposal, and that may well include the philosophy of nature.

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