

## Darwinian Humanism and the End of Nature

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### ABSTRACT

Darwinian humanism proposes that environmental philosophers pursue their work in full recognition of an irreducible ambiguity at the heart of human experience: we may legitimately regard moral action as fully free and fully natural at the same time, since neither perspective can be taken as the whole truth. A serious objection to this proposal holds that freedom and nature may be unified as an organic whole, and their unity posited as a matter of substantive truth, by appeal to teleology. In particular, I consider Hegel's account of the emergence of Absolute Spirit, weigh its advantages and disadvantages as an approach to human moral experience and as a strategic move for environmentalists, and conclude with a refinement of Darwinian humanism and a clarification of its implications for environmental ethics.

### KEYWORDS

Moral agency, teleology, phenomenology, Kant, Hegel, Darwin

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Let us beware of thinking the world is a living being ... We have some notion of the nature of the organic; and we should not reinterpret the exceedingly derivative, late, rare, accidental, that we perceive only on the crust of the earth and make of it something essential, universal, and eternal.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Darwinian humanism arises from a long-standing tension between two traditions in philosophical ethics (see Kirkman, 2007: 4). On one side is the empiricist tradition, passed down to us from Hobbes by way of Hume, which takes human moral sentiment as its starting point. On the other side is what I have called the humanist tradition, passed down from Rousseau and Kant, which takes human freedom as its starting point. The tension between these traditions is heightened by the expanding scope and power of scientific accounts of human conduct and even human choice. In short, the empiricist tradition has come into its own in the wake of the Darwinian revolution, which seems to bring humanist notions of freedom and dignity sharply into question.

The central premise of Darwinian humanism is that it may be possible to reach a mutual accommodation between these two traditions, taking a cue from Kant's solution to the antinomy of freedom and nature. On Kant's account, causality is a category of the understanding the proper use of which is in constituting our experience of nature as the realm of appearances. Reason, however, pushes beyond this proper use, taking causality as a universal principle that applies to things as they are in themselves. The antinomy arises at this point. When reason pushes toward universality, it finds itself torn between two equally compelling metaphysical dogmas regarding causality: the empiricist dogma according to which there can be nothing other than an unbroken chain of causal connections stretching back into the infinite past, and the rationalist dogma that there must be at least one spontaneous (that is, free) first cause that begins a new chain of causal connections. Kant's critical solution of this antinomy is to reject both dogmas as instances of transcendental illusion. Once the illusion has been dispelled, the thesis and antithesis of the antinomy can be taken as two legitimate perspectives on the world of experience, neither of which gives us access to a transcendent world of things as they are in themselves.

Stated in this form, the accommodation between the standpoints neither presupposes nor implies unity or harmony between them. In Kant's terms, there is 'an immense gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, the sensible, and the concept of freedom, the supersensible ... just as if they were two different worlds' (Kant, 1987: Ak.176). Accordingly, Darwinian

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humanism supposes the two standpoints constitute an irreducible ambiguity at the heart of moral experience, an ambiguity that has become more acute as empirical explanations of human consciousness and behaviour have increased in sophistication and power. It is as though, in the wake of the Darwinian revolution, we have developed chronic double vision that is getting worse, leaving us dizzy and disoriented (see Kirkman, 2007: 16–17).

If Darwinian humanism is a plausible account of human moral experience, then the separation between the two standpoints imposes strict limits on what environmental philosophy can be and what its practitioners may hope for. In particular, it is difficult to see what grounds there can be for a moral vision of harmony in the relationship between humans and our environment when that relationship is always dual. As natural beings, we are intertwined in causal relationships involving matter and energy that both sustain and constrain our activity in the world. As moral beings, we are intertwined in reciprocal moral relationships of care and responsibility with other moral beings. Given the gap between the two standpoints, it would be a mistake to conflate these two kind of relationship or simply to assert their harmony or essential identity.

In short, to the extent they still hope to do so, environmental philosophers will never be warranted in granting features of our environment the same status as human moral agents, nor will they ever be able to read moral obligations off of natural relationships or the promptings of natural sentiment. They will have to find other tasks on which to spend their time and effort (Kirkman, 2007: 17–20).

There is, however, a serious and plausible objection to Darwinian humanism and its consequences for environmental ethics, an objection that merits treatment at some length. It may be possible to close the gap between humanism and empiricism by appeal to teleology, establishing an organic unity of freedom and nature. This objection is particularly compelling in that Kant himself appeals to teleology, at least as a matter of reflective judgment, precisely in order to reconcile the two standpoints. Hegel would take up this line of inquiry and push toward an actual unity of freedom and nature embodied in spirit, the concrete human moral community forging its history in the world.

My purpose here is to consider Hegel's teleological turn as a possible answer to Darwinian humanism, to weigh its advantages and disadvantages as an approach to human moral experience and as a strategic move for environmental ethicists. I will close not with a rejection of but with a revision to Darwinian humanism, a clearer statement of what is at stake in the tension

between freedom and nature, what it entails for making decisions generally, and what it implies for environmental ethics in particular.

## I. THE TELEOLOGICAL TURN

Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* seems to leave us at an impasse between two standpoints: the spectator perspective that looks always for the determinate causes of every aspect of experience and the actor perspective that posits the possibility of unconditioned action on the part of rational beings. Kant seems willing to accept this impasse, in large measure because he can see that it is not nearly as bad as it may seem. It is not a standoff between mutually contradictory metaphysical dogmas, but merely an ambiguity in how we approach the world of common experience. This is Kant's critical solution to the antinomies of pure reason: we may hold seemingly incompatible views of the world as long as we acknowledge that neither is constitutive of things as they really are.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant does not claim to get any closer to things as they really are, but he does complete his critical system by proposing a way of harmonising the two standpoints by means of a reflective principle. He identifies this principle as a product of judgment, a third faculty of human cognition that works between understanding and reason without intruding on either of them.

Judgment, Kant writes, 'is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal' (Kant, 1987: Ak.180). When only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal to contain it, then judgment is reflective. The particulars are to be found in experience, the phenomenal or sensible realm, which is the domain of understanding. Reflective judgment draws universals from the noumenal or supersensible realm, which is the domain of practical reason. Practical reason posits ends or goals, so the reflective judgment subsumes particulars under a universal principle of goal-directedness: purposiveness.

Kant holds that the reflective principle of purposiveness is indispensable for human cognition. At a very basic level, reflective judgment serves as a heuristic that makes coherent inquiry into nature possible. While understanding grasps particular connections in experience, judgment guides where we look for such connections, how we structure our inquiry, how we decide what to attend to and what to ignore. Without judgment, understanding of nature would amount only to a list of particulars – this thing over here, that connection over there – with no prompting to investigate further. Reflective

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judgment posits as a principle that the diversity of laws are to be united under a few, overarching laws; it also posits the principles of parsimony (i.e., 'nature takes the shortest way'), continuity (i.e., nature 'makes no leap'), and so on (Kant, 1987: Ak.181). It is only in search for the unity, perhaps even the beautiful harmony of natural laws that the products of the understanding can amount to science.

More concretely, we encounter some particular things in the natural world for which we cannot give a full and satisfying mechanistic account. The only way to make sense of such things is to judge them as organised beings or 'natural purposes', as though they were designed to perform a function posited by practical reason. Rather than being the mere product of blind mechanism working from the outside, Kant writes that a natural purpose is '*both cause and effect of itself*' (Kant, 1987: Ak.371).

The essential character of natural purposes resides in the peculiar relationship of its parts to one another and to the whole. On the one hand, the parts can exist and have their form only in relationship to the whole. On the other hand, the whole can exist and have its form only through the mutual and recursive causality of the parts. As Kant states it, to judge a thing as being a natural purpose, 'what is needed is that all its parts, through their own causality, produce one another as regards both their form and combination, and that in this way they produce a whole whose concept ... could, conversely, be the cause of this body according to a principle, so that the connection of *efficient causes* could at the same time be judged to be a *causation through final causes*' (Kant, 1987: Ak.373). Insofar as it is judged a natural purpose, no part of an organised being is 'gratuitous, purposeless, or to be attributed to a blind natural mechanism' (Kant, 1987: Ak.376).

We can also judge nature as a whole as being a coherent system, though not on the same terms. The extrinsic relationships among things in nature, as Kant understands them, are not analogous to the relationships among the parts of an organised being. This may in part reflect the state of natural history in Kant's day, for which the foremost effort to systematise nature was Linnaean taxonomy. Accordingly, Kant does not see in nature a closed and recursive intertwining of causal relations among organisms analogous to the closed and recursive intertwining among the parts of an organism.

Still, for Kant, nature as a whole has this much in common with organisms, that 'everything in the world is good for something or other; nothing in it is gratuitous' (Kant, 1987: Ak.379). To find a universal under which to subsume nature, Kant goes back again to the domain of practical reason, particularly the demands of moral law and the idea of the highest good. Nature may be judged a purposive system insofar as it may be judged to be

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in harmony with the freedom of moral agents. As he states the matter in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, nature is a moral order, its parts and their mutual relations all subordinate to the highest good (Kant, 1965: A814, B842).

When we judge that the diverse laws of nature are unified, that living things are self-organising, that nature as a whole is a system, and that the system is unified by a moral God, according to Kant, all we are doing is making the myriad clockwork mechanisms known to the understanding subordinate to a single end: supporting us in our vocation as moral beings. It is not that nature is arranged so as to guarantee happiness to those who do their duty, but that nature is arranged to make human culture possible. Through culture, people acquire skills aimed at 'the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires, a despotism that rivets us to natural things and renders us unable to do our own selecting' (Kant, 1987: 432).

In whatever capacity it is used, Kant must continue to insist that purposiveness is merely a reflective principle of judgment. We judge a tree to be an organism, we judge it as having a distinct place in the natural order, we judge it to be beautiful, but we cannot say we *know* it to be such, in itself. All we are doing is asserting the conditions under which it is possible for us to think about the tree at all.

Human cognition has to maintain a delicate balance here. If we try to claim determinative knowledge of nature entirely in terms of purposes, we will find ourselves straying 'into the transcendent, where our cognition of nature cannot follow and where reason is seduced into poetic raving' (Kant, 1987: Ak.411). At the same time, attempting to explain nature entirely in mechanistic terms 'must make reason fantasize and wander among chimeras of natural powers that are quite inconceivable' (Kant, 1987: Ak.411). So, there is a kind of double vision in our comprehension of nature, as well: we are bound to see it as determined by linear causality and always at the same time as shaped according to final causes.

In the subsequent generation of German philosophers, Fichte, Schelling, and particularly Hegel push beyond Kant's caution to posit the actual organic unity of freedom and nature. For Hegel, that unity is realised in Absolute Spirit, which is something very much like Kant's conception of culture: the human moral community in its actuality, through which our freedom as moral beings and our determinateness as natural beings may be reconciled.

One crucial stop on the way from Kant to Hegel is to move from a formal conception of practical reason to a concrete and historical conception of human action. Contrary to Kant's contention that morality is only to be found in the pure, rational motives of a good will, Hegel characterises spirit

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in action as ‘an immediate unity, a *self-actualizing* being, and the action is immediately something *concretely* moral’ (Hegel, 1977: 385).

Hegel insists, however, that the harmony of freedom and nature is not easily grasped. If I simply assert the unity of freedom and nature, my assertion is necessarily abstract and, as such, becomes something other to knowledge. At most, such an assertion can serve only as edification, and Hegel warns sternly against settling for a mere ‘feeling of essential being’, deriding it as ‘rapturous haziness’, ‘empty depth’ or, more famously, the night ‘in which all cows are black’ (Hegel, 1977: 5–6, 9).

To grasp the truth of the harmony of freedom and nature is to *be* that harmony in actuality, which is to be the confident self-knowledge of that harmony. An individual can only achieve such an actuality from the inside, as it were, by working through the whole process by which consciousness develops. Philosophy must have, as Hegel (1977: 10) puts it ‘the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative’. This requires some explanation.

In Hegel’s terms, the self is essentially negation: I am not that, subject is not object, universal is not particular, freedom is not nature. What pushes the development of consciousness forward is the possibility of negating a negation while preserving the distinction it creates. The dialectic goes like this: a shape of consciousness asserts itself as an abstract unity, falls apart in contradiction, then comes back together as a new, more sophisticated shape; the new shape is a determinate negation or a mediated universality that resolves the contradiction of the prior shape by transcending it, only to fall apart in contradictions of its own. So the development of consciousness continues on its way. Hegel’s purpose in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to linger over every possible shape of consciousness, mopping up every detail of every negation; this is ‘the labour of the negative’.

Truth, for Hegel, is to be found in the whole movement by which consciousness develops, taken as an organic system, not in any determinate moment along the way. Truth is an organic whole in the precise sense that every form of consciousness is teleologically subordinated to the goal of bringing Spirit to confident self-knowledge (Hegel, 1977: 11, 14; see also Hyppolite, 1974: 65). It might be said that consciousness *evolves*, but only in the pre-Darwinian sense of ‘evolution’ as applied to developing embryos: it is an unfolding of a form that was always already there, in the seed.

The master-slave dialectic is perhaps the best known moment in Hegel’s account of the development of consciousness. It occurs early in the *Phenomenology*, at the first emergence of self-consciousness. At first, self-consciousness is only the abstract desire for certainty of itself. It cannot find

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satisfaction for that desire by changing or consuming mere things: as soon as the things are changed or consumed they are negated, and the desire returns. Rather, self-consciousness finds satisfaction only in its relationship with another self-consciousness, a being that contains its own negation within it (Hegel, 1977: 110).

At first the relationship between self-consciousnesses is asymmetrical, which is what gives rise to the master-slave dialectic. One self-consciousness encounters another and the two engage in a life-or-death struggle for recognition. The struggle stops short of death, but yields a relationship of domination in which one self-consciousness gives recognition without receiving it while the other receives without giving. This relationship is unstable, however: the role of the master consciousness is ultimately self-defeating and the slave consciousness potentially self-transcending.

The tension between freedom and nature is plainly evident in this moment. The universality of freedom is all on the side of the master consciousness, which is the pure, detached enjoyment of being recognised as self-consciousness. Particularity is all on the side of the slave consciousness, which is bound to 'natural existence', the demands of mortal life, time, and circumstance (Hegel, 1977: 116).

The dialectic moves on when the slave consciousness comes to internalise the tension between universality and particularity: it is still bound to particularity, still up against what Hyppolite (1974: 176) calls 'the independence of being', but it at the same time has within it the power of negation such that it can work on that independent being and transform it.

As the phenomenology goes on this same tension between the universality of freedom and the particularity of nature comes into play again and again, each time in a new form, until it is finally resolved with the emergence of Absolute Spirit. At that point, there are no longer two distinct standpoints on human moral experience, the actor perspective on the side of freedom and the spectator perspective on the side of nature: the two are harmonised in concrete the action of the human moral community.

Hegel thus provides us with an organic system of philosophy *par excellence*. Phenomenologically, each stage in the development grows out of what was implicit in the stage before and, in the whole movement, no stage is superfluous. The system circles back on itself, so that the simple unity of particular and universal that could be found in sense certainty is recaptured in a new and higher form with the emergence of absolute Spirit. Speculatively, following the three volumes of Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, the pure Concept develops as logic and then externalises itself in nature, which unfolds organically until the Concept returns to itself as spirit.



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### II. THE PROMISE

Hegel's teleological turn has a number of points in its favour, in terms of both the strategic interests of environmental ethicists and a more general interest in elucidating human moral experience.

Perhaps most generally, Hegel provides an account of the actor perspective that is richer and more expansive than Kant's formalism. While Kant posited a strict separation of pure moral reasoning from the impure promptings of inclination, Hegel arrives at a view of moral action in which pure and impure motives are inextricably mixed in the response of concrete moral individuals to concrete situations.

Hegel responds most directly to Kant's approach to morality late in the *Phenomenology*, in the moments just before the emergence of Absolute Spirit. Moral consciousness, as Hegel calls the form of spirit corresponding to the Kantian view, recapitulates the master-slave dialectic in a more sophisticated form. In this instance, universality and freedom are all on the side of pure duty, while particularity and natural existence are all on the side of inclinations. As Hegel states the matter, the moral view of the world

consists in the relation between the absoluteness of morality and the absoluteness of Nature. This relation is based, on the one hand, on the complete *indifference* and independence of Nature towards moral purposes and activity, and, on the other hand, on the consciousness of duty alone as the essential fact, and of Nature as completely devoid of independence and essential being. (Hegel, 1977: 365–366)

In striving to make itself independent of natural existence, moral consciousness will fall into yet another set of contradictions. As Hyppolite puts it, moral consciousness 'will either have to renounce its moralism or consent to be what it thought it was not: instead of a pure and disinterested consciousness, a hypocritical and even envious one' (Hyppolite, 1974: 471).

Moral consciousness is preoccupied with the question of its prospects for happiness, a question it cannot just drop. The dialectic begins with Kant's move of postulating a harmony between freedom and nature such that moral consciousness can assure itself of its future happiness. The dialectical movement that follows is particularly complex, since by this point in the development of consciousness, nature is not only external to consciousness but internal to it as well. Hegel himself characterises it as a "whole nest" of thoughtless contradictions' and as the 'insincere shuffling' of moral consciousness (Hegel, 1977: 375). In true dialectical form, what was seen

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as essential becomes inessential, what belonged to consciousness becomes alienated from consciousness, and the tension mounts all the while.

In effect, the dialectic of moral consciousness serves mainly to demonstrate the hypocrisy of moral consciousness, which clings to postulates that make concrete moral action impossible even as it goes on engaging in concrete moral action. The bottom line is that, if duty is held to be pure, then whatever is morally pure cannot be done, and whatever is done cannot be morally pure. This is so because the sensuousness of inclination is 'the middle term or mediating element between pure consciousness and actual existence'. Moral self-consciousness deceives itself if it pretends otherwise (Hegel, 1977: 375).

What resolves this nest of contradictions is the simple acknowledgement that, however much consciousness tries to portray itself as motivated by pure duty, concrete action is always already a fusion of duty and inclination, freedom and nature. More precisely, this means the particular inclinations that actually motivate action in the world already carry universality within them. With this acknowledgement, moral self-consciousness overcomes the division between pure duty and pure nature and returns to itself as '*concrete moral Spirit*', which does not need duty 'as an empty criterion to be used against actual consciousness' (Hegel, 1977: 385).

The Hegelian turn also serves to expand the actor perspective by shifting from subjectivity to intersubjectivity: moral experience begins in community with others. According to Robert Williams, Hegel joins with other German idealists of his generation in seeking to overcome Kantian formalism 'not by denying it, but by recontextualising it in the intersubjectivity and historical conditions that it presupposes' (Williams, 1997: 34). The key to this recontextualisation is *recognition*: self-consciousness can be certain of itself and its freedom only in being recognised as such by another self-consciousness.

As already noted, Hegel takes up the theme of recognition early in the *Phenomenology*, in the moment at which self-consciousness emerges. Self-consciousness starts out as the merely abstract desire for self-certainty, but it can find that certainty only through the recognition, and hence the mediation, of another self-consciousness. The initial struggle for recognition leads through the inequality of the master-slave dialectic and onward toward mutual recognition among equals.

Spirit is precisely this mutual recognition. It is 'this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I"' (Hegel, 1977: 110; see also Hyppolite, 1974:

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160–161). In more contemporary terms, Williams casts the renunciation of mastery and slavery as opening the way to an ‘enlarged self-identity’ that ‘results from a joint reciprocal action that is not completely under the control of the self’ (Williams, 1997: 57).

The possibility of an ‘enlarged self-identity’ should no doubt pique the interest of those pursuing the traditional task of environmental ethics, seeking to draw humans out of what they take to be our narrow self-centredness. More than this, the Hegelian turn promises to go farther, rehabilitating nature and restoring it to a central place in human moral awareness. Indeed, the entire tradition of post-Kantian idealism and romanticism supports resistance against the reduction of the world of human experience to the terms of mechanism and merely instrumental value. Building from Kant’s critique of teleological judgment, the nature of which Hegel and his contemporaries write is no longer the lifeless mechanism of Newton, but a richly articulated organic system populated by entities that are themselves irreducibly organic, irreducibly alive. Nature has an end – a purpose – all its own.

From here, it seems plausible to move toward some sort of ethical relationship with nature. We experience nature as other to ourselves, Hegel would say, but we also recognise ourselves in it. Recognition of self in other is the fundamental ethical relationship between self-conscious beings, so perhaps it may be the basis of an ethical relationship between humans and nature. In a recent paper, Elaine P. Miller argues that the romantic view of nature makes possible

a more fertile way of interacting with the natural environment as an essential part of what it means to be human, not by simply conceiving of the natural world as encompassing, or capable of being in perfect harmony with, human desires, needs, and goals, but by seeing in the organism an analogue to human thought and divine spirit that is both independent of, and a condition for the possibility of, self-conscious spirit. In this simultaneous correspondence and essential difference the possibility of an ethical relation to nature can arise. (Miller, 2005: 298)

It may be tempting for environmental ethicists to push matters still farther. In the ultimate reconciliation of nature and spirit, it may be possible to glimpse the realisation of Leopold’s ambition that we think of ourselves in community with non-human living organisms. It seems consistent with Hegel’s phenomenology to posit that it is not just membership in human communities that makes us what we are but the whole of the concrete context in which we find ourselves and through which we forge our history. It seems a small leap of imagination to see in that context the overlapping and intertwining

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of moral community and biotic community, with the notion of biotic community taken as a contemporary stand-in for Hegel's organic nature.

One very recent version of this line of thinking comes from Jason Brennan, who takes up Hegel's master-slave dialectic and applies it metaphorically to the relation of human beings to nature, working toward something like mutual recognition. Nature cannot recognise us, he argues, but we can act as if it did: we can seek to be worthy of its respect. Environmental ethics can then be seen as resolving the master-slave dialectic between humans and nature in the realisation that nature is not really alien to us: 'those woods and hills form part of my identity, of my consciousness of myself. To wantonly destroy them would be an act of self-loathing' (Brennan, 2007: 520).

### III. THE PERIL

Whatever advantages there may be to taking a teleological turn, there are also a number of distinct disadvantages, beginning with some problems for what have traditionally been the strategic interests of environmental ethicists.

The most telling problem is that, deep down, the unity of freedom and nature in Kant and Hegel is still primarily about human freedom, and it ultimately remakes nature in a human image. For Kant, the end of nature is *us*, our moral vocation:

Only in man, and even in him only as moral subject, do we find unconditioned legislation regarding purposes. It is this legislation, therefore, which alone enables man to be a final purpose to which all of nature is teleologically subordinated (Kant, 1987: Ak.435–436).

This view carries over into Hegel's account, in which the purpose and the meaning of nature is to prepare the ground for the emergence of Spirit.

In truth, Hegel treats nature very badly, especially in the *Encyclopedia*. Nature may be an organic system, but it is such only to the extent that it is the striving of the self-alienated Concept to return to itself as spirit. Once spirit emerges, nature falls away as a 'dead husk' and is no longer of much interest (Hegel, 1970: 443). The history of spirit goes on from there, driven by the actions of world-historical individuals, reacting to and overcoming their context without being bound by it. In a Hegelian account of the history of the United States, for example, Leopold's (1949: 205–206) speculation on the pivotal role of bluegrass in the settlement of the Ohio River valley would be brushed aside as an appeal to mere contingency.

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As a matter of practical experience, Hegel may allow that nature is relevant to our actions in the world, and we may still encounter it as other to us. However, Hegelian nature has its being and its freedom as a self-exteriorised expression of human freedom itself, and as such its alterity is of a reduced or degenerate sort, an alterity that is always to be transcended as soon as we recognise ourselves in nature. In sum, nature lacks the full, satisfying, self-subsistent otherness of another individual self-consciousness.

Here is the heart of the matter for environmental ethics: in Hegel's terms, mutual recognition is possible only between self-conscious beings. With the resolution of the master-slave dialectic, one person lets the other person go free, but nature is always to be negated, consumed, overcome, transformed into a human world. Alexandre Kojève emphasises this point in his (still controversial) reading of the *Phenomenology*. In the first moments of self-consciousness, the actions that flow from animal desire 'negate, destroy the natural given. By negating it, modifying it, making it its own, the animal raises itself above this given' (Kojève, 1969: 39) This is not a lasting transcendence, however, as nature is so easily consumed. No, we can dominate nature and transcend the natural given only through the mediation of other self-conscious beings – but note that the goal is still to dominate and transcend the natural given. There can be no question of mutual recognition between humans and nature.

In light of this, it should be clear enough that Brennan's application of the master-slave dialectic to the relationship between humans and nature works only as a metaphor, and a strained metaphor at that. In fact, Brennan's use of the master-slave dialectic runs directly counter to the meaning of that dialectic in the context of the *Phenomenology*. Any authority he might have hoped to borrow from Hegel is thereby lost, since he is working against one of the premises that gives Hegel's account its coherence.

On balance, environmental ethicists of a traditional bent stand to lose more than they gain by adopting the Hegelian solution to the problem of the two standpoints: they would gain an organic view of the world, perhaps, but one in which nature is always subordinate to the general ends of the human moral community, even if not to the particular ends of individuals.

Setting aside such strategic concerns, Hegel poses more fundamental problems for the understanding of human moral experience. Can the teleological turn overcome the tension between the actor perspective and the spectator perspective, between freedom and nature, as Hegel himself seemed to think it could? Signs are far from promising. For all his long and arduous labour, it is difficult to avoid the impression that, in the end, Hegel overcomes the tension between freedom and nature by simply brushing it aside.

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At the same time he enriches human moral experience by placing it in social and historical context, Hegel seems to impoverish human moral experience by closing it in on itself. The context is always a human or humanised context, full of self-conscious moral beings and the artifacts they have forged out of raw and inessential nature. He seems to have drawn us into a kind of collective solipsism: the concrete moral community can be certain of itself as Absolute Spirit only to the extent it is certain there is nothing other to itself; there is nothing other than the 'we'.

Parallel to the charge of solipsism is the concern that Hegel's organic system is suspiciously tidy, showing all the signs of being too carefully constructed. As Derrida puts it, Hegel's system is a 'restricted economy' in which all meaning is carefully conserved, with no remainder, no 'excess' (Derrida, 1978: 271). Hegel insists there can be nothing contingent, nothing that just *is* or just *happens* without some spirit-oriented reason for being or happening. Every state of human consciousness, every aspect of human experience, every element in a system of speculative philosophy must be subordinated to the single, overriding purpose of supporting the emergence of Absolute Spirit.

This, at last, is why a Hegelian turn does not answer to the challenge of Darwinian humanism. In the *Phenomenology* and the *Encyclopedia* alike, Hegel works always to give contingency short shrift: whatever is or seems to be contingent is always at the same time necessary, always caught up in the same movement toward the emergence of spirit. Evolutionary theory, by stark contrast, brings unalloyed contingency into the very heart of human self-understanding.

#### IV. DARWIN AND THE END OF NATURE

Kant (1987: Ak.419–420) foresaw the rising power of mechanistic explanation in the Third Critique. Comparative anatomy in particular offered what he terms a 'ray of hope' that 'we may be able to accomplish something with the principle of natural mechanism'. From observations on comparative anatomy, Kant speculates that animals may have sprung from 'a common original mother' by some sort of mechanistic process of variation. He locates this process in the distant past, 'ancient revolutions' in a 'womb' that has long since 'rigidified, ossified'. However, while Kant gives over some space to mechanistic explanation, he insists this serves only to push teleology back a bit without eliminating it: 'the archaeologist of nature will have to attribute

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to this universal mother an organisation that purposively aimed at all these creatures'. For Kant, teleology has to come in somewhere.

Hegel makes no such concessions to mechanism in his philosophy of nature. The study of mechanics has its place, of course, as does the study of physics. By this point it should come as no surprise that such studies are to be overcome on the way to the study of organic form, which in turn is to be overcome on the way to the philosophy of spirit. Along the way, Hegel must twist and turn to avoid giving contingency any really significant or independent role in his account. Natural events may be contingent, but that contingency is itself caught up in the necessary progression from logic through nature to spirit. Regarding the fossil record in rock strata, for example, he notes:

In this sequence there does not lie a deeper meaning. The meaning and spirit of the process is the inner coherence, the necessary connection of these formations, and nothing is added to this by the succession in time. The general law of this sequence of formation can be recognized without any reference to the historical aspect; that is the essential point – this is the rational element which alone has interest for the Notion: to recognize in this sequence the characteristics of the Notion. (Hegel, 1970: 283).

Hegel frequently embarrasses himself in his effort to find such necessary connections in nature, as when he explains the development of the cranium as the third step in the dialectic of bone, which is itself 'the sensibility belonging to shape as such' that is, 'the simple and therefore dead force which is not yet a process, but abstract reflection-into-self'. The form of the skull can be explained as an elaboration of the vertebra: 'since in the vertebra the bony centre is pierced, the bone, now returning to itself, is, *thirdly*, the hollow *cranium*' (Hegel, 1970: 361–362). This may rise to the level of clever speculation, but it is difficult to imagine how such an account could even be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Darwin pushes the study of nature in exactly the opposite direction, establishing a fully mechanistic account of the diversity of life and the adaptation of living things to their circumstances, an account in which contingency plays a dominant role. While Darwin's own language is sometimes sloppy on this score, later evolutionary biologists have made it clear that evolution is not a goal-directed process: there is no overarching system, no higher purpose, no end toward which life is inevitably drawn. The process of diversification is pushed from behind, as it were, by variation and selection, which operate as blind and inexorable efficient causes across vast expanses of time.

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The emergence or disappearance of this or that lineage is a matter of utter contingency: whatever happens to be just happens to be.

Darwin's account has the advantage of being susceptible to critical scrutiny. If anything, decades of subsequent research in evolutionary biology, particularly after its fusion with modern genetics, have served only to expand its power and its scope as an explanatory framework for the natural world.

As it has expanded, the Darwinian account has, in a sense, brought about the end of nature or, perhaps, the end of the end of Nature: it has foreclosed the possibility of regarding nature as a goal-directed, spirit-oriented organic system that can be fully grasped by means of speculative philosophy. In the modern sense of the term, evolution is not a dialectical process by which pre-existing meaning unfolds in the world; rather, it is a mechanistic process of material diversification without any necessity of a spiritual return.

There is spirit in the world, of course, in the sense of a concrete moral community making a history for itself. You and I are in some small way contributing to the development of spirit through the medium of this text. Here is the critical point, though: spirit there may be but, from a Darwinian point of view, it did not have to be, even in retrospect. *Homo sapiens* has no special status within the natural world. We are not on the top of an evolutionary ladder, which would imply that we somehow deliberately climbed or were deliberately drawn up here. Rather, we are the offshoot of a single twig of the ancient and ever-proliferating tree of life, a branch that just as easily might never have emerged. Our coming to be and our eventual passing away are equally contingent. It is quite likely, according to Stephen Jay Gould, that had a handful of early chordate species been wiped out in an extinction event in the Cambrian period, there would not now be vertebrates on Earth, let alone human beings (Gould, 1989: 322–323). Such are the mischances on which evolution turns.

Whatever we may learn from Hegel in response to Kant's antinomy of freedom and nature, the double vision of the two standpoints in effect reasserts itself behind and against concrete, human moral action in the world. If anything, we are left with an ambiguity in the human condition deeper and more intractable than the one we started with. The Darwinian perspective places human moral action against a backdrop of particularity and contingency in which we cannot recognise ourselves, with which we cannot have a moral community. This is not to say the surrounding world is necessarily a threat, or that it is necessarily to be conquered. It is perhaps, precisely, indifferent to us. It is perhaps, precisely, unconquerable.



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More disturbing, we now find that our concrete individuality and moral agency are themselves conditioned on that intractable contingency and particularity. Advances in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary ethics, and other such enterprises give us intimations that something alien to what we think we are or ought to be lies at the very root of consciousness. It shows us that we are in some fundamental respects always other to ourselves. We may be spirit, but spirit cannot be absolute, in Hegel's sense, striding ever forward in the full confidence that our inclinations are always in harmony with our obligations.

## V. CONCLUSION

The teleological turn in Kant's third critique and Hegel's *Phenomenology* seemed to offer some hope of resolving the tension between freedom and nature, bringing them into some sort of harmony. The Hegelian project in particular seemed promising toward that end, but there are good reasons to doubt of its success: the product of Hegel's long labour is too tidy, too contrived to stand up to the overwhelming force of the Darwinian revolution. Still, it might well be asked, might it be possible to have a robust and coherent teleological conception of nature without following in Hegel's footsteps?

The answer to this question is not at all clear. If Kant, Hegel, and the whole of the Romantic movement are excluded from consideration, there is not much on which a teleological view of nature could be based other than nostalgic longing or metaphysical dogma – precisely the kind of metaphysical dogma Kant so decisively demolishes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is worth noting that Miller turns to the Romantic tradition precisely in order to avoid a lapse into mere nostalgia for some mythic pre-modern, pre-industrial condition (Miller, 2005: 298). If Hegel cannot turn the trick, then perhaps no one can.

So, it would seem that the tension between freedom and nature persists. As long as it does so, the basic restriction of Darwinian humanism stands: environmental ethicists must avoid any conflation of human moral community with ecological relationships in the natural environment, and they must not seek to derive moral guidance directly from nature or from the promptings of natural sentiment.

It is an interesting matter of empirical fact, for example, that humans often feel empathy for non-human animals, just as we feel empathy toward other humans in whom we most readily recognise ourselves. We still

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must choose, however, whether to heed the call of empathy in particular circumstances, and must decide whether our actions toward non-human animals should be proportional to the intensity of our response to them. Is it sometimes necessary to harm kittens? Or to favour a brood of scorpions over a litter of wolf cubs? In making up our minds, should we appeal to rational moral principles or to the promptings of further sentiments? Our predicament is that it may not be possible for us to give clear and definitive answers to these questions.

Even though the appeal to teleology cannot overcome the tension between freedom and nature, the side-trip through Hegel's *Phenomenology* does help to bring out some of the fine texture of lived moral experience. Regarding empathy toward non-human animals, for example, there is a Kantian temptation to draw too sharp a distinction between principle and sentiment, obligation and inclination, with all of the moral weight on the side of principle. Hegel's introduction of intersubjectivity and concrete historical context into his account of human moral action is a useful corrective. We can follow Hegel far enough to acknowledge that the lived experience of our relationships with other beings in the world, human and non-human, is richer and more nuanced than Kantian formalism can allow, with principle and sentiment intertwined.

So, empathy matters, even though we have to decide how much it matters in a given circumstance. In the end, when the phenomenology of moral experience has been exposed to various critiques, and especially when it has been bathed in what Daniel Dennett (1995: 63) characterises as the 'universal acid' of Darwinian evolution, the mere acknowledgement of the richness of moral experience still leaves us without much direct, practical guidance. Here we are, the human moral community, steeped in and conditioned by the excess, the unmeaning of brute contingency; that is our predicament. There is no reason for us to think we have emerged as self-conscious beings for the sole purpose of embodying the harmony of freedom and nature, and so there is no reason for us to think obligation and inclination are always in harmony or that the promptings of sentiment will always steer us right.

There is still important work for environmental ethicists to do, however, even if the domain of normative ethics has been thus thrown into confusion. Darwinian humanism itself arose from an effort to grapple with more fundamental questions of human moral experience, including the question of whether and under what conditions moral action is possible in the first place. In this light, the primary task of environmental ethics is to find ways to help the human moral community to face up to our predicament as beings both natural and free, to better understand the full complexity and ambiguity of

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moral experience. This is what we have to offer people as they themselves engage in the project of actually figuring out what to do.

That said, taking in the full measure of our human predicament may bring with it a shift in perspective that, indirectly and in the long run, can help to shape choices and actions concerning our environment. From the perspective of Darwinian humanism it is perhaps not 'the environment' that is fragile, after all, but the concrete, human moral community itself: we find ourselves here in the midst of things, unsure of how we got here or what our being here means, and in any case vulnerable to the contingencies of the world and to the consequences of our own actions. The more this perspective takes hold, I suspect, the more we will place a premium on attentiveness, inclusiveness, modesty, and caution in the process of making decisions, whatever the outcome of that process may be.

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