

# Ethics and Ontology

## A View From a Contemporary Philosophy of Nature

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From the 1970s onwards within the analytical ambit, as Michael Esfeld rightly observes, there has been a renewed interest in metaphysics understood as a philosophical project that aims to pull all our knowledge together into a coherent and comprehensive vision of the world (Esfeld 2008). In this sense, we are witnessing the birth of a new philosophy of nature, that is a renewed philosophical interest in nature, which we can also define as a ‘metaphysics of nature’ in that it aims to “propose a philosophical vision of the whole of nature, based on the knowledge brought by science” (Esfeld 2018:13), rather than reflect on the logical analysis of scientific theories (a task belonging to epistemology) or on the conditions of the knowability of nature in general (a wonderful example is the work of Rescher 2000). By Esfeld’s own admission, such a conception of the philosophy of nature depends exclusively on the natural sciences and in any case falls within the branch of the philosophy of science.

Of course, the philosophy of nature can only be linked to scientific knowledge and its most recent results, but, as it is primarily philosophy, it requires further reflection on its theoretical foundations, on the particular status of the discipline as well as on the particular character of its object, nature. Such an articulated reflection can contribute to restoring the philosophy of nature’s centrality with respect to other philosophical disciplines and to facilitating a philosophical vision of nature, whose examples are still rare.

In the preface to the Italian edition of his *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, Iain Hamilton Grant observes that a philosophy of nature becomes contemporarily viable “once lazy readings of it as pro or ant science are dismissed, and more nuanced and philosophical accounts of the materials nature–philosophy draws on and the conclusions it reaches are provided” (Grant 2017:19), and when nature is considered as the *grounding* of the entire philosophy, as Schelling himself observes in his *Einleitung in die Philosophie*.

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These days such a claim brings with it many questions about the legitimacy of such a programme of philosophy of nature: how should it be different from a philosophy of science, and what is its relation to epistemology and the widespread philosophical “naturalism”? What is the meaning of nature in this context and what is the very *nature* of nature? And, finally, what is meant by the idea that nature should ground philosophy?

An initial answer to these questions can come from direct consideration of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, an author whose philosophy in recent years — and I believe this is no coincidence — is experiencing a rebirth of interest, especially in the English-speaking world (cf. Corriero, 2017). Compared to the historical context of reference, Schelling’s Nature–Philosophy is certainly a unique example, as it is not limited to the unifying temptation of knowledge in a determined and functional *Weltanschauung*, but also reflects on transcendental ontology (to use one of Gabriel’s expressions, 2013), on the auto-epistemic character of nature (Hogrebe 1989) and on the un-objectifiability of nature (Schelling 1799). Reflecting on the theoretical premises of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* can, in my opinion, also contribute to the theoretical positioning of contemporary philosophy of nature, and this probably constitutes the greatest theoretical legacy left by the philosopher from Leonberg, together with his reflections on the system of identity.

The particular notion of nature that Schelling began to articulate from 1790s, which combines the Kantian concept of the “totality of all beings” with the Greek one that sees the *Phýsis* as birth, origin that preserves the beings in their becoming and as permanent productivity (Hadot 2004), helps to determine a *Naturphilosophie* which presents itself as a *dynamic philosophy* that, in order to think and ‘say’ nature in its progress, cannot be separated from an identity concept of mind and nature. Without it, the improper and apparently unavoidable objectification of nature could not be circumvented. In fact, hiding is characteristic of nature (as *Phýsis*) (Heraclitus). Not in the sense that it escapes from objectification, but rather in the sense that that objectification, necessary for reflective and determining knowledge, does not restore nature as the infinitely potential *arché* — that is, as that which constantly produces and accompanies its products — but only the beings (apparently) isolated from the original and permanent becoming, which also commands and determines them, captured in the *Begriff*, which describes and delimits them. But as Schelling observes, “the concept of being as something original must simply be eliminated from the philosophy of nature” (Schelling 1799). There cannot be a concept of this becoming and all-pervasive origin that is nature itself: it cannot result from a reflective knowledge of *arché*, it rather requires a new rationality and indeed a philosophy (*Naturphilosophie*) that takes the subjective perspective of what

it intends to investigate by recognizing that nature includes everything, even the elusive Past “presupposed” to the “subject”, which participates in the Subjectivity of nature, wanting to “express” it and therefore to continue its becoming.

From here one can comprehend how a philosophy of nature, which accepts these premises, cannot be understood as a second philosophy, but must be understood properly as meta-physics, as a *first philosophy*. However, *Naturphilosophie* is not simply a “first philosophy” as it has being itself or the existent in general as “object”, since it would thus present itself as a form of *Wissen* (knowledge) that in knowing “determines” the object. It is, for Schelling, the only form of philosophical reflection capable of recognizing the subjectivity of nature (its *Urständlichkeit*, its full autonomy) and of assuming it as a way of expression—explication of what exists and becomes. There can be no determining knowledge (*Wissen*) of nature just as there cannot be a knowledge of freedom: clearly we have, or grasp, full and determined knowledge of nature as a free subject of the being in general that includes everything (including the subject that would like to ‘philosophically’ talk about it). If this may seem at first to simply fall within the sphere of the romantic *Schwärmerei*, a pathetic attempt to confuse the waters that is sometimes typical of some continental philosophy, one cannot help but consider how contemporary science itself has in fact radically questioned the classical structure of rationality (Gargani 1979) and the subject–object relationship, demanding new forms and new models.

A philosophy of nature that presents itself at the same time as a meta-physics of nature (bringing together the complexity of scientific knowledge) and as a ‘transcendental’ reflection on the grounding of being in general is capable of establishing a systematic vision of knowledge that presents solutions in the ethical field too, in continuity, however, with the oldest models of the philosophy of nature.

A contemporary philosophy of nature intertwines with several philosophical disciplines such as metaphysics, ontology, philosophy of mind, and, of course, ethics, assuming that the crucial issue of any moral theory is combining “the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included” (Nagel 1986: 3). In what way can a philosophy of nature provide an answer to the fundamental questions of ethics without risking any form of reductionism? Is there room for freedom within a contemporary philosophy of nature? And what would it entail?

## References

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