A Hegelian Approach to Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract

Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel has been known as one of the philosophers that does not promote environmentalism as most of his works were focused on Nature vis-à-vis Spirit implies anthropocentrism. Hegel was considered a champion of the unqualified industrial exploitation of nature. But recently, researchers deemed that Hegel's philosophy can accommodate the problems related to environmental philosophy. Hence, this paper will focus on the potentiality of Hegel's use in Environmentalism, in agreement with Nicholas Mowad's work *The Natural World Spirit : Hegel on the Value of Nature (2012), Alison Stone's work Petrified Intelligence (2005), and Wendell Kisner's work The Category of Life, Mechanistic Reduction, and the Uniqueness of Biology (2008)*. This paper agrees that there are only limited things to which anthropocentrism can be applied in nature and that there is still some essence of nature into which we can know and are true, not being influenced by human phenomena. Thus, the paper holds that it is the concept of Consciousness holds the key to how we can aid environmentalism through Hegel, with our capability of knowing the true nature of the environment, we can then help with aiding the environmental crisis.

Keywords: Hegel, Consciousness, Environmental Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, a well-known German philosopher, was often considered to be a philosopher that prefers Spirit over Nature in his philosophy. This understanding came from his prevalent idea of Geist in his work *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in which the Geist itself is the culmination of his theory of knowledge. His theory of Geist is also seen in his *Philosophy of History* as something that is being realized. So

MABINI REVIEW | Vol. XII (2023): pages 75-87
 | ISSN 2012-2144

far, Hegel's philosophy can be seen as something in which the Spirit becomes. But as much as Hegel's philosophy can be seen as something influential even at this time, Hegel is often seen as a philosopher who prefers Spirit over Nature. I will make use of the word Spirit here very loosely. Spirit can be referred to here in my paper as something that was produced by the human intellect, whether that is culture or Reason itself all of which are referred to by Hegel in his work. Hence, what is meant by Hegel prefers Spirit over Nature is that Hegel prefers human intellect over the external objects or environment in which he lived. His *Phenomenology of the Spirit* presents this well, from his process of Consciousness to Self-Consciousness to Reason towards Geist. Consciousness, is our ability to be aware of external things in reference to the Ego, Self-consciousness, is our ability to be aware of ourselves in reference to the external world, Reason, is the synthesis of both, or the ability of the intellect to connect both Consciousness and Self-Consciousness and Geist is the becoming of Reason that can be seen in our society or culture.

This idea of Spirit over Nature can be seen in his *Philosophy of History* as well as history itself is the becoming of Geist. As Reason itself was being processed by the people who participated in history, Reason then presented itself in the actions, and phenomena of the people of history. This participation or presentation of Reason will then become Geist into which that history itself reveals.

It is no doubt that Hegel is then perceived as someone who prefers Spirit over Nature. But what is this question? I asked this question in the first place because of how timely is Nature to our generation and how influential Hegel is particularly to contemporary philosophers. First, we have the problem of climate change, surely, it is relevant then to ask whether the philosopher you pursue fits into this problem. Two, Hegel's work reacted particularly to the contemporary philosophers and Hegel is very relevant to the philosophy itself. Like Tom Rockmore stated in his work *Hegel, Analytic Philosophy and Realism* (2002) that indeed the second generation of the analytic neo-pragmatist philosopher is less concerned with Hegel's idealism, but they are nonetheless willing to undertake any questions or concerns related to epistemological foundationalism (Rockmore 2002, 126). According to Rockmore, the two notable analytic philosophers who have undertaken criticism of philosophical idealism are G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. Moore

rests his three claims on why he criticizes philosophical idealism, those are: 1) idealism denies the existence of the external world, 2) idealism, in general, can be identified and refuted in the immediate empirical knowledge, and 3), there is immediate empirical knowledge (Rockmore 2002, 123). Although Rockmore indeed assures us that Moore did not identify that it was indeed Hegel that he criticizes or it was philosophical idealism in general, it nonetheless pushes other philosophers to pursue empirical knowledge, such as Bacon and Locke.

Russell, on the other hand for Rockmore, was briefly attracted to Hegel, particularly in Hegel's Philosophy of History, Russell concedes that Hegel's views are false, as he perceives them as a violation of elementary logical principles. But at least to Hegel, according to Rockmore, it "has been made possible through two developments within analytic philosophy: the later Wittgenstein's critique of the realism underlying Moore's commonsensism and Sellar's attack on empiricism" (Rockmore 2002, 124).

Hegel has also been linked to pragmatism as well, this includes Peirce (who believed his position differs mainly from the terminology used by Hegel), Dewey (who opposed absolute idealism for objective idealism), and James (who staunchly opposed idealism in its all forms). For Rockmore, other contemporary Anglo-American analytic neo-pragmatists and analytic philosophy, routinely conflate pragmatism and Hegel as well (Rockmore 2002, 125).

Hence, it the ever-present threat of Environmental crises such as climate change and the influence of Hegel, I deemed it important to ask this question, can we use Hegel's concept of Consciousness in consideration with the work of Mowad, Kisner, and Stone in the environmental philosophy? Thus the purpose of this paper is to claim focus only on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit's* Consciousness, and how this concept of Consciousness is not a phenomenal process resulting from the Spirit imposed on Nature. Rather, there are things in which Consciousness reveals its true nature to the Subject by rejecting the idea that Consciousness in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* will always be a product of human subjectivity. This paper also aims to present that Hegel can be used in Environmental philosophy as one of the alternative ways to undertake and resolve the environmental crisis.

Like what has been stated above, my claim is in line with Nicholas Mowad in his work *The Nature World Spirit: Hegel on the Value of Nature* (2012), Alison Stone in her work *Petrified Intelligence* (2005), and Wendell Kisner in his work *The Category of Life, Mechanistic Reduction, and the Uniqueness of Biology (2008).* This paper will also briefly discuss Val Plum Wood in his work *Feminism and Mastery of Nature (1993)* and Slavoj Zizek in his work *Mythology, Madness and Laughter in German Idealism (2009)* particularly their criticism of Hegel's work.

With this, the objectives of my paper are:

1. Present that Hegel does not prefer Spirit over Nature, instead that both are equally important in his philosophy.

2. To present that Hegel can be used in Environmental philosophy.

Hegel for Environmental Philosophy

Though limited philosophers have mentioned the potentiality of Hegel's use in Environmentalism, the likes of Kendell Wisner and Akinola Mohammed Akomolafe and Olusegun Steven Samuels, it nonetheless raises the question of Hegel's use of environmental philosophy. Akinola Mohammed Akomolafe and Olusegun Steven Samuel in their article *Hegel's idealism and environmental holism (2014)* believed that Hegel could be used by environmentalists. They both believed that Hegel's idealism could provide internal order for environmental ethicists.

> Hegel's idealism can provide internal order for environmental ethicists' position, especially Leopold and Callicott's theories which have a resemblance with Hegel's idealism in certain respects. Both Hegel and the exponents of land ethics are interested in showing how human action can be carried out in a way that contradictions are in thought and actions are resolved. It is vital also to note that contradiction is the thrust of idealism and environmental ethics (Akomolafe and Samuel 2014, 32).

Windell Kisner also mentioned in his article, *A species-based environmental ethic in Hegel's Logic of life (2009)*, that 'very little work has been done to date on Hegel's possible contribution to eco-philosophy

and environmentalism. His philosophy [Hegel] has for the most part been relegated to an environmental dustbin:'

> In part, this may be due to some of Hegel's own unpromising remarks about nature vis-à-vis spirit and the implied anthropocentrism therein, and in part to the extraordinary difficulty of deciphering the Hegelian corpus. [But] there are resources in Hegel's text that speak against some of his own apparently dismissive statements as well as against the interpretation of Hegel as a champion of the unqualified industrial exploitation of nature (Kisner 2009, 2).

For Kisner, 'the ecosystem ethic corresponds to an ontological conceptualization of life that is indicated when the account of life in the Logic is taken together with the account of freedom in the Philosophy of Right. This could avoid some of the problematic features of several previous attempts to ground a normative framework with respect to non-human beings while accommodating the concerns of at least some of them' (Kisner 2009, 2).

A good question is then, who are the philosophers who think of Hegel otherwise?

Hegel's Preference for Spirit over Nature

Val Plumwood and Slovaj Zizek are good examples that present that Hegel cannot be used in environmental philosophy.

Val Plumwood in his work *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* (1993) perceives that Hegel is one of those philosophers (including Marx) that defends unfair usage of the environment without specifically looking into its value (Wood 1993, 16). This stems from his analysis of associating of women with the environment, and men with rationality (Wood 1993, 45). He said:

> The attempt to view women and reproduction in terms of nature/ culture dualism is distorting whichever of the alternatives. The construction of reproduction as the field of nature makes it the work of instinct, lacking skill, care, and value. It is an unshakable and insupportable "natural" burden that can be allowed to dominate and

> distort women's lives and destroy their capacity for choice and participation in a wider sphere of life. If in the rationalistic paradigm (for example Hegel), the male body is made rational by being made the instrument of rationality that transforms nature, the female body is made part of the culture by being subject to the control of others taken to represent rationality (Wood 1993, 38).

Plum Wood added, that this then produces an idea that the latter is "passive, non-subjects" that are manipulated by rationality (Wood 1993, 38). This, of course, was affirmed by Nicholas Mowad's claim that Hegel was often perceived as someone who prefers Spirit instead of Nature, "Hegel is known at all in the popular consciousness, he is thought of an arch-intellectualist, one who degrades nature and exalts spirit" (Mowad 2012, 47).

Plum Wood also added that such distinctions (nature/ women and men/ Spirit or Reason) warp the lives of women and how we view the environment (Wood 1993, 38) leading to environmental injustice and environmental crisis. This idea was of course produced by others who had encountered Hegel claiming that Nature is subordinate to Spirit, a good example is Slavoj Zizek.

Zizek holds that Hegel in his Philosophy of Spirit has held the dialectical-materialist aspect of his work. He holds that "nature to (human) Spirit is here developed not as a direct outside intervention to Spirit, but disturbing the balance of the natural circuit" (Zizek 2009, 107) implying the same thing as Plum Wood. Zizek added, aside from that the distinction between Nature and Spirit does not show a clear distinction, "it lacks a clear self-feeling, a feeling of itself as distinguished from external reality" (Zizek 2009, 108) leaving more problems, creating indeterminacy instead of a clear cut distinction of Nature and Spirit.

Hegel regarding Nature

The philosophers, on the other hand, has presented criticism towards Plumwood and Zizek are Alison Stone, Wendell Kisner, and Nicholas Mowad as these philosophers as well have found that Hegel has the potential for Environmental Philosophy.

Alison Stone, stated indeed Hegel's work presents an anthropological phase, this came from the idea of Sensuous Consciousness in which Stone presents an impoverished representation. She said "the problem with sensuous consciousness is that it does not permit the subject to differentiate between singular, external beings. The subject, therefore, cannot actually pick out one such item in contrast to any others, as soon as the subject identifies an item, that item merges into undifferentiation with all other supposedly distinct items." She said this deficiency came from how consciousness was conceptualized in the first place, the subject has left itself no room to conceive material items it only has simple singularities and lacks differentiated content (Stone 2005, 38). But correcting this, Stone added that "although Hegel believes natural forms to act according to rational requirements... those are conscious of the rational requirement from which they act" (Stone 2005, 81).

> The planets revolve around the sun because this behavior is the rationally necessary expression of the fact that the planets are partially identical to one another and partially different. But the planets are not conscious of their partial identity and do not intend to give it expression in their behavior. Nor can it even be said that the planets unconsciously follow rational requirements of which they have some kind of structurally inaccessible mental awareness. The planets, like all other natural forms, are simply not conscious at all (Stone 2005, 82).

Following such claim, according to Stone, Hegel tries his best not to exhibit this misleading as though that nature itself has its "thought-determination" (Stone 2005, 82). Hence Hegel can still present itself as a not thought-determining philosophy. There are still parts into which we can learn from nature.

Wendell Kisner in his work *The Category of Life, Mechanistic Reduction, and the Uniqueness of Biology (2008)*, claims that Hegel may indeed appear as someone who gives external reality as a subjective sphere, but he is not. Kisner affirms that any account that will fall into the subjective sphere will always need a "categorical distinction" into which " that was given in advance" is not something which that just

appeared out of nowhere. He also added that this claim is also based on "Hegel's derivation of necessity, as a necessity that there be a contingency" that it would be impossible to have a thought without an empirical sphere (Kisner, The Category of Life, Mechanistic Reduction and the Uniqueness of Biology 2008, 117).

> It is a mistake to assume that the categories derived in the Logic are merely epistemology as opposed to ontological. If there is no justification for placing thought over and against being at the outset, then it is also a mistake to assume that there must be a problem with gaining access to what is to be thought "about" as if we're trying to get something outside thought (Kisner, The Category of Life, Mechanistic Reduction and the Uniqueness of Biology 2008, 118).

Implying the same thing as Stone, there are still things into which we can learn from the empirical sphere that are not just limited to the subjective sphere into which most of Hegel's critics would say.

Nicholas Mowad, on the other hand, agrees with Stone and Kisner's affirmation. In his work, *The Natural World of Spirit: Hegel on the Value of Nature (2012), he* criticizes the idea of Hegel as being an "arch-intellectualist, one who degrades nature and exalts Spirit (Mowad 2012, 55)". Mowad stated that "the world seems dualistic to Hegel, and that human will, which hence appears as what is superior, independent, and essential – the world is presented as subordinate, dependent and inessential (Mowad 2012, 47)" but Hegel is not. Mowad states that "many have regarded or identified these kinds of dualisms as a major source of misunderstandings regarding the human relation to the world nature, and consequently the stumbling block for an environmental ethics (Mowad 2012, 49), but for him, there is no dualism in Hegel because what we have is a warps understanding of Hegel and the environment. Mowad expounded on this by giving an example, the human body.

A human body for Mowad "is never merely a thing, but rather is always in the existence of freedom. Though it can be made to serve as an instrument for the will, there are limits to how it may be used, the human body is indeed a part of corporeal nature, but it always commands respect" (Mowad 2012, 55). Hence there is always an aspect into which we can indeed create a certain phenomenon of the

body, as indeed it is part of our nature to create this subjectivity, but nonetheless, this does not mean that we disregard the body itself, we still see the body as something different and dissimilar and helps us create this subjectivity. Like what Mowad said about culture, "a people have a special relationship with their natural environment: their culture is intimately bound to its natural environment " (Mowad 2012, 56, 59) as much as we try to say that we are subjective but we are still bound to this body. That being said, Mowad believed that the Spirit and Nature have this intimate dialectical relation to each other, without each other, both cannot be realized. Spirit cannot be created without humans referring to their geographical location, or the human body to the Nature (environment) in which they are living (Mowad 2012, 59).

Hence, Stone, Kisner and Mowad represent that Hegel has indeed not present himself a prevalence of Spirit over Nature that pushes the idea that Hegel is against environmentalism or does not regard environmental philosophy in general. Hence, this opens the door to the potentiality of Hegel's philosophy for environmental philosophy.

In agreement with Mowad, Stone, and Kisner claim, I deemed it that we can also unravel what Nature is in his Consciousness which makes Hegel possible for Environmental Philosophy.

Hegel's Consciousness

Focusing only on Consciousness, I find it too that Hegel has been misunderstood, instead, Hegel for me shows that Hegel did not actually prefer Spirit over Nature, thereby agreeing with both Mowad, Kisner, and Stone's claim.

Consciousness according to Hegel is "about the Ego that knows and the relation of the Ego and the object to each other." That is the subject came to know the object, and the object is determined by the subject. Hence, it is quite possible to view them the same as in and for themselves outside of Consciousness and the relation of the Ego and the object to each other. It is as if what we know is the Truth of the Object (Hegel 1986, 55). What lies here in Hegel's concept of nature is that humans can modify and produce a new idea about nature itself (or about the subject itself), it is because Consciousness is phenomenal.

Hegel also added that as much as the subject was independent of the object, the object meanwhile, was essentially determined or modified through the mediating relation to Consciousness. 'This reciprocity, according to Hegel, continues through the Phenomenal sphere of Consciousness' (Hegel 1986, 56).

A good question then, can we actually know the object then? Can we actually know Nature? The answer lies in the process of Hegel from Consciousness to Self-Consciousness and to Reason.

It is clear, Consciousness is about our awareness of the existence of the object. What is startling about this idea is its idea of "Here and Now." Here is in reference to Hegel in space, meanwhile Now is in reference to time. It is then indefinitely we know the object then, but Hegel also added, it is also not just about Now and Here, but it is also about "This." It is that "This" refers to our ability to differentiate it from another object. Hence, our capability of saying this is an apple and that is orange is also in reference to that we are capable and aware of both these objects giving us the capability of comparing and contrasting them.

Hegel also added that in Consciousness, we are also capable of knowing the properties of objects, which makes them the same as other things and yet at the same time different from them (Hegel 1986, 57). For Hegel, 'properties are always mediated;' which always, have been perceived by the Ego. They have their existence in another and are subject to change. As perceived by the Ego, properties are thus, only accidents, according to Hegel. Since the objects subsist in their properties, they can 'perish through the change of those properties, and became an alternation of birth and decay' (Hegel 1869, 169). But as Hegel realizes that there is a problem in relation to how we then perceive reality, as if reality excludes each other and that reality itself is a separate entity from one another (due to properties such as accidents). Hegel tries to correct this mistake by saying that Consciousness recognizes this mistake and takes responsibility correct this untruth, Hegel calls this "inner of things" (Hegel 1986, 57).

The *Inner of Things* is where the object is free from the phenomenal manifestation that favors an outer in opposition to the inner, however, as much as it is not phenomenal, it is only phenomenal through concept. Or in general, as much as the essence of the thing is free from

phenomenal manifestation, Comprehension of the thing corresponds to such manifestation, connecting them, correcting them. For example:

> This salt is different from that salt.
>
> But, despite we know that they are not the same salt, we know that both are salts (Hegel 1869, 170).

I think the problem here lies in the emphasis of the phrase that Consciousness is phenomenal, making it anthropomorphic, but akin to Mowad, Kisner, and Stone, Hegel also affirms that there is part of Consciousness that is free from the Ego, that is, our capability to distinguish one object to the other and at the same time saying it is the same thing (e.g. Salt). Hence, knowing then for Hegel despite its emphasis refers to that we can indeed know Nature (environment) is something that is, indeed, in reference with the Ego but in some sense does not. We know a Lion as Lion because we refer to it as Lion, but we also know that Lion eats meat not because of its reference to our Ego but also at the same time, it is true and is independent of our Ego. We can also refer to the Here, Now, and This. As Here Quezon city is indeed phenomenal, but the place itself to which the Quezon city refers is not.

CONCLUSION

There is indeed a problem when it comes to understanding Hegel's philosophy, as he is known as someone who uses complex language making his philosophy even harder to understand, like what Jon Stewart said 'Where some see profundity and originality in the obscurity, other see simply gibberish and nonsense. Hegel's opaque writing style and neologistic vocabulary are that his works remain largely inaccessible to the nonspecialists' (Stewart 1996, 2). Arthur Schopenhauer also mentioned the same predicament Hegel is a 'commonplace, inane, loathsome, repulsive and ignorant charlatan who, with unparalleled effrontery, compiled a system of crazy nonsense that was trumpeted abroad as immortal wisdom by his mercenary followers' (Schopenhauer 2001, 96). But their claims surely do not stop Alison Stone, Wendell Kisner and Nicholas Mowad in their work understanding Hegel has the potential to tackle certain environmental problems.

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