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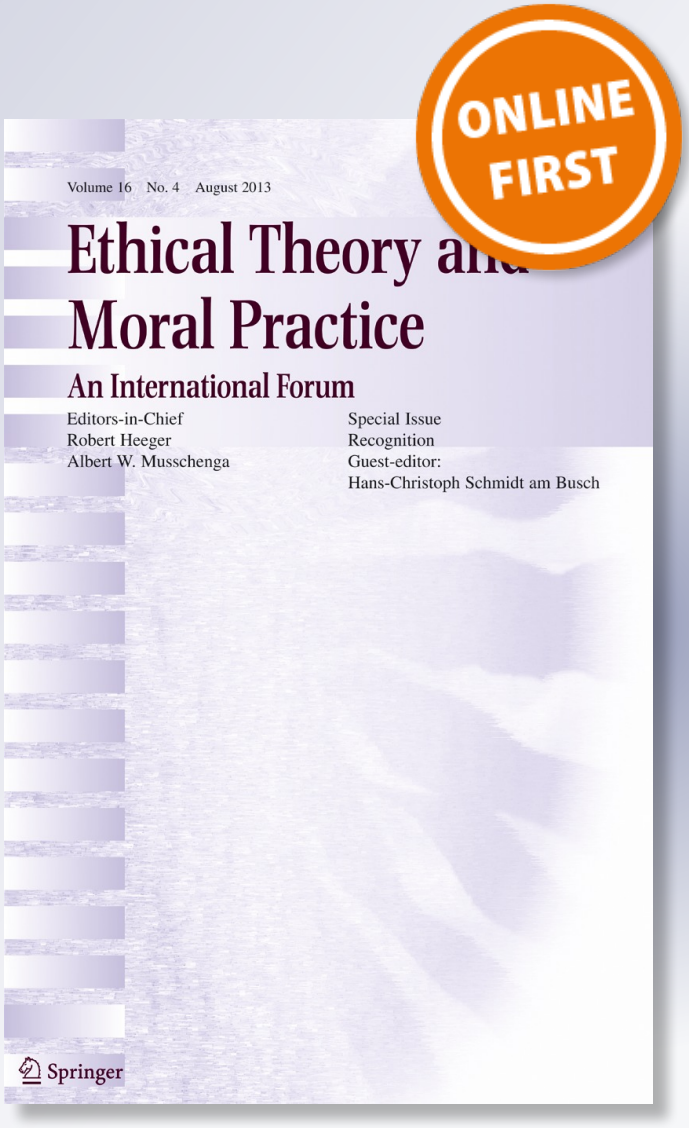

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Abstract In this article I ask how fruitful the concept of alienation can be for thinking critically about the nature and causes of the contemporary environmental crisis. The concept of alienation enables us to claim that modern human beings have become alienated or estranged from nature and need to become reconciled with it. Yet reconciliation has often been understood—notably by Hegel and Marx—as the state of being 'at-home-with-oneself-in-the-world', in the name of which we are entitled, perhaps even obliged, to overcome anything in nature that is alien to the human mind. This approach to alienation derives ultimately from the German Idealist philosopher J. G. Fichte. I explore an alternative conception of alienation and reconciliation to be found in the work of the Early German Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. The Romantics think of reconciliation as including a dimension of alienation, in the form of an awareness that nature is greater than and exceeds the understanding of human beings, insofar as we are merely limited parts of the all-encompassing whole that is nature. I argue that this is a more fruitful approach to alienation and reconciliation than that pursued by Fichte, Hegel, and Marx.

Keywords Alienation · Environment · Fichte · Hegel · Marx · Novalis · Nature · Romanticism · Schlegel

1 Introduction

In this article I ask how fruitful the concept of alienation can be for thinking critically about the nature and causes of the contemporary environmental crisis. On one level, this crisis—problems of global warming, deforestation, degradation of the oceans, species loss, and so on—is the unintended by-product of industrial development. But for many environmental philosophers, the crisis is at a deeper level 'caused by our intellectual relationship with the world and the practices that stem from it' (Dobson 1995: 39)—by our having, in modernity, adopted an intellectual relationship with the world that is problematic. This problematic relationship can be characterised in various ways: for Heidegger [1954] (1993) and those informed by him, in terms of the technological view of the world as a stock of resources; for some self-professed postmodern environmental ethicists, in terms of the 'modernist' conviction that nature can be completely known through and practically appropriated through science and technology

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(Oelschlager 1995: 3); or, for some ecofeminists (e.g. Salleh 1984; Plumwood 1993), in terms of a worldview that sharply divides culture from nature, humans from world. The concept of alienation can potentially help us to articulate the nature of this modern intellectual division of humanity from the world, as a division by virtue of which we have become alienated or estranged from nature with damaging practical consequences.[1]

However, according to the elaboration of the concept of alienation by Hegel and Marx—arguably the central figures to articulate the concept—we can only overcome our alienation from nature by thoroughly humanising the natural world, transforming it by our labour so that it entirely reflects the human self. Here, far from challenging the conceptual opposition between humanity and nature, the concept of alienation seems to presuppose that very opposition, presuming that nature is the material 'other' that is subordinate to and must be continually overcome by the human 'self'—a view that for ecofeminist Val Plumwood undergirds the Western notion of progress and with it 'the problematic features of the west's treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis' (Plumwood 1993: 3). However, in the same period in post-Kantian German philosophy when Hegel was articulating his concept of alienation, an alternative conception of it was developed by the Early German Romantics, particularly Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich von Hardenberg (better known under his pen-name Novalis). The writings of Schlegel and Novalis were until recently largely neglected by philosophers: they were long regarded as rather dreamy, mystical and not intellectually serious thinkers. But an extensive body of recent scholarship has established that Schlegel and Novalis actually developed an original, coherent and important philosophical orientation of their own, which repays investigation today (see, amongst others, Beiser 2002; Frank [1997] 2004; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy [1978] 1988; Larmore 2000; Kompridis 2006; Millan-Zaibert 2007). Central to this orientation is the idea that human beings are dependent upon the world as a unified whole, that is, upon nature—an idea that Schlegel and Novalis developed in opposition to the ideal of complete human autonomy and mastery over nature then advanced by the German Idealist philosopher J. G. Fichte. Yet although human/nature relations hold this central place within Romanticism, the outlook has so far received little attention from environmental philosophers.[2]

Here I want to help to correct this oversight by returning to the Early German Romantic conception of alienation. Schlegel and Novalis suggest that human beings in modernity have become estranged from nature, and that ideally we are to overcome this condition of alienation by accepting that humanity depends upon and is part of nature rather than standing outside it. In thus accepting that we depend on and are part of nature, we are to accept that nature is a whole greater than us, that exceeds us—such that as merely finite beings we can never fully comprehend nature as a whole. For the Romantics, then, the ideal condition of being reconciled with nature would *include*, amongst its integral elements, a level of alienation from nature—in the form of appreciation that nature is and must remain other

[1] Surprisingly, though, there has been relatively little explicit, thematic discussion of alienation by environmental philosophers. An exception is Biro (2005). Biro distinguishes between basic human alienation from nature, which he regards as necessary for human social and productive life, and surplus alienation, which for him is a concomitant of social relations of domination. This position has affinities with the Romantic view that I will be exploring here, which distinguishes between a damaging form of alienation (where humanity is conceived as *separate* from nature) and a positive form of alienation (which is part of the acknowledgement of human *dependency* on and *belonging* to nature). Whilst there has been little sustained discussion of alienation in environmental philosophy, there has, of course, been considerable discussion—much of it now relatively old—of Marx's concept of alienation and whether it is bound up with advocacy of human domination over nature (as Balbus (1982) contended).

[2] However, for exceptions, see Becker and Manstetten 2004; Bowie 1995. There has, on the other hand, been considerable discussion of the ecological dimensions of English Romanticism; see, for example, Bate 1991.

to and profoundly unlike us. So this is a conception of reconciliation with nature as including a level of alienation—but a kind of alienation that the Romantics valorise positively, as stemming from our acknowledgement that we belong within and depend upon nature, far from existing '"outside" nature' (Plumwood 1993: 3). This Romantic conception of alienation, I will argue, unlike that of Hegel and Marx, goes some way to challenging the human/nature opposition that is a major source of ecological crisis.

2 Advantages and Disadvantages of the Concept of Alienation

Let me begin by expanding on the potential advantages of the concept of alienation for reflecting on the sources of the environmental crisis. The concept of alienation enables us to maintain that in modernity human beings have become alienated or estranged from the natural world: that we have come to understand and experience the natural world as something alien or strange to us as human beings, and reciprocally to understand and experience ourselves as strangers to—disembedded from—our natural surroundings. On this view, modern human beings have come to understand and experience themselves to be separate from and opposed to nature. Plausibly, this understanding derives from Cartesian and Enlightenment contrasts between mind and matter, reason and nature, with human autonomy opposed to nature as a realm of causal determination (a contrast drawn by Kant, for instance). The effect of these contrasts has been to 'make impossible the notion of a relational, ecological self … [a] self [that] is not an isolated, immaterial Cartesian ego … but is constituted by its relationships with others' (Warren 2009: 231).

Insofar as we adhere to this modern understanding of ourselves as separate from nature, such a view plausibly disposes us to behave towards our natural environments in heedless and destructive ways. Heedless, because we feel too far removed from the natural environment to attend to, anticipate or imagine the potential consequences of our actions upon it. Since we do not regard ourselves as part of nature, we struggle to appreciate how our actions and practices are embedded in ecological processes and causal chains. And destructive, because the conceptual contrasts that generate and express our alienation (those of mind/body, humanity/nature, etc.) are generally hierarchical, encouraging us to see ourselves as superior to nature just insofar as we think that we are separate from and stand apart from nature. This primes us to think that we are entitled to use natural beings and processes however they best suit us—superior to nature as we are, we are thus its rightful masters.

Arguably, then, our alienation from nature is a major source of the environmental crisis, and overcoming that crisis requires our alienation to be overcome: that is, requires that we achieve *reconciliation* with nature. Reconciliation—which Hegel conceives as the antithesis of alienation—normally means both the state of non-alienation to be achieved and the process of achieving that state. To suppose ourselves alienated from nature is thus to suppose that, ideally, we would inhabit a contrasting state of being reconciled with nature, at one or at peace with it.

This concept of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) has been articulated philosophically by Hegel above all. As Michael Hardimon points out, reconciliation is the 'main goal and central organizing category of Hegel's philosophy as a whole' (Hardimon 1994: 3). For Hegel, the overarching aim of philosophical reason (*Vernunft*) is to reconcile opposed categories of thought—mind and body, reason and emotion—and opposed dimensions of practical social life—individuality and community membership, self-interest and commitment to the common good (see Taylor 1975: ch.1). Hegel's goal is to bring us to reconceive these categories and aspects of life as intertwined, not opposed to one another. Reason, he says, 'shows that the terms

that appear initially to be bound together are not in fact alien [*fremd*] to one another; instead, they are only moments of *one* whole, each of which, being related to the other, is at home with itself, and goes together with itself' (Hegel [1830] 1991a: §158A, 232). A mode of social life that embodied this reconception would be one of reconciliation. Unlike many after him including Marx, Hegel does not believe that achieving reconciliation requires radical social transformation. For Hegel, modern European society, stratified into the spheres of family, civil society and state, is already so organised that in principle, given some liberal reforms, we can be reconciled with it. Unfortunately, our potential for reconciliation is blocked by our entrenched habits of thinking in terms of opposed categories—what Hegel calls *Verstand*, abstract understanding—and living in ways imbued with this abstract understanding. The result is a widespread modern experience of alienation or *Entfremdung* (Hardimon 1994: 20, 121).[3]

For Hegel, the reconciliation that we are ideally to achieve, through philosophical reason, is with not merely modern society but the world at its broadest, the totality of all that is. This totality encompasses several regions for Hegel: non-human nature; human culture, history, and society; and the basic ontological forms and structures (such as causality, negativity, and difference) that are instantiated within nature and culture.[4] Ultimately, we are to be reconciled with all these dimensions of existence, and thereby come to be *in der Beziehung auf das andere bei sich selbst*—with oneself, or at home with oneself, within the relation to the other (Hegel [1830] 1991a: §158A, 232). The world that initially appears to be outside us, other to us, would cease to seem alien just in case we found ourselves reflected back to ourselves everywhere within it, as if in looking out at the world we were looking in a mirror. For Hegel, our ideal condition is constant presence-with-self, reflection-back-to-oneself from the other.

What of reconciliation with *nature*, for Hegel? We are to be-with-ourselves within nature, experiencing nature as mirroring us transparently back to ourselves. In part, for Hegel, we attain this by comprehending theoretically that nature is not alien to us. He aims in his philosophy of nature to demonstrate that nature (as empirical scientists understand it) comprises a rationally ordered whole which, as such, reflects back to us our own nature *qua* rationally organised beings (see Hegel 1970: §246A, 9–10). In part too, for Hegel, we achieve reconciliation with nature by practically making nature into our home, transforming it to reflect us back to ourselves. In doing so we simultaneously 'externalise' ourselves within the world: by practically transforming the

[3] Hegel's term *Entfremdung*, deriving from the German word *fremd*, 'alien', is also sometimes translated as 'estrangement', for example by J. B. Baillie in his 1910/1931 translation of Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Mind* (see Hegel 1967). Whether rendered as 'alienation' or 'estrangement', *Entfremdung* is for Hegel distinct from *Entäusserung,* which, deriving from the word *ausser* ('outer' or 'external'), can be translated either as (again) 'alienation' or as 'externalisation'—the latter the usual preference of A. V. Miller in his 1977 translation of the *Phenomenology* (see Hegel 1977). *Entäusserung* is not commonly used in German; more usual is *Veräusserung*, meaning the action of relinquishing ownership of some thing or power through a contract, such as a sale. Hegel uses *Entäusserung* to mean the embodiment of the self in some external object or existent (see, especially, Hegel 1977: 294–313). For Hegel this activity of self-externalisation need not *per se* involve alienation or estrangement, as long as one learns to recognise oneself in one's external embodiment. In contrast, Marx, writing on alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*) in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, takes it that *Entäusserung* (externalisation of the self in the product of labour) does involve *Entfremdung*, the alienation of that self in its product and in its productive activity (see Marx [1844] 1977: 77–87). In history hitherto, labouring has generally been carried out under social conditions of class division, therefore in a form that inflicts alienation upon the labourer. Therefore Marx uses *Entäusserung* and *Entfremdung* interchangeably, distinguishing them both from what he treats as their value-neutral counterpart, objectification: *Vergegenständlichung* (from *Gegenstand*, 'object'). See Arthur 1986: 147–9.

[4] These divisions correspond to the three volumes of Hegel's outline *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, first published in 1817, and republished with revisions in 1827, 1830. Its volumes are the Logic (dealing with ontology), Philosophy of Nature, and Philosophy of Mind.

natural items around us, we impose upon them our plans and more generally our rationality, which they now mirror back to us. For Hegel, the concrete form that this practical modification of nature takes is that of our appropriation, use and transformation of natural objects as individual private property—hence his conviction that reconciliation is possible within liberal society.[5]

For Hegel, the ideal of reconciliation with nature licenses, indeed prescribes, human activity to re-make the world. The early Marx adopts a similar stance when he re-appropriates Hegel's concept of alienation for a distinctly anti-Hegelian purpose: criticising capitalism for inflicting alienation upon the labouring class (and, albeit less so, upon the non-labourers). Enumerating the aspects of alienated labour, Marx includes amongst them alienation from nature. The fact of having to undertake alienated labour, he says, makes nature alien to us—'*die entfremdete Arbeit dem Menschen … die Natur entfremdet*' (Marx and Engels [1844] 1968: 516).[6] In non-alienated productive activity, the human being lives from nature, which is the 'inorganic body' (*unorganische Leib*) of the human individual, the extended body upon which I depend for my survival. But nature is not only the source through which I survive. It is also 'the matter [*Stoff*] in which labour realises itself, in which my labour is active, out of which and through which it produces' (Marx 1977: 79). Thus, ideally, nature is *my* extended body because through my work upon it nature comes to embody and provide an external realisation of my productive activity (just as my individual body is the material vehicle through which I exercise my agency). Moreover, since in the ideal non-alienated condition I imagine, choose, and plan the character (and intended product) of my productive activity, nature also provides an external embodiment of my self *qua* choosing, creative, and conscious. Nature is, ideally, the outer body of the human individual as a free producer. To be reconciled with nature would be to experience it as my external embodiment in this way, due to my productive activity being non-alienated and under my control and direction. In conditions of alienated labour, though, I lose control over my own productive activity. In these conditions, I experience the parts of nature upon which I work as embodying not *my* agency but that of the powers external to me which control my work—the powers of capitalists, managers, and market forces. Nature becomes an embodiment of alien forces rather than a vehicle of my self-realisation.

Like Hegel, then, Marx envisions reconciliation with nature as a condition in which we practically transform and remodel nature so that it reflects us back to ourselves.[7] In this Hegelian-Marxian articulation, the concepts of alienation and reconciliation suggest that there should be no limits to our efforts to re-make the world after our own model. Adorno makes an important objection to this position in *Negative Dialectics*:

> Even the theory of alienation (*Entfremdung*) … confuses the need to come near to the … irrational world—to be 'at home everywhere' as Novalis put it («*überall zu Hause zu sein*»)—with the archaic barbarism that it is beyond the … subject to love the alien (*Fremde*), that which is other; with the craving for incorporation (*Einverleibung*) and persecution. (Adorno [1966] 1973: 172)[8]

[5] See 'Property', §§41–71 of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991b).

[6] In English: 'alienated labour alienates … nature from man' (Marx [1844] 1977: 81); here McLellan translates *Entfremdung* as alienation and *Entäusserung* as externalisation. Others translate *Entfremdung* in Marx as estrangement and *Entäusserung* as alienation: for example, Benton in Marx 1975.

[7] Isaac Balbus made the even stronger claim that Marx's notion of production is the 'ultimate possible expression' of 'the hubris of domination' over nature (Balbus 1982: 269). In contrast, for some other Marx scholars, Marx rightly emphasises that human beings depend upon nature—so that, for Marx, rather than the self being separate from nature, the self is intrinsically constituted by its location in and relations with nature (see, e.g., Ollman 1977: 27–28). Nonetheless, I believe that Marx's *ideal* is for us progressively to restructure these relations so that nature becomes shaped by human labour.

[8] Translations from Adorno 1973 are amended in light of Adorno 1966.

Here Adorno points out the double-edged sword that is the 'theory' of alienation. Positively, this 'theory' suggests that we should not set ourselves apart from or above the non-rational (that is, natural) world, but should embrace our proximity to and embeddedness within this world, thereby becoming reconciled with it. Negatively, though, the concept of alienation suggests that we are to achieve this state of reconciliation by first making nature a vehicle for the expression of the human self—thereby incorporating nature into ourselves (or making it into our extended body), stripping it of its otherness so that we can find it unthreatening and homely. Adorno objects that this embodies a profoundly unethical, even barbaric, urge to incorporate what is different into the self.

Yet Adorno does not want to abandon all reference to alienation. Rather, he goes on to say—apparently paradoxically—that: 'If the alien were no longer ostracised, there would be no more alienation' (172). He means that, ideally, we need to achieve a kind of reconciliation with nature—a state in which there is 'no more alienation'—which *includes* positive acceptance and not ostracism of the alien *as* alien, positive acceptance of nature's otherness to us. He makes this explicit later: 'The reconciled condition [*der versöhnte Zustand*] would not annex the alien with philosophical imperialism, but would find happiness in the fact that the alien remains that which is distant [*das Ferne*] and different [*Verschiedene*] in the nearness granted to it' (191).

Is this idea of a reconciled condition that includes alienation coherent? Or is it the incoherent ideal of an absence of alienation in which some alienation yet remains present? There is a way to articulate reconciliation-with-alienation as a coherent ideal, a way taken by the Early German Romantics.

3 Romanticism and Alienation

Early German Romanticism (*Frühromantik*) flourished in Jena and Berlin between 1794 and 1802, amongst a group that included F. W. J. von Schelling, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August, and F. D. E. Schleiermacher; the poet and theoretician Friedrich Hölderlin had connections with the group. They developed their particular philosophical orientation out of a concern to overcome the conceptual oppositions that had become entrenched in thought and practice with the Enlightenment (Taylor 1975: ch. 1). These were oppositions between individual and society, mind and matter, soul and body, reason and intuition, and between free humanity and causally determined nature. The Romantics found these oppositions problematic partly on theoretical grounds, as leaving the intellect in a divided and uncomfortable position, but also partly on practical grounds—for in everyday life adherence to these oppositions causes us to experience mind and body, individual and society, etc., as opposed. This condition is one of alienation from one or other side of each opposition (or from both sides at different times): alienation from our own bodies experienced as burdens or encumbrances, or from our societies experienced as hostile or indifferent to our needs.

The last of these oppositions—between human agents who determine their actions according to rational principles, and natural objects the behaviour of which is causally determined—took on particular importance for the Romantics (and others of their time such as Hegel) because of its central place in Kant's Critical philosophy. To be sure, according to Kant in his theoretical philosophy, we are obliged to think of ourselves as free subjects, but we cannot know whether we really are so. Equally, we cannot know that we are not. This ignorance creates space for Kant to argue in his practical philosophy that, given the fact of our subjection to moral obligations, we are justified in assuming (*annehmen*) that we really are free, rational subjects (Kant [1788] 1997: 79).

Under this assumption—which we must make as a matter of practical necessity—human agents are ultimately separate from nature, as free agents who stand out from the realm of causal determination. Overcoming this belief in human separateness from nature was central to the German Romantic project of overcoming entrenched conceptual oppositions.

There were two principal routes along which the humanity/nature opposition could be broken down (Gardner 2011: 90). First, humanity could be absorbed back into nature, as it was in what became the dominant approach in the later nineteenth century: scientific materialism, according to which nature is a vast causal chain and human beings are causally—biologically, psychologically, socially—determined links in this chain. Second and alternatively, nature could be re-absorbed into, or derived from, free and autonomous human subjectivity, as it was in different ways by the German Idealists. A first version of this latter programme was announced by Fichte in his 1797 First Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Here he rejected 'dogmatism', the belief in determinate things (*Sachen*) given independently of the intellect and by which the intellect is to be oriented—an approach that anticipates scientific materialism. Against that approach, Fichte advocated idealism, centred on faith in the autonomy of the human intellect (Fichte [1797] 1994: 11). But how could idealists derive nature from autonomous human subjectivity?

Let us look at Fichte's endeavour to make that derivation in his political philosophy, specifically his 1796/7 *Foundations of Natural Right*. Here he offers us an elaborate transcendental argument: it is a necessary condition for the possibility of conscious experience that the subject perform various activities; but since we do in fact have conscious experience, the condition must be met and the subject must perform these activities.[9] These activities include that of transforming the natural world in our own image.

Fichte begins as follows. With Kant, Fichte holds that we are active in knowing and experiencing, actively unifying the materials of sensation under concepts (a 'rational being', Fichte insists, is one that *acts* [1796/7] 2000: 3). It is therefore a condition of possibility of experience that we impose its organisation upon it. But it is a condition of possibility of our imposing this organisation that we ascribe to ourselves the status of *agents* who impose it: '*a rational being … must ascribe* to itself *an activity whose ultimate ground lies purely and simply within itself*' (18). This is because, to perform any action as an intelligent, intentional action, one must tacitly take oneself to be doing so, and thus make tacit reference to one*self* as the one doing this performance.[10] A level of self-consciousness is therefore the necessary condition of conscious experience.

Fichte further reasons that we can only be self-conscious if we are conscious of ourselves as *finite*, determinate, bounded and individuated selves. For to ascribe myself the status of an agent (to 'posit myself') who imposes unified order on sensation, I must ascribe myself the status of a *unified* agent. But I cannot ascribe unity to myself unless I distinguish myself from something else that I identify as not-I. Therefore, conscious experience presupposes my self-awareness as a finite self: 'The rational being presented here is a *finite* rational being' (18). To ascribe myself finite status, I must identify an external world outside me (19). Is Fichte claiming merely that I must frame the thought of a world external to me? No; for Fichte, if I merely thought of an external world, it would exist merely in my representation and would provide no real limit or contrast to my self. To ascribe myself finite status as a self

[9] 'The philosopher's task is to show that [a certain] determinate action is a condition of self-consciousness, and showing this constitutes the [transcendental] deduction of that concept'—its necessity and application (Fichte [1976/7] 2000: 9).

[10] As Robert Pippin reconstructs this reasoning: 'consciousness of objects is implicitly reflexive because … whenever I am conscious of any object, I can also be said to "apperceive" implicitly my being *thus* conscious. In any remembering, thinking or imagining, … I am also potentially aware *as* I intend that what I am doing *is* an act of remembering, thinking, or imagining' (Pippin 1989: 21).

against the outer world, I must, more strongly, *apprehend*—or 'intuit' (*anschauen*)—a world outside me; I must *feel* this outer world checking or limiting me.[11] For this to be possible the world must be there, outside me, to exert this check (5).[12]

Amongst the preconditions of conscious experience, then, are that I must ascribe myself the status of a free, self-determining agent and that I must always-already inhabit a world outside me, which limits or checks my freedom, imposing upon me sensations that I do not choose to have. Yet for the world to limit my freedom in this way but not destroy it, I must practically act back upon this world to transform it. If my agency is not to be swamped, I must reassert it against the check imposed by the world.

> *But the activity we are seeking can [only] be posited by the rational being in opposition* to *the world, which would then limit the activity; and the rational being can produce this activity in order to be able to posit it in opposition to the world*. (19)

Since objects in the world must continue to limit our agency, though, our practical activity can never definitively transform them into mere vehicles of the self. For then the limits that they impose, and with them the possibility of conscious experience, would evaporate. Consequently, our practical activity upon objects must be something that we undertake endlessly, without completion. Moreover, Fichte establishes a moral or practical imperative here. Since constant work on natural things is a condition of the possibility of the experience that we do in fact have, we must undertake this work on rational grounds; reason obliges it. Further, reason obliges us to undertake this work without restraining ourselves, since the transformation of nature must continue *ad infinitum*. Impelling our work is an ideal of removing the check that nature imposes and converting it into our vehicle. The ideal can never be realised; but, for the same reason, it can never cease to inform our efforts. Fichte expresses this ideal in his popular essay *The Vocation of Man*:

> Nature must gradually enter a condition which … keeps its force steady in a definite relation with the power which is destined to control it—the power of man. … Cultivated lands shall animate and moderate the inert and hostile atmosphere of primeval forests, deserts, and swamps. … nature is to become ever more transparent to us until we can see into its most secret core, and human power … shall control it without effort and peacefully maintain any conquest once it is made. Fichte [1800] (1987: 83)

The Early German Romantics pitted themselves against this position. Representative of their stance are the objections made to Fichte by Schelling (who belonged to the Jena and Berlin Romantic circles between 1798 and 1800):

> I am thoroughly aware of how small a region of consciousness nature must fall into, according to your concept of it. For you nature has no speculative significance at all, but only a teleological one [that is, it is there to serve human purposes]. But are you really of the opinion, for example, that light is only there so that rational beings can also see each other when they talk to each other, and that air is there so that when they

[11] As Fichte puts it: '*Its activity in intuiting the world* [in der Weltanschauung] *cannot be posited by the rational being as such*, for this world-intuiting activity, by its very concept, is not supposed to revert into the intuiter; it is not supposed to have the intuiter as its object, but rather something outside and opposed to the intuiter; namely, a world' (19).

[12] Thus, the traditional view of Fichte, according to which he believes that the self posits the external world merely to check and thereby enable its own thinking, is misguided. His point is rather that conscious experience is ultimately only possible because the self is already embedded within a given world that it apprehends. Thus, Günter Zöller rightly points out that Fichte's idealism includes a measure of realism (Zöller 2000: 201–3).

> hear each other they can talk with one another? (Schelling, letter to Fichte of 3 October 1801, in Schulz 1968: 140)

Nonetheless, the Romantics were not entirely anti-Fichtean. On the contrary, Schlegel and Novalis (like Schelling) were initially attracted to the ideas of Fichte, especially of their liberatory promise (reflected in Fichte's championing of the French Revolution). But Schlegel and Novalis turned against Fichte and formulated their own independent philosophical positions (see Beiser 2002: 437–44). The question of nature contributed to motivating this turn. For the metaphysical view that the Romantics adopted, in reaction against Fichte, is that human beings are dependent on nature because nature is an all-encompassing whole which develops into manifold articulations, including humankind, which as such is merely one part of the natural world. This whole, Novalis writes, is the '*all* … in whom we live, breathe and have our being' (Novalis [1795–6] 2003: #462, 147).

Consider, for instance, Schlegel's claim in his 1799 *Dialogue on Poetry* that 'we, too, are part and flower' of the earth (Schlegel [1799] 1968: 54). The

> artificial works or natural productions that bear the form and name of poems … what are they in comparison with the formless and unconscious poetry which reigns in the plant, radiates in the light … ?—Yet this is first, original, without it there could certainly be no poetry of words … All the holy plays of art are only distant imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-forming art-work. (53–4)

All human activities, including that of creating art-works, are part of and derivative of the prior, more all-encompassing creativity unfolding in nature (the unconscious realm that produces plants and light) as it organises and produces itself. Nature as this unconsciously creative realm is equated with the 'infinite play of the world'—a world that Schlegel describes in one of his unpublished fragments as a plant: 'The *world* as a whole, and originally, is a plant' (Schlegel 1958- : vol. 18, #332, 151). His point is that the world grows, unfolds through multiple articulations, in the manner of a plant.[13] Novalis, more broadly, understands it as an organism (Novalis [1798–99] 2007: #503, 90).

It is not obvious, though, that the world as a whole (what Schlegel and Novalis also call the Absolute, *das Absolute*, or the infinite, *das Unendliche*) is identical to nature. After all, as we saw earlier, Hegel regarded nature merely as one region *within* the wider world. The Romantics, though, often equate nature with the Absolute and both with the entire world. This reflects their conviction that humanity is dependent on, derivative of, and part of nature. For if humanity is part of nature, then humanity and nature are not discrete regions of being as they are for Hegel, but rather nature encompasses humanity. Consequently, too, the basic ontological structures that for Hegel unite and cut across nature *and* mind are for the Romantics structures within nature and within mind *as* a region of nature, and which therefore are in all cases embodied within nature, and do not exist outside it.

In adopting this view the Romantics are not simply absorbing humanity into nature understood naturalistically. Instead they absorb humanity into a nature that already organises itself and thus prefigures human freedom. Nature or the Absolute, for them, is an all-inclusive whole that includes all the varieties of finite things within it. *'Only the All is absolute*', Novalis writes (Novalis 2007: #454, 147). Yet finite things also differ from this whole, because they are finite and different from one another whereas the whole is unitary. If finite things are to differ from nature but also be contained within it, then nature must be self-

[13] This conception of the world as a whole as growing in a plant-form manner is not merely whimsical or accidental to the Romantics' thought, but structures it fundamentally; see Miller 2001.

differentiating, coming out of its unity into differences and then re-uniting them into the higher-level unity of a system. And so 'Every phenomenon is a limb in an immeasurable chain—which comprehends *all phenomena* as limbs' (Novalis 1960–75: vol. 3, #140, 574). In thus organising itself, giving itself determinate shape from within itself, nature or the whole prefigures human powers of self-determination, which realise nature's powers of self-organisation at a higher level. 'Thinking …', Novalis says, 'is surely nothing else but the finest *evolution* of the plastic forces—it is simply the general force of nature raised to the *nth dignity*' (2007: #1114, 189). Here humanity is re-absorbed into nature, but not in a way that reduces human beings to causally determined things. Our human autonomy does not separate us from the realm of natural determination but just is nature's highest-level realisation, because nature is already a self-organising whole.

How does this bear upon alienation from nature? For Schlegel, modern human individuals are typically alienated from nature, living in an artificial (*künstlich*) culture, and divided (*zerspaltet*) from nature and within ourselves owing to our adherence to the conceptual oppositions promoted by the abstract understanding (so he claims in his critical diagnosis of modernity, in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, written in 1795; see Schlegel 2001). But the reality is that we are not separate from nature, but a dependent part of it, and we need to overcome our feelings of alienation by acknowledging this reality.

However, there are ambiguities within this Romantic view of alienation and its overcoming. On the one hand, the Romantic view is that we are to admit our dependence on nature and correspondingly admit that we are profoundly limited beings, limited compared to nature as parts are to the whole. We can create and achieve little compared to nature (witness Schlegel's adverse comparison between human and natural poetry). To be reconciled with nature, then, we need to revise our self-estimation downwards, becoming more humble about our own powers and more respectful of nature as a greater whole whose powers surpass our own and invite our admiration.

On the other hand, the Romantic view is also that in recognising nature to be a self-organising whole we are finding ourselves everywhere: the whole of nature is already a prototype of the free human self. Novalis dramatises this idea in his famous fairy-tale of Hyacinth and Rose-Blossom, contained within his unfinished novel *The Novices of Saïs* (Novalis 1949: 53–68). Friends since childhood, Hyacinth and Rose-Blossom become lovers, but Hyacinth is miserable and dissatisfied with life—a classic alienated adolescent—until his family is visited by a stranger who enthrals him with stories of foreign places. Hyacinth sets off to travel the entire world, looking for the Goddess Isis, but as he nears her he falls into a dream of a place that seems strangely familiar. Lifting Isis's veil, he finds—Rose-Blossom. The story ends with the pair living happily ever after in their home town. After all Hyacinth's travels in quest of the alien, what he had wrongly taken to be most alien to him (Isis behind her veil) proves to have been his own home all along. '*Wo gehen wir denn hin?*' Novalis also asks in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*—'Where are we going?' '*Immer nach Hause*', always home (see Novalis 1964: 159). The Hyacinth fairy-tale has more bearing upon nature than it might seem, for in the traditional image of the veil of Isis, Isis stands for nature, the secrets of which cannot be penetrated by the human mind—just as the veil of this fertile, many-breasted goddess may not be lifted (see Hadot [2004] 2006). That which Hyacinth thought most alien and foreign was nature; and nature, it transpires, was all along his home, was the place in which he remains together with himself.

The story is revealing of one side of Romantic metaphysics. If we are the highest realisation of nature's self-organizing powers (the '*finest* evolution' of nature's general force, as Novalis has it), then the entire natural cosmos leads up to us: we stand at its centre and summit. Wherever we look in nature we find our privileged status and supreme powers

of self-determination confirmed, since all that we encounter approximates to and leads back to us. Like Hyacinth, we find nothing fundamentally strange, mysterious or different; that which appeared strange only leads us back to ourselves.

The Romantic ideal of reconciliation now seems to license the quest to make oneself at home everywhere, to reshape the world in one's own image, just as that ideal did in Hegel and Marx. Indeed, Adorno actually makes his criticism of the theory of alienation in *Negative Dialectics* with reference to Novalis's ideal of being everywhere at home. Both connotations—depending on nature *and* standing at the summit of nature—appear to be part of the Early German Romantic vision.

At their best, however, the Early German Romantics interpret alienation and reconciliation differently. And after all, despite implicitly criticising Novalis, Adorno also refers his own reconception of reconciliation back to the notion of the 'beautiful alien' (*Schöne Fremde*) that he finds in the later German Romantic poet, the Baron von Eichendorff.[14] By implication, then, Adorno takes his ideal of reconciliation with alienation from the German Romantic tradition. So let us re-examine, once more, Early German Romantic thought concerning nature and alienation.

4 Reconciliation with Alienation

Nature is a whole. How do we apprehend this fact? For the Romantics, we do so via *intuition*, *Anschauung*, understood as a particular mode of awareness.[15] Ordinary cognition, as Kant held, is discursive: in it we apply concepts to the givens of sensation or we connect concepts together under judgements, but in either case we impose unity on a diversity of elements, where the unity is external to the diversity. Ordinary discursive cognition cannot be the mode in which we apprehend nature as a whole, because this kind of cognition is not equipped to perceive things as wholes but only as manifolds to be synthesised. In intuition, on the other hand, we are receptive: not imposing unity, but immediately detecting a unity that is already infused into the component elements of what we intuit.

Is intuition knowledge? It is not knowledge proper, for the Romantics: 'Knowing already means a *conditioned* knowing. The unknowability of the Absolute is therefore an identical triviality' (Schlegel 1958- : vol. 18, #64, 511). But at the same time, in intuition we do apprehend the whole, and this apprehension is presumably of a cognitive character. Thus, intuition has the peculiar status of being an ambiguous cognitive state between knowledge and non-knowledge.[16] Intuition constitutes a level of knowledge, since in it we apprehend a really existing unity; but intuition falls short of meeting the discursive conditions for knowledge proper. Insofar as it counts at once as knowledge and as non-knowledge, intuition seems to violate the law of excluded middle. For this reason, the Romantics hold, we find ourselves compelled to try to convert our intuition into knowledge proper, that is, into discursive knowledge. We translate our intuitive apprehension that nature is a whole

[14] For the poem of this name, see Eichendorff 1841: 39. Adorno's passage, omitted from the standard English translation of *Negative Dialectics* by E. B. Ashton, reads: 'Beyond Romanticism, which felt itself as the pain of the world, suffering from alienation, rises Eichendorff's saying "Beautiful Alien"' (Adorno 1966: 192).

[15] Schlegel, for example, refers to our 'sense for the infinite' (Schlegel [1798] 1991: #412, 83) and our 'intuiting [*Anschauung*] the whole' ([1799] 1968: 89).

[16] There has been some controversy on this issue; for Frank (2004), the Romantics think that we can only intuit and feel but not know the whole, while for Beiser (2002) the Romantics think that intuition is a higher, super-discursive way of knowing. In Stone (2011), I argue for the middle position that intuition falls between cognition and non-cognition.

into rational claims: that nature is self-differentiating, self-organising, etc. We are rationally obliged to make this translation and to understand nature in these terms. But in making this translation, we inescapably lose sight of the very whole about which we are trying to gain knowledge. We start to treat it as something more like a part, one finite existent amongst others. Yet the uneasy epistemic status of the intuition itself constantly re-kindles the effort to render it into knowledge. We strive endlessly to know nature as a whole, to regain the unity of intuition in the shape of discursive reason, without ever reaching this goal. Rather, as Novalis famously puts it, 'Everywhere we *seek* the unconditioned and only ever *find* things' (1960–75: vol. 2, #1, 412).

Do human beings still count here as nature's highest realisation? In a sense, yes. In intuiting the unity of nature as a whole, we constitute the part of nature in which its unity rises to a level of self-awareness and self-apprehension. We realise nature by intuiting its unity. *But* this intuitive mode of awareness is, as we've seen, self-contradictory, and so it propels us endlessly to strive for discursive knowledge. Just when we might have seemed to bring the self-organising unity of nature to its fullest realisation by intuiting this unity as such, we only succeed in bringing nature's unity into a state of *division*. This division applies both within intuition—between its status as knowledge and its status as non-knowledge—and within our epistemic efforts generally, which are split between unified intuition and the disunified discursive knowledge into which we strive, unsuccessfully, to translate intuition. We are left in a state of dissatisfaction and restless striving, found nowhere else in the natural world. As Friedrich Hölderlin puts it in his epistolary novel *Hyperion*, we are fated to be cast out of the peace, unity and harmony of nature (Hölderlin [1797/99] 1990: 4). We cannot straightforwardly be identified as nature's highest realisation, because just when we (almost) realise nature's unity we break that unity apart.

To go back to alienation: In the ideal, reconciled condition, we appreciate that we depend on nature, recognising it as the whole that encompasses us as one of its parts. The root of this appreciation is our intuition of the whole. Yet this intuitive apprehension of the whole, and so too of our dependence on the whole, is not fully cognitive, and however much we strive to render this apprehension into knowledge proper, we cannot. Thus, just when we apprehend nature as the whole on which we depend, we are also obliged to admit that this whole of nature is greater than we can understand or comprehend, an admission that should arouse our respect and awe towards nature as well as a sense of humility. We are also obliged to admit that nature has a unity of which we can only ever fall short and which we can only ever try, endlessly, to regain.

Here we have an elaboration of the ideal of reconciliation in which it includes a dimension of alienation. We have reconciliation, in that we appreciate and affirm our dependence on nature and our status as parts of nature rather than separate beings. Yet we also have alienation, because we appreciate that the nature on which we depend is profoundly unlike us and remains out of the reach of any human attempt to comprehend its unity.

These considerations might seem far too abstract to speak meaningfully to our contemporary situation of environmental crisis. But, I submit, it is *because* the Romantic reconception of alienation and reconciliation is couched at an abstract, theoretical level that this reconception is able to address and unseat our deep-rooted understandings of the self and nature. These understandings—the ideas that the human self is detached from nature, able to stand outside and comprehensively survey and master nature—are a major strand of the modern, Enlightenment tradition of thought and are entangled with the mainstream of modern science. These ideas are also plausibly regarded as one source of the contemporary ecological crisis (as I indicated earlier). To that extent, if we are to address and respond to this crisis adequately then we need to re-orient ourselves intellectually, and to rethink and reimagine what it would be to be reconciled with the natural world, in the far-reaching way that the Romantics attempt.

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