

Insights on Biodiversity from Hegel and Jonas

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Abstract: This paper examines the challenges and perspectives of biodiversity by linking Hegel's Philosophy of Nature with Hans Jonas's works. It proposes a biocentric foundation for a moderate anthropocentric environmental ethics, emphasizing the continuity between humans and nature while underscoring humanity's responsibility for life and its varieties.

1. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES OF OUR ERA AND THE POTENTIAL OF HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity's vulnerability became strikingly evident. Nature and present and future generations are equally at risk, facing the shared threat of a potential collapse of life on Earth. Paradoxically, it was precisely when human beings were cut off from the natural world due to extended lockdowns that they gained a renewed awareness of nature's profound physical and psychological benefits, as well as its essential role in sustaining life. This period underscored the fact that humans exist in continuous interaction with nature and, as such, must pursue sustainable development to protect life in all its diverse forms. Life itself revealed its intrinsic value, which demands protection not for instrumental purposes, but as an end in itself.¹

In this context, biocentric perspectives—centered on life rather than human dominance and advocating for the extension of moral and legal recognition to the natural world—have demonstrated their relevance and gained renewed validation.² While Hegel never formulated a specific theory on sustainability or biodiversity, largely due to the historical context of his time, his philosophy nonetheless offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions on environmental ethics and biodiversity. Recent scholarly attention to Hegel's Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Right highlights his relevance in addressing today's environmental challenges. The first significant attempt to connect Hegel's philosophy to sustainability can be found in Klaus Vieweg's essay *Care and Forethought: The Idea of Sustainability in Hegel's Practical Philosophy*.³ In this work, Vieweg explores how the themes of care and provision, central to sustainability, can be traced back to Hegel's notions of appropriate resource use and management, which consist of a "successful combination of the sensible forming of nature and letting-be" with the goal of enabling life and safeguarding the right to life as the foundation for all other rights. Through Hegel's practical philosophy, Vieweg

reconstructs a discourse centered on the thoughtful formation of the external world and the preservation of natural conditions essential for life—both of which have clear implications for environmental ethics. He emphasizes, in particular, Hegel's view that fundamental resources—the so-called “elemental things”—, such as air and water, should not be considered private property, as they form the very basis of life.⁴ Even when individuals are entitled to appropriate external resources, this appropriation must come with the responsibility of preservation, ensuring that these resources are not simply consumed or destroyed.⁵ This perspective inherently opens the door to a forward-looking understanding of sustainability. As Vieweg argues, “for Hegel, sustainable use is grounded in a knowledge of current and future situations and takes into account the current and future rights of free subjects.”⁶ In essence, Vieweg's analysis reconstructs a Hegelian theory of sustainability based on responsible, future-oriented stewardship of natural resources. Several authors have taken Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* as their starting point, uncovering a notable continuity between his ideas and certain twentieth-century “philosophies of organism,” with significant implications for environmental ethics. Hegel's theory of the organism, with its inherent subjectivity and intrinsic teleology, is often seen as a conceptual reservoir that offers a compelling response to the mechanistic view of nature.⁷ This organic model has been revisited on two levels: at the microscopic level, to gain a richer understanding of living beings in relation to their environments, and at the macroscopic level, to view the Earth and the world as an interconnected, organic whole, characterized by teleological processes and the mutual relationality of all its parts. This perspective paves the way for a progression from ontology to ethics—or more precisely, to environmental ethics—through the recognition of the continuity and unity of all living beings and the intrinsic value of life.

Moreover, there are ongoing efforts to explore the potential legacy of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* for addressing today's environmental challenges.⁸ However, within this renewed interest in Hegel's natural philosophy, no study to date has specifically examined the insights his work can offer to the current debate on biodiversity. My article aims to fill this gap, presenting the first exploration of how Hegel's ideas can contribute to this pressing discussion.

I will begin by addressing the concept of biodiversity, highlighting its complexities and the various perspectives through which it has been analyzed and evaluated, with the aim of identifying key unresolved issues (1). Following this, I will examine and discuss selected passages from Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, seeking to extract insights that can be meaningfully applied to contemporary discussions on biodiversity. Building on this foundation, I will then explore the normative status of biodiversity, placing Hegel's thought in dialogue with Hans Jonas's works, *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966) and *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979) (2).

The overarching goal is to present, through the perspectives of Hegel and Jonas, a biocentric basis for a moderate anthropocentric environmental ethics. This position acknowledges, on one hand, the inherent continuity between humans and nature—viewing nature as a dynamic system, a vast living organism whose vitality depends on its diversity, particularizations, and distinctions. On the other hand, it recognizes the unique and privileged role of the human

being as the most advanced organism, one that bears the responsibility for sustaining and preserving the world in which they live.⁹

2. THE CHALLENGES SURROUNDING THE CONCEPT OF BIODIVERSITY

The concept of biodiversity presents several challenges, two of which will be the focus of this discussion: a descriptive challenge—how to define biodiversity—and a normative challenge—how to justify and legitimize efforts to conserve it.

Regarding the first challenge, it is important to acknowledge that, even within academic circles, there is still no clear consensus on how biodiversity or “biological diversity” should be defined and what it should encompass. Since the term “biodiversity” was coined in 1985, its scope has expanded to include not only individual biological elements but also the ecological interactions and processes that connect them, transforming it into a holistic and multifaceted concept. It has also come to encompass everything we aim to protect through conservation efforts.¹⁰ A key aspect of biodiversity lies in its emphasis on “variation” and “diversity,” a point underscored by the definition provided in Article 2 of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity:

“Biological diversity” means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.¹¹

The Convention on Biological Diversity identified three key levels of biological variation: genes, species, and ecosystems. Biodiversity was thus defined as the variability among living organisms, inherently implying diversity. This definition raised the critical question of how to measure such variability, a challenge complicated by the existence of unknown species¹² and living forms that cannot be directly measured or accounted for. This uncertainty has significant implications for conservation, as the effectiveness of biodiversity preservation efforts largely depends on how biodiversity is quantified—a question that remains unresolved.¹³ Over time, the concept of variety was expanded to include life in “all of its many manifestations,”¹⁴ extending to populations and communities. This broader understanding introduced a framework in which biodiversity gained specific value based on socio-political and economic contexts, often shaped by human interests.¹⁵ Thus, regarding the first challenge of definition, biodiversity remains an inherently fluid and ambiguous concept. Its scope is difficult to pin down due to the immeasurable, unquantifiable, and in some cases, unknowable nature of the life forms it aims to encompass. Regarding the second question, two main positions emerge in the evaluation of biodiversity conservation, each situating the concept of biodiversity within the broader debate of environmental ethics: 1. intrinsic value: biodiversity and its conservation are valued for their own sake, meaning humans have a moral obligation to preserve natural variety regardless of its practical utility; 2. instrumental value: biodiversity and its conservation are valued for their usefulness to humanity, providing benefits that justify preservation efforts. The first position aligns with biocentric or ecocentric perspectives in environmental ethics, which assert that nature—

whether individual living organisms or entire ecosystems¹⁶—possesses inherent value. This view is grounded in the belief that life itself has worth, independent of human needs. The second position reflects the anthropocentric perspective, which values nature primarily for the benefits it provides to humans.¹⁷ However, this anthropocentric approach has often been criticized as inadequate because it neglects the moral status and intrinsic value of nonhuman living beings. Surprisingly, despite these critiques, the anthropocentric framework appears to offer the most robust justification for the normative status of biodiversity conservation.

From the earliest discussions of “biotic diversity,” there has been a strong link between biodiversity and human well-being, making anthropocentric arguments the most persuasive in advocating for conservation. However, this perspective carries significant risks. It can lead to the selective prioritization of certain natural elements deemed more useful to humanity while neglecting others. This is problematic, given our limited knowledge of nature’s complexity—we do not fully know all species, nor can we predict which aspects of biodiversity will prove essential to future human survival and well-being.

Several positions have attempted to bridge the intrinsic and instrumental value of biodiversity. For instance, Caryl P. Haskins emphasized the intrinsic value of biotic diversity while simultaneously linking it to humanity’s survival.¹⁸ It was argued that biodiversity encompasses vital resources, the loss of which could severely limit future human choices. Similarly, G. Jon Roush identified four key reasons for preserving natural diversity: (1) human enjoyment, (2) ethical responsibility, (3) the potential for future benefits, and (4) the role of biodiversity in maintaining the stability of life systems.¹⁹ Subsequent works have built on this foundation, stressing that a crisis in biological diversity could result in the irreversible loss of resources and opportunities for future generations.²⁰ The core argument is that ecosystems with higher biodiversity are better equipped to meet future, unforeseen needs and desires.

In response to this reasoning, since 1985, three major frameworks have been developed to address biodiversity and its normative status:

1. The “ecosystem services framework,” which emphasizes the benefits that ecosystems provide to humanity, known as ecosystem services.²¹ Within this framework, biotic diversity is considered essential for maintaining these services and ensuring that future generations can meet their needs. The value of biodiversity, therefore, is tied to the goods and services it generates, contributing directly to human well-being. However, given the uncertainty surrounding which resources or ecological functions will be critical in the future, this approach promotes the precautionary conservation of ecological integrity to safeguard potential future needs.

2. The “conservation biology framework,” which views biodiversity as both the object and the primary goal of conservation biology. This framework does not focus on the concept of biological variety as a core principle. Instead, it encompasses two key positions: 2a. deflationism, which defines biodiversity retrospectively, based on current conservation practices. It is highly dependent on economic and stakeholder interests, as what is deemed worth preserving at any given time is determined by immediate, context-specific factors. As a

result, this approach tends to be relative and historically contingent, raising concerns about its long-term effectiveness and stability;²² 2b. eliminationism: this position argues that biodiversity is an impractical and even problematic concept due to the difficulty of accurately measuring it. Furthermore, it highlights that biodiversity is not inherently beneficial, as it can sometimes pose risks—such as harmful parasites that threaten human health. Therefore, eliminationists argue that the concept of biodiversity should be abandoned, favoring instead the idea that life itself holds intrinsic value, while its variations do not necessarily share this status. They also point out that biodiversity does not fully encompass the range of human interests toward the environment and may even limit broader environmental commitments. However, this position raises an important question: can we be certain that recognizing the intrinsic value of life does not also imply acknowledging the intrinsic value of its diversity? This unresolved concern challenges the eliminationist stance and invites further reflection on the role of variety in the preservation of life.

3. The “socio-ecological framework,” which focuses on the aspects of nature that society values. Within this framework, biodiversity is understood as a socio-political construct, and its crises, as well as the solutions to address them, are deeply embedded in sociopolitical and economic contexts.²³ As highlighted above, from an anthropocentric perspective, biological variation is considered valuable insofar as it benefits humanity—both current and future generations. The preservation of biodiversity, therefore, is closely tied to the preservation of options, resources, and opportunities for future generations, emphasizing the importance of maintaining life’s diversity to safeguard long-term human well-being.

As a result, the anthropocentric and utilitarian perspective has proven more effective in linking the normative status of biodiversity to intergenerational justice. It emphasizes that biodiversity conservation requires long-term actions with consequences not only for the present but, more importantly, for the future. However, several critical questions remain unanswered: why should we care about the potential uses of natural variety by future generations? What grounds our concern for their well-being? In other words, what legitimizes our moral obligation toward future generations?

Additionally, the anthropocentric approach to biodiversity—widely embraced—appears to be at odds with the biocentric and ecocentric perspectives commonly championed in environmental ethics, which emphasize valuing nature and life in themselves. The anthropocentric view tends to frame nature as subordinate to human needs, subject to control and exploitation. But how can this be reconciled when biodiversity itself is a central concern of environmental ethics? Does this create an inherent contradiction? In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to address and resolve this contradiction by drawing on the ideas of Hegel and Jonas.

3. ELEMENTS OF A DISCOURSE ON BIODIVERSITY IN THE THOUGHTS OF HEGEL AND JONAS

Addressing the concept of biodiversity through the thoughts of Hegel and Jonas may initially seem ambitious, if not misguided. First, because the term “biodiversity,” coined in 1985, is obviously absent from both thinkers’ work. Second, it may appear questionable to juxtapose

these two philosophers at all. However, the first issue is easily addressed by recognizing that biodiversity has a conceptual prehistory. Within this prehistory, numerous thinkers—including Hegel and Jonas—have offered valuable reflections on life, its intrinsic value, and its diverse manifestations. The second concern has been recently addressed by scholars who, while acknowledging Jonas’s criticisms of Hegel, have demonstrated that Jonas’s philosophical biology and understanding of the living organism share significant parallels with Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature. These parallels suggest the possibility of identifying a shared foundation in their views.²⁴ Building on these connections, I will argue that both Hegel and Jonas provide valuable insights that can meaningfully contribute to contemporary discussions on biodiversity. In the context of Hegel’s understanding of nature as a “system of stages,” we can read that “the variety of forms has to be grasped as necessary and determinate,” in accordance with the Idea of nature (Enz-N, §249Z). In the addition to §249, Hegel further highlights—with reference to metamorphoses—that “it is important to maintain identity, but not less important to maintain difference” (Enz-N, §249Z). However, Hegel is notably critical of attempts to categorize or enumerate all living species and forms of life. He finds such efforts not only impractical but fundamentally misguided. In the Remark to §250, he writes:

The infinite wealth and variety of forms, and the utterly irrational contingency which mixes with the external order the natural formations, have been praised as the sublime freedom and divinity of nature, or at least as the divinity within it. . . . Traces of Notional determination will certainly survive in the most particularized product, although they will not exhaust its nature. . . . The difficulty, and in many cases the impossibility of finding clear distinctions for classes and orders on the basis of empirical observation, has its root in the inability of nature to hold fast to the realization of the Notion [Begriff]. Nature never fails to blur essential limits with intermediate and defective formations, and so to provide instances which qualify every firm distinction. (Enz-N, §250A)

Hegel argues that empirical observation can never fully capture—or “count up”—the multiplicity and variety of nature’s forms. Moreover, it appears that nature itself resists clear and rigid distinctions among its species and categories, suggesting that life operates as a continuum, even though it is structured through distinct stages or degrees. For Hegel, nature is fundamentally a “living whole” that unfolds and realizes itself through a progressive series of stages (Enz-N, §251). However, many of its particularities remain undiscovered or unexplained, and perhaps always will, meaning that the full variety of nature can never be entirely grasped through empirical means.²⁵ In the section of Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature dedicated to Organic Physics, Hegel examines life and its diverse forms or configurations. Here, especially in his discussion of animal organisms, Hegel reinforces the view of nature as an interconnected living whole, with all parts necessarily related to one another:

In nature, vitality [Lebendigkeit] certainly disperses into the indeterminate plurality of living beings, but there are intrinsically subjective organisms, and it is only in the Idea that they constitute a single life [ein Leben] and organic system. (Enz-N, §337; translation modified)

What stands out here is that vitality (*Lebendigkeit*) seems to necessitate differentiation into a multiplicity of beings. These beings are, on the one hand, autonomous and self-determining entities with their own “subjectivity,” but on the other hand, they remain integral components of the organic system of nature, which functions as a unified whole, as one life—“the primary truth” (*das Wahre*, Enz-N, §337Z). Life, in this context, begins to be defined by self-finality, a concept that Hegel further elaborates in his discussion of the animal organism.²⁶

Hegel’s treatment of genus and species also offers valuable insights. In §368 of the *Encyclopedia*, he explains that the genus is particularized into species, but these species are not isolated entities; rather, they are completely “subservient to the changes of the external universal life of nature. The life of the animal shares in the vicissitudes of this universal life” (Enz-N, §368A). This underscores the interconnectedness of individual life forms with the broader system of life, illustrating how the life of specific organisms depends on and participates in the larger context of nature’s vitality. The animal, according to Hegel, is “life belonging to nature,” and its vitality remains inseparable from “the infinitely numerous particularizations of inorganic and vegetable nature” (Enz-N, §368Z).

Hegel also highlights the difficulty of rigid classifications within the living world, noting that “the infinity of forms exhibited by animal being is not to be pedantically regarded as conforming absolutely to the necessary principle of orders” (Enz-N, §368Z). However, within this continuum of life forms, Hegel makes it clear that in the progression of natural beings—“in the graded scale of development formed by the genera and species”—the human being represents the “most perfect organism,” the highest stage of development. This stage not only marks the culmination of vitality but also serves as the reference point for understanding the lower stages of life. As Hegel puts it, “the human being is the crowning type of the organism, and as he is used as the instrument of spirit, all aspects must have reached their most perfect development” (Enz-N, §368Z; translation modified). This implies that the human being is uniquely distinguished by the development of rational thinking, setting humanity apart within the natural order.

To some extent, however, the human being is also an animal organism, sharing key biological characteristics with other living beings. What makes Hegel’s theory of the organism particularly fascinating is how it addresses the relationship between the organism and externality, integrating the multiplicity of the external world into the organism itself. As an organic individuality, the living organism possesses the ability to absorb and assimilate external elements—specifically, inorganic nature—into its inner processes as part of its self-production. This process is central to the organism’s subjectivity. By being open and outwardly directed (*nach außen*) toward the external world (Enz-N, §352), the organism maintains its identity, individuality, and unity through its interaction with external multiplicity. The organism does not lose itself in this interaction but instead transforms external elements into its own being. It produces itself by engaging with externality and inorganic nature, without becoming something else. Its defining power lies in this transformative capacity: to integrate externality into its own nature, as Hegel puts it, “transforming externality into animal being” (Enz-N, §356Z). This continuous, cyclical process of self-production and self-preservation allows the organism to return to itself,

completing a cycle of internalization and renewal. This dynamic reveals the organism's intrinsic teleology—its inherent purposefulness—by demonstrating how it constantly reproduces and sustains itself while integrating the external world. For Hegel, all of this represents a primary form of freedom, an inner purposiveness (*innere Zweckmäßigkeit*), a *causa finalis* that characterizes life itself. This differs fundamentally from a mere *causa efficiens*—the efficient causality that governs inorganic nature—because the *causa finalis* implies that the beginning of the process, or the organism's purpose, coincides with the end result (Enz-N, §351Z). According to Hegel, a living organism is not simply a mechanical assemblage of parts placed side by side. Instead, its parts mutually depend on and influence one another, forming an interconnected whole where each part is meaningful only within the context of the whole. As noted in §356 of the Encyclopedia, each member of the organism “is interchangeably both end and means” and maintains “itself by virtue of the other members, and in opposition to them” (Enz-N, §356). Thus, the parts of the organism cannot exist independently: “if a finger is cut off, a process of chemical decomposition sets in, and it is no longer a finger” (Enz-N, §350Z). If an organ or part of the organism becomes overly particularized, isolating itself and working against the integrated activity of the whole, the organism becomes ill (Enz-N, §371).²⁷ This understanding of the organism as a system—already present in Hegel's writings from his time in Jena—conceives the organism as a whole, where every part contributes to a shared purposive action and is intrinsically connected to the others. Any alteration in one part affects the others and, by extension, the entire organism. Although for Hegel—unlike for Schelling, by which this conception nonetheless remains strongly influenced—the concept of the organism is applied metaphorically to nature as a whole, his conception of the living organism can nonetheless offer valuable insights when extended to the natural world. It provides a framework for understanding the unity of living beings, life as an interconnected system, and the significance of biodiversity within this context.

On the one hand, each animal organism is a self-producing entity with a degree of freedom and autonomy, but on the other hand, it depends on the external world—and even on other living organisms—for its production and self-maintenance. This dependency reveals the inner contradiction inherent in living beings. For Hegel, the process of “assimilation” or nutrition addresses this contradiction. Assimilation involves overcoming the organism's dependence on externality—that is, on external nature as a preexisting world—by appropriating inorganic nature and thereby reuniting the organism with itself. Through this process, the external world is internalized and transformed into the organism's subjectivity (Enz-N, §357). Hegel describes this as the reduction of the “separated moments of inorganic nature to the infinite unity of subjectivity” (Enz-N, §358A). Although assimilation involves mechanical and chemical processes, and the organism itself possesses mechanical and chemical properties, Hegel argues that these are insufficient to explain life in its entirety. In this view, while acknowledging a form of continuity between nature and spirit, Hegel defends an anti-reductionist perspective on organic nature, rejecting any explanation that reduces life solely to mechanical or chemical functions.²⁸

Regarding the human being, Hegel asserts:

As vitality's most perfect organism, human being then constitutes the highest stage of the development. . . . It is natural to progress in this way from the undeveloped to the higher organism, but in order to understand the lower stages, one has to identify the developed organism, for it is this that constitutes the measure or prototype of its less developed counterparts. As everything in it has reached its developed activity, it is clear that it is primarily from this developed organism that the undeveloped being is to be understood. (Enz-N, §370Z; translation modified)

I will now briefly introduce some of Hans Jonas's reflections that I consider particularly relevant to the topic at hand and that help bring Hegel's key insights into contemporary discussions. Jonas's philosophical biology contains a core that is more Hegelian than the author himself—or many of his interpreters—might acknowledge. His understanding of nature and the living organism has a great foundational potential, as it draws on a “philosophy of the organism” to establish the ontological continuity between nature and spirit. This is achieved by demonstrating the presence of spirit within nature and the gradual emergence of freedom and subjectivity in the living organism. This continuity leads to the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature and life, not merely in relation to human interests but as valuable in themselves. Jonas's *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966) makes a crucial contribution to this view, serving as a bridge between Hegel's ideas and contemporary environmental ethics.

In the epilogue of *The Phenomenon of Life*, which marks the transition from Jonas's philosophy of the organism to his philosophy of the human being—and ultimately to his ethical work in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979)—Hegel is the only philosopher explicitly mentioned. Jonas references Hegel when presenting the idea of an ethics derived from a philosophical biology that traces the progressive stages of freedom within nature and culminates in the human being: “The reflection of being in knowledge may be more than a human event: it may be an event for being itself that affect its metaphysical condition. In Hegelian language: a ‘coming-to-itself’ of original substance.”²⁹ This reference to Hegel is no coincidence. Rather, it highlights the proximity of Jonas's project to that of German Idealism, and especially to Hegel's thought.³⁰

For both Jonas and Hegel, organic life only becomes fully aware of its intrinsic value in its highest form—the human being. Jonas's philosophical biology can be understood as a speculative, reflective movement that begins with the human perspective and traces life backward through its “pre-human” forms, ultimately arriving at a “return to itself” of human existence or spirit, as Hegel would describe it. Furthermore, both thinkers view the organism as a system. Jonas defines this system as follows:

Formally, the sense of “system” is determined by the concept of “being together,” which presupposes a multiplicity that has just come to stand in the relation of “being together,” or cannot stand otherwise than in it. System is thus necessarily a manifold, but beyond that the sense of “being together” here is that the manifold has an effective principle of

its unity. . . . The “being together” of the parts is not a neutral togetherness, but a mutual determination, and again such a determination that the togetherness is preserved by this very means.³¹

Jonas, like Hegel, holds that the unity of an organic system is preserved through change and transformation, where unity is maintained through the multiplicity of processes and interactions. This process includes the organism’s relationship with the external world, facilitated by the continuous exchange of matter with its environment. Within this framework, Jonas introduces an intriguing discussion of metabolism as an early form of freedom, which closely parallels Hegel’s understanding of assimilation. In Jonas’s view, metabolism is the process that continually renews the organism’s composition, distinguishing the living being from a mere machine. It highlights the active relationship between the organism and its environment, from which it draws the resources necessary for its survival. This reflects the dialectical relationship between the organism and matter, a relationship Jonas describes as “needful freedom”—the living organism depends on the external world of nature to sustain itself. This mirrors Hegel’s notion of the inner contradiction inherent to living beings.

From this perspective, important insights emerge regarding the relationship between humans and their environment: a relationship defined by belonging, dependence, and reciprocity. While Jonas and Hegel both acknowledge an ontological continuity between nature and spirit, animal organism and human being, they also recognize the unique specificity of the human being. As an embodied living being, the human retains its naturalness, with physicality and biological characteristics playing a fundamental role. At the same time, humans transcend nature by becoming rational, reflective beings. This reflective capacity, or what Jonas calls “immanent transcendence,” enables humans to perceive something beyond the visible—the self of freedom.

This reflective dimension is tied to moral freedom, which Jonas views as both transcendent and dangerous, as it includes the potential for radical evil. This “trans-animal freedom” is unique to humans and imposes upon them a responsibility for themselves and the world they inhabit. Thus, subjectivity emerges from nature but simultaneously seeks to transcend it, grounding humanity’s ethical responsibility toward nature and its preservation.

To conclude, I would like to highlight what Jonas states in the chapter titled “The Good, the Ought, and Being: A Theory of Responsibility” within *The Imperative of Responsibility*:

In organic life, nature has made its interest manifest and progressively satisfies it, at the rising cost of concomitant frustration and extinction, in the staggering variety of life’s forms, each of which is a mode of being and striving. The price is necessary, since each purpose can be realized only at the cost of other purposes. The generic multiplicity itself represents such a selection, of which it is impossible to say whether it was always the “best,” but whose preservation is certainly a good compared to the alternative of annihilation or impoverishment.³²

Although, as mentioned, the concept of biodiversity does not explicitly appear in Jonas's work, we can nevertheless identify a crucial statement regarding the variety of life forms as distinct ways of being that must be preserved because they represent a fundamental Good. Life, in this sense, is affirmed as a value in itself. This affirmation arises from the understanding that every living being is not only an end of nature but, more importantly, an end in itself, defined by self-affirmation and the drive for self-preservation. For Jonas, as for Hegel, the human being embodies the highest stage of natural development—or, in Jonas's words, the "supreme outcome of nature's purposive labor."³³ Unlike other beings, the human is no longer the "automatic executor but, with the power obtained from knowledge, can become its destroyer as well. He must adopt the 'yes' into his will and impose the 'no' to not-being on his power."³⁴

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the continuity between nature and spirit, environment and living organism, and from the fact that subjectivity and an embryonic form of freedom emerge from nature and life while retaining a natural core, it can be concluded that nature and life possess intrinsic value and dignity of their own. At the same time, the recognition that humans, as rational and reflective beings, represent the highest stage of natural development, freedom, and life justifies their responsibility toward the vast natural system or living organism of which they are an integral part. This responsibility points to a form of moderate anthropocentrism rooted in a biocentric ontology, blending the insights of anthropocentric ethics with those of environmental ethics, which acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. In this sense, the position I am proposing argues that human beings hold a unique moral status because they are the only rational, thinking beings capable of bearing responsibility for their actions. However, this does not imply that humans are the only beings deserving moral consideration. Here, biocentric claims play a crucial role. An anthropocentric perspective need not exclude the possibility—or the necessity—of cultivating a non-anthropocentric consciousness grounded in the ontological continuity between humans and nature.³⁵ In relation to biodiversity, this means that biodiversity holds both instrumental and non-instrumental value.³⁶ As I have shown, the various forms of life are interconnected, with each mode of life depending, to some extent, on the others.³⁷ The extinction of one species inevitably impacts others, demonstrating that nature functions as a living whole—a dynamic system or organism in which each configuration and particularization plays a necessary role, even though, as Hegel noted, this complexity can never be fully grasped through empirical observation. Life has intrinsic value, and its diverse forms must be preserved as a good in themselves, as Jonas argued. Since human beings represent the final stage of natural development, their capacity for rational thought enables them to understand and appreciate life's intrinsic value and its interconnectedness with other forms of life. Consequently, the preservation of biodiversity is not only a good in itself but also a moral duty for human beings understood as part of nature (biocentric perspective) and as the only moral subjects capable of being responsible for it (anthropocentric perspective).

Recognizing life as a value in itself also establishes a moral connection between present and future generations. This recognition provides the foundation for intergenerational justice and

a holistic view of biodiversity—one that respects life and its countless, even unknown, variations.³⁸

NOTES

1. I developed this aspect in Battistoni 2023a.
2. For an overview of the various positions in environmental ethics, see Light and Rolston 2002.
3. Vieweg 2020: 84–95.
4. See Vieweg 2020: 89–90.
5. “The reason for maintaining and sustaining the natural world, as Hegel makes explicit in his theory of recognition, lies in the communality of the individual’s life-needs and the concern for their current and future satisfaction—care (Sorge) and forethought (Vorsorge),” as Vieweg claims (Vieweg 2020: 91).
6. Vieweg 2020: 92.
7. I refer to Jonas (1973) and to Whitehead (1978). On this, see Battistoni 2023b: 59–72.
8. See the contributions contained in Battistoni 2024.
9. Sally Sedgwick has recently shown that Hegel’s concept of freedom is compatible with the realm of nature, because “our only home is nature” (Sedgwick 2018: 249–61). The idea that “our only home is nature” is a crucial point to ground our responsibility towards nature.
10. For an in-depth discussion of the history of the concept of biodiversity and its various interpretations over the years, see Faith 2023. On possible definitions of biodiversity, see also Levin 2013.
11. <https://www.cbd.int/convention/articles/?a=cbd-02#:~:text=’Biological%20diversity’%20means%20the%20variability,between%20species%20and%20of%20ecosystems; emphasis added.>
12. Species, in particular, are considered vital parts of the whole that sustains life, a whole on which we depend.
13. On this, see the entry “Biodiversity Preservation” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/biodiversity.html>.
14. Gaston 2010: 27–44. The position briefly presented in the text corresponds to the so-called “multidimensional variationist” view of biodiversity, which emphasizes variability. On this see Burch-Brown and Archer 2017.
15. See Potschin, Haines-Young, Fish, and Turner 2016.
16. Correspondingly to the biocentric individualism and the ecocentric holism. On this, see Oksanen 1997: 541–45.
17. For an in-depth discussion of these positions, see Oksanen 1997. Oksanen further diversifies the anthropocentric position into a weak and a strong anthropocentrism, where the latter bases biodiversity on normatively unqualified human interests, while the former adopts

an objective view of the human good, but does not ascribe intrinsic value to biodiversity. See also Newman, Varner, and Linquist 2017.

18. See Haskins 1974: 646–47. See also Burch-Brown and Archer 2017: 990.

19. See Roush 1977: 9–12.

20. See Wilson 1985.

21. See Daily 1997.

22. Moreover, this view inevitably leaves aside those species that objectively at this time are not directly useful to humans. On this, see Oksanen 1997: 542.

23. For an in-depth discussion of these frameworks, see Faith 2023.

24. See Michelini, Wunsch, and Stederth 2018 and Erle 2020.

25. “One must start from the Notion, and even if it should as yet be unable to exhaust what is called the ‘abundant variety’ of nature, and there is still a great deal of particularity to be explained, it must be trusted nevertheless.” Enz-N, §353Z.

26. This one “differentiates itself within itself, and maintains the unity of multiplicity.” Enz-N, §344Z. In a certain sense, multiplicity (of systems, elements, organs, etc.) is part of the animal organism itself. As we can read in Enz-N, §355: “the differences of the elements and their systems also unite in a general concrete interpenetration in shape. In this unity, each formation of shape contains these elements linked together within it.”

27. This applies to both the Hegelian conception of physical illness and that of mental illness. On the latter, I refer to my recent study, Battistoni 2024c.

28. On this topic, see Kabeshin 2021: 479–94.

29. Jonas 1966: 283–84.

30. This has been rightly highlighted by Giorgio Erle in Erle 2020: 66.

31. Note that this passage is not included in the English edition of the book, but in the German edition, Jonas 1973. The translation into English is mine.

32. Jonas 1984: 81; emphasis added.

33. Jonas 1984: 82.

34. Jonas 1984: 82.

35. I made this point also in Battistoni 2024a.

36. In a different way, this is argued also by Burch-Brown and Archer (2017: 990).

37. This is argued also by Oksanen (1997: 543).

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