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Nature as a *You*: Novalis' Philosophical Thought and the Modern Ecological Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to introduce the German Romantic poet Novalis into the discussion of the modern ecological crisis. In particular we examine Novalis' unique philosophy of nature as a *You* in which he deals with both of the two aspects of the relationship between humans and nature: their original identity as well as the distinction between them. We analyse the way in which Novalis understood the relationship between nature and humankind dynamically, and show the significance of his concept of poetry for this question. This concept is analysed and described in respect to its principal features: creativity and love. The former is regarded by Novalis as a general capacity of humans as well as an expression of nature itself. Together with love it forms the base for a possible harmonious relationship between humans and nature. We furthermore interpret Novalis' economic thought against the general background of his philosophy of nature and his understanding of humankind. Novalis recognises the crucial role economic action plays in the relationship between nature and humankind and he offers some important insights into this issue. Finally, we discuss the relevance of Novalis' concept of nature as a *You* for environmental philosophy. By comparison with other concepts of nature in the modern environmental debate, we show how Novalis' thought offers a new perspective on the human–nature relationship and thus fruitful stimulation for today's environmental philosophy.

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Novalis, Romanticism, philosophy of nature, environmental philosophy, ecological crisis, ecological economics

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we introduce the German Romantic poet Novalis (1772–1801) and examine his significance for the discussion of the modern ecological crisis. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) was one of the most important thinkers of the Romantic age. He played a major role in developing the philosophical and poetical base of the German Romantic movement, which had its beginnings around 1795. Novalis was highly educated in mathematics, physics, geology, philosophy and economic issues. He dealt especially with German Idealism and his philosophical thought was much influenced by the analysis of the ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814).

Romanticism was a broad movement encompassing a wide range of cultural fields as diverse as literature, philosophy, music and art. Between 1790 and 1860 it gradually spread across most European countries eventually reaching America as well. One aspect many Romantics were concerned with was the general question of the relationship between humans and nature. In this regard they confronted a problem which has been at the core of the modern discussion of environmental problems since the second half of the twentieth century. Romantic thought on nature and humans is therefore of particular interest for today's environmental debate[1].

The relevance of Romanticism for modern environmental thought has been recognised before. This holds especially for the romantic poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) in England and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)[2] in America. Novalis, however, has hardly been recognised in this context up to now. Although he has a great deal in common with these thinkers, he differs in his specifically philosophical approach.

The ideas of Novalis were first introduced to the English-speaking world by Thomas Carlyle's famous article on Novalis written in 1829. Carlyle was greatly impressed by Novalis, whom he characterised as

> […] a man of the most indisputable talent, poetical and philosophical: whose opinions, extraordinary, nay, altogether wild and baseless as they often appear, are not without a strict coherence in his own mind, and will lead any other mind, that examines them faithfully, into endless considerations; opening the strangest inquiries, new truths, or new possibilities of truth, a whole unexpected world of thought, where, whether for belief or denial, the deepest questions await us. (Carlyle [1829] 1899: 5)

In the following we begin by offering a coherent presentation of Novalis' complex thought on nature, humankind and economy, which can be found throughout his entire, mostly fragmentary work. Against the background of Fichte's crucial distinction between self and nonself we describe Novalis' reflections on the relationship of humankind and nature and his philosophy of nature as a *You* (sections 2 to 4). We further examine the meaning of Novalis' concept of *poetry* which is of great importance in this context (sections 5 and 6). Against this philosophical background we then also take into account Novalis' thoughts on the economy, which plays a crucial role in the practical relationship between humankind and nature (section 7). Finally, in section 8 we discuss the fruitfulness of the concept of nature as a *You* for modern environmental philosophy. We clarify the distinction between nature as a nonself (Fichte) and nature as a You (Novalis). In this context we address the question of the unity and parity of humankind and nature. Within this discussion we wish to show in which way Novalis' approach towards nature differs from other approaches and offers a new perspective on the human–nature relationship.

We hold that the thought of Novalis is of considerable relevance for the understanding and discussion of modern environmental problems. Of course, like any philosopher, Novalis has to be understood within the horizon of the philosophical and scientific discourse of his times. At the same time, however, his texts contain important insights independent of their historical context and genesis. Significant texts, such as those of Novalis, offer us stimulation in regard to questions and problems we bring to them. They may not directly provide concrete answers or solutions, but they enable us to see the world in a new and different way.[4] This can make us receptive to new approaches to current problems. In this sense we want to interpret the work of Novalis in a way which respects the fact that it belongs in a late eighteenth century context, while at the same time emphasising its relevance for the modern environmental discourse.

2. FICHTE'S PHILOSOPHY AS A PARADIGM OF MODERN ANTHROPOCENTRISM: NATURE AS NONSELF

One essential origin of Novalis' philosophy of nature was his critical reflection on the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.[5] Fichte's principal work *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) is an attempt to simultaneously lay the foundations of all theoretical science as well as every practical access of humankind to nature. His philosophy may be perceived as a key to understanding the fundamental attitudes of modern humankind. Fichte's basic distinction is the distinction between the *self* (Ich) and the *nonself* (Nicht-Ich). The essence of the self is action. Action is guided by will and reason. The object of all action is the nonself. The nonself is devoid of will and reason. It is the perpetual effort of the

self to transform the nonself as far as possible. Independent of the self, the nonself has no identity. Whatever the nonself may be, it is nothing but the result of the action of the self. Fichte conceives it as the task of the self to acquire the nonself to an ever greater extent through theoretical determination and practical action. That the self should dominate the nonself is therefore a direct consequence of Fichte's philosophical system. This view has far-reaching theoretical and practical implications for the relationship between humans and nature.

In theory (according to Fichte) nature is nothing but the absence of the self, it is the nonself. Nature can only be perceived as the passive object of the human self. Within nature there is no possibility of an awareness of an own self. This holds for inanimate nature as well as for plants and animals. This view of nature is directly in the line of thinkers such as Descartes[6] and Newton. In practice, nature has to be acquired and used by humans for the purposes of humanity without any restriction. This attitude towards nature had already been postulated by Francis Bacon[7]. Thus Fichte states:

> The attempt to master the forces of nature is based in the essence of humanity. [...] The relationship between mankind and nature be it living or non-living can be characterised as follows: Humankind aims to modify nature according to its purposes … (Fichte [1795] 1966: 99; B/M)

Fichte's view brings to light the philosophical roots of the anthropocentric positions expressed in the procedures of modern western science, technology and the economy.

3. NOVALIS' CRITIQUE OF FICHTE'S UNDERSTANDING OF NATURE

Although in many respects the philosophy and poetry of German Romantics such as Schelling (1775–1854), Hölderlin (1770–1842) and Novalis drew important ideas from Fichte's approach, they unanimously criticised his understanding of nature. For example, Schelling, having Fichte's philosophy in mind, stated: 'All modern philosophy proceeds in a way as if nature wouldn't exist' (Schelling [1809] 1907: vol.3, p.452; B/M). Schelling's criticism is that Fichte's philosophy, like most conceptions since Descartes, is unable to regard nature as an entity in its own right. It is this same conception that Novalis also recognised and criticised some years earlier. Novalis recognised that life within nature cannot be adequately understood as long as nature is treated as a nonself. Above and beyond this, the life of nature itself may be endangered by the theoretical and practical procedures of modern humankind. This is expressed in particular in Novalis' criticism of modern science: 'Under the hands of [...the natural scientists] nature died. There remained nothing but dead twitching parts' (Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, [I, 84]; B/M).

In a different metaphor, Novalis characterises nature insofar as it is an object of science as: 'Nature is a petrified enchanted city' (Novalis, *Fragments*, [II, 761]; B/M). Thus it is not possible to make any adequate assertions about nature. The object of such assertions is not nature itself but nature in its petrified and dead state. Novalis says: 'He who speaks of nature 'existing', necessarily takes us too far, and while striving for truth in speeches and dialogues about nature we go further and further away from naturalness' (Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, [I, 84]; B/M).

The problem with all speech and dialogue about nature is that it is *about* nature. Nature itself has no speech and takes no part in dialogues of this kind. As soon as we speak about nature, it no longer exists as *nature* but only as an object of human consciousness. But if this is true, the question arises: How must nature be conceived in order for it to be no longer merely an object of human action and theoretical reflection, i.e. a nonself? And who would be able to meet nature beyond its petrifaction, i.e. to listen to nature's own speech? Which abilities and attitudes would this require?

4. NOVALIS' PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE: NATURE AS A *YOU*

To gain new insight into the essence of nature we have to recognise that humans and nature spring from the same source. We are connected with nature in a way that cannot completely be recognised by human reflection. Nature is the precondition of human existence and of all human thought and action. Essentially we are nature, although this does not mean that there is no distinction between humankind and nature. In Novalis we find concepts that pick up the distinction between humankind and nature, as well as their original identity. Philosophical tradition describes the distinction between humankind and nature in the separated categories of *self* (humankind) and *other* (nature). Novalis takes up these categories, but changes their meaning in a dynamic procedure. Humankind has to be seen as self *and* as other. Nature has to be seen as other *and* as self. This means in particular that the notion of spirit is not reserved only for humans but holds also for nature. Nature, as well as humankind, has spiritual dimensions. This view is required to make an encounter possible between humankind and nature in which both partners are equal. Thus Novalis rejects Fichte's understanding of nature as a nonself. In contrast Novalis postulates, 'Instead of nonself – You' (Novalis, *Fragments*, [III, 429f.]).

As in any true dialogue, humankind and nature learn from each other, and what they learn is insight into the self of the other as well as into their own self. Thus Novalis says: 'Nature would not be nature if it had no spirit, it would not be the unique counterpart to mankind, not the indispensable answer to this mysterious question, or the question to this never-ending answer' (Novalis 1949: 85). Nature and humankind need each other. For humankind nature is a mirror,

in which the self determines its own position and recognises and understands itself. On the other hand, Novalis holds that nature experiences its essence through humankind. The encounter of humankind and nature is thus a dialogue between *I* and *You*:

> Is it not true that all nature, as well as face and gesture, colour and pulse, expresses the emotion of each one of the wonderful higher beings we call men? Does the cliff not become a unique [You], whenever I speak to it? And what am I but the stream, when I look sadly down into its waters and lose my thoughts in its flow? (Novalis 1949: 89)[8]

These questions are related to experiences of nature which, according to Novalis, can be had by all humans. Nature can on the one hand be seen as a counterpart of humans (as in the example of the cliff). As a 'unique You' it is a true partner in a dialogue, familiar to us and at the same time mysterious. On the other hand, looking sadly down into the waters of the stream, we may experience that we and nature are one. For Novalis, those humans which are especially capable of having such experiences are *the poets*. The existence of the poet is an expression of the dialogical structure of the encounter of human and nature and the original identity of both.

Why does Novalis attribute to the poets a special ability to understand nature and to communicate with her? The answer to this question leads us to the core of Novalis' philosophy of nature and anthropology. First we will need to elucidate which characteristics Novalis ascribes to the poet. This will lead us in section 6 to a detailed analysis of what is central to Novalis' thought: his concept of 'poetry'.

5. NOVALIS' VIEW OF THE POET AS AN IDEAL OF A HUMAN UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE OF NATURE

Whereas there is a tendency in humanity to misunderstand its particular position in relation to nature by separating itself from nature, Novalis holds that the poet overcomes this separation. In the eyes of Novalis, one of the things which characterises the poet is his love towards nature: 'He who would know the mind of nature has to share the company of poets. There nature is open and pours out her wondrous heart. He who does not love nature truly, but is only interested in one part or the other, can only visit her sick-bed or her charnel-house' (Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, [I, 85]; B/M).

The poet, as Novalis defines him, has a deep relationship with nature. His love leads him to a special attentiveness towards nature: 'It seems to him [...] that a man cannot be too much alone with nature, cannot speak of her tenderly enough, cannot be attentive and undisturbed enough in his contemplation of her' (Novalis 1949: 109). For Novalis, the true poet is not only or even chiefly the

author of literature. He is principally characterised by his capacity to discover nature, the seemingly other, as a *You* which is the counterpart of the self. This recognition of nature as a *You* in its full sense means love. The mystery of love is in a certain sense that it does not attempt to determine the other but accepts him/her in his/her own development. Whereas science is the fixation of nature, the poet is able to follow the undetermined and quasi liquid and fugitive motions of nature:

> Poets have lightheartedly pursued the liquid and fugitive, while scientists have cut into the inner structure and sought after the relations between its members. [...] When we read and hear true poems, we feel the movement of nature's inner reason and, like its celestial embodiment, we dwell in it and hover over it at once. (Novalis 1949: 25)

For Novalis, the poet is furthermore characterised by a particular creativity. In this creativity he shows a connectedness between himself and nature. For in the experience of the poet, nature is in itself essentially creative:

> For [the poets] nature has all the variety of an infinite soul, and more than the cleverest, most alive of men, it astounds us with ingenious turns and fancies, with correspondences and deviations with grandiose ideas and trifling whimsies. So inexhaustible is nature's fantasy, that no one will seek its company in vain. (Novalis 1949: 85f.)

For Novalis, the poet who displays these characteristics represents an ideal human, achieving a perfect relationship between humans and nature. This is founded in the precepts of Novalis' special concept of poetry.

6. NOVALIS' CONCEPT OF *POETRY*: CREATIVITY WITH LOVE AS THE UNIFYING FOUNDATION FOR HUMANS AND NATURE

The concept of *poetry* (Poesie) is central to early German Romanticism, transcending its definition as a category of literature. It was originally developed by Novalis together with other Romantic poets, especially Friedrich Schlegel. The concept of 'poetry' is a key one in Novalis' philosophy of humans and nature. It is, however, open to misunderstanding, because it is at odds with our common language, as indeed it was in the time of Novalis. For Novalis, 'poetry' is not unique to poets. Novalis sees 'poetry' rather as a general capability of humans:

> It is too bad […] that [poetry] has a special name and that poets make up a special guild. It is not anything special at all. It is the peculiar mode of activity of the human mind. Does not everybody use his mind and his imagination all the time? (Novalis 1964: 116)

Novalis uses the term 'poetry' in a rather unusual sense. Generally, 'poetry' is linked with the production of literature. For Novalis, however, 'poetry' is not restricted to particular people, that is the authors of poems, novels etc., but is rather an essential trait of humanity in general. It is often assumed that humanity is chiefly characterised by the trait of rationality and its capability for rational discourse. For Novalis, however, it is not rationality but 'poetry', which 'is the peculiar mode of activity of the human mind'.

For a better understanding of the Romantic idea of poetry, we want to quickly sketch some of its roots in the history of ideas. It can be traced back to antiquity. The Greek word *poiesis* means nearly the same as our word 'production'. *Poiesis* concerns the process of bringing non-being into being. Hence, Plato gives the following definition of *poiesis*: 'Every cause for that which springs from non-being into being is *poiesis*' (Plato, Symposion 205b; B/M). Furthermore, there is a link between the Romantic idea of poetry and the creation of the world as it is described in the Bible. According to Christian tradition, creation is an expression of God's creative power as well as an expression of his love. In this tradition, humankind as the image of God shares with its creator the ability to be creative and is called to a love not only towards human beings but furthermore towards all creatures (see e.g. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 8).

Such general ideas may have led Novalis and other early German Romantics to their concept of poetry as a universal principle of humanity[9]. In their understanding, poetry is the integration of two traits: (i) creativity or inventiveness and (ii) love. Thus poetry represents a synthesis of two essential dimensions of what makes humanity human. What this means we will explain in the following.

(i) For Novalis it is self-evident that creativity is an original internal stimulus for all human action and thinking. Creativity can be observed within a wide range of different human activities: art, science, craft, technology and economic activity. In the eyes of Novalis, however, not only humankind, but also nature is in itself highly creative, bringing forth an endless variety of new life-forms. As a result, creativity can be found in both humans and non-human nature, whereas rationality, then as today, is generally ascribed only to humans.[10] Although human creativity has the same roots as nature's creativity, human creativity may become destructive toward nature. Destructiveness towards nature comes from disrespect. If nature is regarded as nonself, there is no point of reference for an attitude of respect and sympathy. If there is only nonself, then who is able to receive our sympathy? There is no reason for humans not to do whatever they wish with nature. Thinking along the lines of Fichte, it is even necessary for humans to shape nature completely according to their will (see section 2). Novalis was well aware of the potential for destructiveness in the philosophy of Fichte. Therefore he maintains that human creativity is truly human only when it takes the form of poetry: Only when combined with respect and sympathy

towards nature, does human creativity deserve the name of poetry.[11] This leads us directly to the second essential trait of Novalis' concept of poetry: love.

(ii) For Novalis, an essential potentiality of humanity is its ability to choose to encounter the other as an other self, or, as Novalis puts it, as a *You*. In its perfection, this encounter is love. Love, in the sense of Novalis, need not be restricted to one beloved person, or even to humans, but can apply to nature as a whole. Respect and sympathy towards nature in their perfect form is love. According to Novalis, only when combined with love can human creativity be regarded as poetry. Creativity without love, without regard for the other as an other self, may be destructive. Combined with love, however, creativity can contribute to an encompassing harmony between all humans, as well as between humans and nature. On the one hand, humans should communicate their creativity to one another and to nature, on the other hand they should always be receptive to nature's creativity. This is the deeper meaning of Novalis´ idea of the dialogue between humans and nature as between *I* and *You*.[12] In their dialogue with nature, humans experience all their activities as being derived from nature and as manifestations of nature's creativity. Therefore, human poetry, although different from nature's creativity, can in a certain sense be seen as an expression of nature itself, as the perfection of the creative power observed in nature. It is perfected by the human ability to be aware of the other self, to be able to love. Thus, for Novalis, poetry is the unifying link between humankind and nature.[13]

Our argument so far has served to demonstrate why the concept of poetry is of such importance in the thought of Novalis. Through this concept, Novalis expresses his perception of humans' place within the universe. 'To be human' in its proper sense does not mean to dominate nature, but to be in poetical communication with nature, something which would lead to a universal harmony:

> Poetry elevates each single thing through a particular combination with the rest of the whole [….P]oetry is as it were the key to philosophy, its purpose and meaning; for poetry shapes the beautiful society – the world family – the beautiful household of the universe. (Novalis 1997: 54; [II, 533])

The ideal poetry seeks to achieve the 'beautiful household of the universe'. In this household humankind has a special task. Humans in the attitude of poetry are the 'housekeepers', who have to take care that all things are in their proper places and can exist in harmony with 'the rest of the whole'. The term 'household' is used by Novalis in reference to the Greek term '*oikonomia*' (economy). Economy originally meant 'the art of good housekeeping'. Housekeeping may be related to a single household, as well as to an entire society, and Novalis even extends this concept to the whole universe.

This ideal, however, is not the real state of the world, and Novalis was well aware of this. Humankind in his times kept their household, their economy,

without any respect for the household of the universe. There existed a tension between the household of the universe and the economy which Novalis experienced. As a keen observer of his times, knowledgeable in contemporary ideas of political economy, Novalis carefully explored the causes of the discrepancy between the ideal and the existing state. In the following we deal with his considerations about the economy.[14]

7. POETICAL ECONOMY VERSUS THE EXISTING MODERN ECONOMY

One crucial point for the relationship of humans and nature is how human economic action and attitudes take into account or affect nature. Novalis was well aware of the importance of this practical question. In Novalis' work, one can distinguish between two different views of the economy. On the one hand there is the idea of an ideal economy, which is an expression of human poetry and thus contributes to 'the beautiful household of the universe'. This idea we have labelled the ideal of a *poetical economy*. On the other hand, Novalis displays a critical view of the existing economy of his time and of certain emerging liberal concepts. His economic criticism points out certain aspects which prevent the economy of his time from being poetic, and thus from being in harmony with nature.

Novalis' ideal of a poetical economy can be found, for example, in the following fragment:

> The spirit of commerce is the spirit of the world. It is the splendid spirit itself. It sets everything in motion and combines everything. It wakens countries and cities – nations and works of art. It is the spirit of culture – the perfecting of the human race. The historical spirit of commerce – which slavishly follows given needs – the circumstances of time and place – is only the bastard of the true, creative spirit of commerce. (Novalis 1997: 136; [III, 464])

Here, Novalis emphasises the creative and the communicative aspects of the economy. Whenever goods are invented and produced, economy becomes an expression of human creativity. And as far as economic action requires bargaining and trade, it is a means and a cause of communication, a way to approach others and to exchange with them. Thus Novalis identifies aspects of economic action which indicate how an economy could become an expression of poetry. These aspects suggest an ideal of a poetical economy. Such a poetical economy would make a harmony between economy and nature possible. The whole economic process would become a manifestation of the creativity of nature itself. That would, however, require the economic relationship between humans as well as the one between humankind and nature being governed by a spirit of love.

On the other hand Novalis clearly recognises that the economy of his time had aspects which were completely incompatible with a poetical economy. Thus, the economy as it is hinders the perfection of humankind and society, and prevents humankind from finding a true relationship to nature. Novalis essentially identifies three aspects of economic action which are incompatible with a poetical economy and thus a harmony between economy and nature. These aspects are greed, the concept of private property and the overvaluation of self-interest.

Novalis criticises *greed* in various places in his work. One tale in his *Henry Von Ofterdingen* shows how the harmonic order of the world is destroyed by greed. In this manner greed becomes the opponent of poetry, the creator of harmony in the world. If one is ruled by greed, one stands outside all harmony and comes into conflict with love and poetry.[15]

Furthermore, in the view of Novalis, the concept of *private property* leads to a disregard of nature and finally to a destruction of the possessor himself:

> Nature desires not to be the exclusive possession of a single individual. As property, nature changes into an evil poison which drives away tranquillity and makes those who possess wealth lust ruinously after power over all things, entailing a train of endless cares and wild passions. Thus, nature secretly undermines the ground of the possessor, causing it soon to cave in and bury him, so that she may pass from hand to hand and thus gradually satisfy her proclivity to belong to everyone. (Novalis 1964: 70)

Novalis' critical view of private property is derived consequently from his philosophical and poetical thought: Nature is understood as a *You*. A You cannot be possessed as property. Seen and treated as property, Nature indeed becomes a nonself and is thus violated.

Nature as a *You* deserves particular respect. The perfect form of this respect is love. For Novalis the ideal society, as well as the perfect harmony between humankind and nature, is based on the idea of love. Obviously, the opposite of love is selfishness. Thus, selfishness is incompatible with a poetical economy. In Novalis' time, selfishness was to an ever-increasing extent being regarded as the essence of all economic action. Indeed, self-interest has become one of the foundations of the modern western economy as well as modern economic thought.[16] This suggests a relevance of Novalis' economic critique for today's discussion of the relationship between economy and nature.[17]

The modern economy, although it seems to be highly creative in regard to inventions and production, cannot be called poetic in the sense Novalis means. Its creativity has no orientation and no attention towards nature, it is not combined with love toward nature. It treats nature not as a *You*, but as a nonself. Therefore, seen with the eyes of Novalis, this form of creativity does not lead to an integration or perfection of humankind and nature, but to a disregard and

oppression of both. It is not love of nature and orientation towards nature that are fundamental to modern economic production, but rather self-love and orientation toward the maximisation of gain[18]. Therefore humankind is lost in an endless and meaningless productivity which simultaneously denotes a disregard and a degeneration of nature and humanity.[19] Taking Novalis seriously, we may wonder whether the foundations of modern economics themselves are part of the problem of the modern ecological crisis.[20]

8. THE CONCEPT OF NATURE AS A *YOU* AND ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

The problem of the modern separation of humans and nature has been clearly recognised by philosophy and in the modern environmental debate, and many efforts have been made to overcome this separation and to consider the possibility of a unity between humans and nature. Most such attempts, however, achieve conceptual unity at the cost of any recognition of the difference between nature and humanity and of their independent existence and individual essence.

The unity between humans and nature has been conceptualised in two ways: (i) Nature has been elevated to a spiritual essence which transcends all human limits. Deep ecology, for example, sees nature as a super human being, endowed with religious traits. It is the task of humans to become one with the great self of nature. The experience of the unity of nature extinguishes all differences. (ii) Humans have been incorporated into the modern scientific view of nature. In modern Neo-Darwinism, for example, humans and non-human nature have in common the fact that they are both the chance results of biological evolution. From a genetic point of view, humans, non-human animals and plants are very similar and are all characterised by the condition that they maximise their genetic fitness. Although humans may be thought of as being far fitter than other animals, there is no real qualitative difference made between humans and nature.

At the other extreme, there have been several attempts made in modern environmental philosophy to emphasise the difference between nature and humans, and to develop a point of view which respects the independent existence of nature. Here the tendency is to conceptualise nature outside the realm of human activity. Along these lines nature is to be regarded as a reality with its own quality, beyond and above its meaning for humans. As a consequence, the stress is laid on the different quality or the otherness of nature.[21] Some of these attempts even go so far as to claim that 'nature is a stranger' (Reed 1989: 56).[22]

In the relationship between humans and nature both approaches have their own validity: Humans and nature are one, and are different as well. Both approaches represent two sides of the same coin. Isolating either one leads to shortcomings. Novalis' philosophy of nature as a *You* is a concept which integrates both approaches: the unity as well as the difference of humans and

nature. The difference is conceived as the distinction between the self and the other as a *You*. The *You* is an independent self in its own right. At the same time, the *You* as self is not strange to us. Our fundamental unity with it can be experienced within what Novalis calls dialogue. What makes this concept fruitful for environmental philosophy? In human relationships the notion of a *You* has obvious implications. Meeting each other truly as *You* implies that humans don't use one another as mere instruments. Of course, humans are dependent on each other, something we see clearly in the field of economics. The notion of *You*, however, transcends this kind of dependency. *You* implies sameness and familiarity as well as a certain mystery. To recognise the other as a *You* means both: Recognising my counterpart's similarities to myself as well as acknowledging our differences. Only if both aspects are accepted may a deep relationship be developed. The true dialogue between *I* and *You* is thus a series of discoveries which encompass familiarity and sympathy as well as respect and distance.

Of course, the experience of a *You* within human relationships cannot completely be transferred to nature. Nature lacks human language, and thus the interplay of question and answer common to human dialogue is not possible in the communication between humans and nature. This is perhaps one reason for the circumstance that we treat nature without respect in modern societies. Nevertheless, encounters between humans and nature beyond the instrumental use of nature are possible and even necessary. The basis for such encounters is a certain kind of familiarity: In nature's creativity we recognise our own creative potential. Novalis would even say that nature recognises our creativity as the perfection of her own creativity. This requires, however, a true dialogue between humans and nature. Perhaps the aspect of Novalis' philosophy which causes the greatest difficulties is understanding his concept of such a dialogue. Such a dialogue requires certain attitudes and insights. There is an asymmetry between the human *I* and nature as a *You*. Humans have to extend an attitude of trust toward nature. They have to believe that nature, which at first glance may appear as a stranger, conceals something familiar in her. Thus they become receptive for that which in the language of Novalis may be called the 'silent speech of natural things'.

What does this mean for our practical relationships with nature? Following Novalis' thought, the task which falls to humanity may be formulated as follows: Developing a form of relationship which cultivates nature while at the same time respecting her independent existence. Space has to be left within which nature can develop in her own way. Solving this task, however, has thus far seemed to be extremely difficult if not impossible. Novalis himself did not try to create practical solutions. A very important example, however, has been given by Henry David Thoreau. He indeed encounters nature as an individual and mysterious other *You* (see e.g. *Walden* or 'Walking'). By intensive practical attentiveness to every individual natural self, he sometimes reached a moment

in which he discovered the secret of the other's existence. Thoreau, like Novalis, clearly recognises the distinction between humans and nature, and meets her like an other *You* with respect and attentiveness. He furthermore experienced his unity with nature in moments of great sensuous intensity. Therefore, Thoreau in his more practical and empirical approach towards nature also demonstrates an integration of both: The recognition of unity with nature as well as the clear insight into his distinction from nature. The more empirical and personal approach to nature of Thoreau thus might be seen as the 'congenial counterpart' to Novalis', who laid the essential theoretical and philosophical foundations for seeing nature as a *You*.

Attitudes of humanity in regard to nature are human receptiveness as well as human activity. In their receptiveness, humans experience, enjoy (and sometimes suffer from) the infinite creativity of nature; in their activity humans are creative themselves. They should be aware, however, that human creativity in its highest form, as poetry, is nothing but the perfection of nature's creativity. In the ideal case, all forms of human poetry, including science and economic activity, are celebrations of nature's creativity.

NOTES

A former version of this paper was presented at the 7th International Conference of the *British Association for Romantic Studies* (Liverpool, 26–29 July 2001). We are grateful for the opportunity for discussion and the stimulation given. Some of the ideas in this paper have also been presented at the PhD Seminar of the *European Society for the History of Economic Thought* (ESHET) on 22 February 2001 in Darmstadt. We wish to extend our thanks to ESHET, especially to Bertram Schefold and Heinz Rieter for their detailed analysis of the presentation. We thank Malte Faber, John Proops and William Rossi for fruitful comments and stimulating discussions. We are furthermore grateful to Dale Adams for helpful comments and correction of language. Finally, we thank Simon Hailwood and another anonymous referee for their careful and encompassing critique of our paper.

[1] For a further detailed discussion of the relevance of the Romantic thought on economy and nature for today's research in the field of Ecological Economics see Becker (2003).

[2] See e.g. Bate (1991), Buell (1995), McKusick (2000) or Worster (1985). It should be mentioned, that the approach of Aldo Leopold to nature also had much in common with Romantic thought, especially with Thoreau.

[3] Until now, there has been no complete translation of Novalis' work into English. We refer to the following translations of Novalis' major works: the translation of *Henry von Ofterdingen (Heinrich von Ofterdingen, 1801)* by Palmer Hilty (Novalis 1964), and the translation of *The Novices of Sais (Die Lehrlinge zu Sais, 1799)* by Ralph Mannheim (Novalis 1949). Furthermore, we refer to the translation of selected philosophical writings by Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Novalis 1997). In some cases we have made our own

translations which are denoted by (B/M). We also refer to the German edition of Novalis' complete works (Novalis 1960ff.); these references are denoted by [volume, page].

[4] Thus, we adopt the hermeneutic position of Hans Georg Gadamer. Gadamer emphasised the principle of dialogue between a literal or philosophical text and the reader (see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*). On the one hand a work is only made complete in its reception, in the other hand enables the recipient to overcome the historical determinedness of his own thoughts and actions.

[5] Maintaining the important role of Fichte's philosophy for Novalis' thought is in correspondence with recent research positions. For an overview see Uerlings (1991: 105ff.), which constitutes an excellent research report on Novalis. For the influence of Fichte on Novalis see also Beiser (2002: 410ff.), who gives an encompassing overview on the development of early German Idealism.

[6] Reflecting on the modern separation of humans and nature and on the modern view of nature as a means for human purposes, one commonly refers to the Cartesian tradition of thought. E.g. John Passmore calls it one of the 'leading traditions of modern western thought' the essence of which is 'that matter is inert, passive, that man's relationship to it is that of an absolute despot, reshaping, reforming what has in it no inherent power of resistance, any sort of agency' (Passmore 1975: 258). We think, however, that the view Passmore describes is even more intensively expressed by Fichte's philosophy. Descartes concentrates more on the theoretical aspect of the separation of matter and mind, while Fichte holds that there is an absolute necessity for humans to act on passive nature.

[7] See in particular Bacon's *Novum Organon*.

[8] The recognition of the cliff as 'a unique You' may remind the reader of the chapter 'Thinking like a mountain' of Leopold's famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*.

[9] Friedrich Schlegel also uses the term 'Universalpoesie', *universal poetry* (see Schlegel (1978: 90), *Athenäums-fragments*).

[10] An important exception is the philosophical treatise of MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999).

[11] In this, Novalis' concept differs from the Platonic concept of *poiesis*.

[12] Even science, in the eyes of Novalis, should not be regarded as an isolated activity of humans, but as part of the dialogue between humans and nature. From this point of view, Novalis states: 'Science, when it has come to its perfection, will have the shape of poetry' (Novalis, *Fragments,* [II, 527]; B/M). One connection between poetry and science can be seen in the fact that all scientific knowledge is ultimately based on a creative act of the human mind. The first principles of sciences, the axioms, for example, cannot be proved by scientific methods. They have to be created and generally accepted. And even mathematical proofs are necessarily based on the ability of creativity and invention. Clearly, every proof has to fulfil the rules of logic and can be screened by everyone analytically; but there is no rule or analytic procedure describing how to find the idea for a proof. Hence, the discovery of an idea for a mathematical proof is a creative act. Science should be aware of this fact: that creativity is its crucial basis. Such an awareness would be one condition for a perfect science, which would have the 'shape of poetry'. A second condition in the sense of Novalis would be love and attentiveness toward nature.

[13] A somewhat similar concept of poetry can also be found in William Hazlitt (1778–1839): 'Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself. […] Many people suppose that poetry is something to be found only in books, contained in

lines of ten syllables, with like endings: but wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that "spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun", – there is poetry, in its birth' (Hazlitt [1818] 1991: 309).

[14] Within the context of this paper it is not our objective to analyse the relationship between Novalis and the history of economic thought in great detail. Obviously, Novalis knew the fundamentals of the most important economic thought of his time, in particular the basics of Mercantilism and Liberalism. This becomes evident e.g. in his text 'Die Christenheit oder Europa' and also in his statements on economic issues in other fragments. For more detailed information on the position of Novalis in the history of economic thought, see e.g. Priddat 1989.

[15] See the so-called Arion-tale in *Henry Von Ofterdingen* (Novalis 1964: 33ff.).

[16] This is in particular an effect of Adam Smith's ideas in *Wealth of Nations* (1776). These have often been reduced to the single principle that egoistic individual economic behaviour leads automatically to the greatest possible accumulation of wealth for all (the so-called invisible hand concept). As such it has been one of the most influential principles in economic theory up until today. However, in contrast to most modern economics, Adam Smith took the circumstance into consideration that: 'How selfish soever man be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.' (Adam Smith [1759] 2000: 3).

[17] For a similar discussion in reference to Goethe's *Faust* see Faber, Manstetten and Proops (1998).

[18] For a detailed critical analysis of the understanding of humans in modern economics see Manstetten (2000).

[19] A similar view of modern economy can be found in William Wordsworth, especially in book seven of the *1805 Prelude*.

[20] Modern (neoclassical) Economics is based on the assumption of humans as being rational egoistic utility-maximisers (see e.g. Mueller 1989: 2) characterised by non-satiation (Alchian and Allan 1974: 21), something that implies an instrumentalisation and domination of nature and thus a certain alienation and separation of humans and nature with negative consequences for both.

[21] See e.g. Hailwood (2000) for a general outline of this concept.

[22] Reed's concept of nature as an other *Thou* is substantially different from Novalis' *You*. Reed's *Thou* remains so strange that he has no concept of how to reach a point where any form of dialogue would be possible: '[...] there is an existential gulf of awesome depth between ourselves and the Other, a gulf which no amount of 'identification in otherness' can span. The Other is really other.' (Reed 1989: 59) Reed concludes by putting a question mark on the necessity of the continued existence of humanity, something which also distances his position from the view of Novalis, who regards humankind as the epitome of nature's creativity.

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