The basis for our belief in bodily resurrection, suggests John Haught, is the compassion of God, God’s inability to forget what has happened to us and to the world. The power of God to raise us from the dead is of a piece with God’s loving embrace of the entire cosmic story which, in perishing, passes into the everlasting divine feeling.  

God compassionately saves all events everlasting in the divine experience. So, suggests Haught, our personal destiny is never separated from the entire cosmic story. If we are able to think of our bodily resurrection as being completely inseparable from the ultimate purpose of the entire universe, then we might be more predisposed to act in an environmentally responsible way, because we will be related to the natural world forever, with all its diversity and complexity.

1. Introduction

A topic that is so manifestly large and complex as this one inevitably invites some words of introduction by way of explanation. The theme of this conference is the ‘theological and scientific perspectives’ informing ecology and biodiversity. Hosted and co-sponsored by the Centre for Theology, Science and Culture, there is an obvious integration of science and theology. There is of course an assumption being made—that science and theology can be integrated; that for all their differing logics and languages there is no ultimate contradiction between them. This is a conversation which continues to unfold and in which no resolution has been reached.

I have long wondered whether the philosophical vision of Hegel might prove helpful in the continuing conversations between science and theology. Indeed, it is Hegel’s place in this conversation rather than his specific thoughts on nature and biodiversity that interests me here. Since Hegel’s philosophy advocated a view in which the discourses of science and theology could be integrated, and since some sort of integration is assumed by the conference, it seems that Hegel might be a reasonable place to begin. If Hegel’s philosophical vision were to prove inimical to biodiversity it would not mean that there could be no integrated vision of science and theology on the issue of biodiversity. However if, as I hope to show, Hegel’s vision does not necessarily contradict the principles of biodiversity, but can be seen to be compatible with them, then a further avenue for the integration of science and theology in relation to biodiversity is thereby opened up. Hegel’s all-encompassing vision is well known. It is a vision in which the Hegelian Idea takes in theology, art, science, nature and history. Just how this happens is mapped out in his Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences.

Hegel commences with the Idea, by which he means the totality or all of reality. This is then subdivided into the Idea in itself, that is to say, the logical idea; the Idea outside itself, that is to say, nature; and the Idea in and for itself, that is to say, spirit. This latter category of spirit is in turn subdivided into the three categories of subjective spirit, objective spirit, and absolute spirit, the last of which is concerned with art, religion and philosophy. Under the heading of the Idea outside itself, or nature, Hegel examines mechanics, physics and organics. And it is from within this category of organics that he looks at the terrestrial organism (by which he means the history of the earth) and vegetable and animal organism.

Now it is evident that much of Hegel’s science, necessarily indebted to what was known at the time, is now merely of historical interest. However, I suggest that what is of perennial interest is the way in which his understanding of nature is integrated into his overall system. But it is at this very point that the question of whether Hegel is friend or enemy so far as biodiversity is concerned begins to be raise its head. For example, his philosophy of nature seems to present a doctrine of evolution, a progress from lower to higher forms. As such it appears to be congenial to our understanding, until we recall, as Stace reminds us, that for Hegel ‘no time element is involved here. One phase succeeds another ... only in logical order. Hegel lived in pre-Darwinian days, and he was not aware that evolution is a fact in time as well as a process of logical thought.’ Thus he remarks

Nature is to be regarded as a system of stages, the one proceeding of necessity out of the other, and being the proximate truth of that from which it results. This is not to be thought of as a natural engendering of one out of the other, however, but as an engendering within the inner Idea which constitutes the ground of nature.

It is the priority of the logical idea that determines the stages of nature and it seems to do so regardless of whether those stages actually correspond to events in time. It is this logical ordering priority that enables Hegel to say in his remark to §249 that ‘thinking consideration must reject such nebulous and basically sensuous conceptions as for example the so-called emergence of plants and animals out of water, and of the more highly developed animal organizations out of the lower etc.’ Hegel as friend or enemy—the choice seems clear.

Yet a further difficulty with Hegel and one that may carry with it a prima facie reason for not even attempting this project at all is his well-known love for totality. His basic principle is that ‘truth is the whole’. Just as categories are subdivided into other categories, only to be further subdivided—a process carried out for the purpose of classification—so too the path runs in the opposite direction, that of sublation. The key insight of sublation is its dual character that simultaneously gives rise to two meanings: to clear away or annul, but also to keep or preserve. It is in accord with this principle that each category is taken up into and indeed thereby comes to constitute the one above it, until at last is constituted the Hegelian Idea of all reality. Not surprisingly Hegel has been interpreted as the enemy of alterity and difference.

Arguments can be marshalled to show that otherness is an essential element of Hegel’s dialectical vision; and anything is what it is only because of all the things that it is not, and to that extent, otherness is constitutive of identity. However, the response to this is to suggest that these are only steps in the dialectical process; they are ways of moving through the categories but they are simply provisional. The final vision is not one where difference is privileged, or even exists, but rather one in which ‘truth is the whole’. What place then for biodiversity, or for any kind of diversity?

More critically, one might object that Hegel was an idealist and therefore only interested in a world of ideas but not in our real world. Such an objection would have to address just why Hegel pays so much attention to the natural sciences (to say nothing of history). Suffice it to say that ‘idealism for Hegel has none of the subjective characteristics

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which are usually associated with this standpoint'. Instead, the 'correct idealism is . . . bound up with his view that the world is capable of being comprehended within the various systems of human knowledge' and can only be attained after 'an investigation of the sciences'.

Hegel was an objective idealist: a position that at once removed him from a naïve or radical empiricism on the one hand, and a solipsistic 'anything goes' stance on the other. It is this mediating position between extremes that I think makes him interesting for us today.

Although many lines of inquiry could be pursued, the one I intend to take concerns the relationship between the individual and the whole. Using this approach allows me to ascertain whether the charge that Hegel's system is hopelessly totalising is completely true, or whether there might be another dimension to the story. It also permits (in fact, encourages) an appreciation of nature as an organic system, steering a path between the Scylla of mechanism and the Charybdis of vitalism.

2. Biodiversity in dialogue with Hegel

By 'biodiversity' I understand a sympathetic and non-anthropocentric disposition toward the teeming mass of plants and animals, from the simplest of organisms through to the most complex. I also interpret it to mean an environment in which all of these biota have their role to play in the overall sustainability of life. While not adopting an anthropocentric viewpoint, my perspective is necessarily (I think) anthropological. I do ascribe a hierarchy of importance to the realm of nature. It seems to me that nature is characterised not only by change but also by development, thus I think in terms of higher and lower forms of nature. Yet I am also aware that what I may at one time regard as a less important aspect of nature—to me—may turn out to be critically important. One of the wagers of biodiversity is that with increased scientific knowledge these reversals have the capacity to recur constantly.

The essence of biodiversity is respect for the biotic community but without necessarily placing all biotic forms on the same level. If, after the manner of deep ecology, we were to make no discrimination between life forms on the basis of value, the question of whether Hegel is friend or enemy would be resolved very quickly. Hegel would take a contrary position, in part because he envisions change as development. However, change can only become development when it is teleologically related to an end. Stace claims that for Hegel 'this end is the actualisation of reason, the Idea, in the world, and this end is, at least proximately, reached in the human being, because the human being is a rational being'.

If, however, biodiversity is compatible with a belief in development—and presumably this is entailed in part by evolution—then the question becomes one of the integrity of the individual within the whole. Does each life form have intrinsic value (albeit at differing levels) or is it merely of instrumental value, nothing more than 'grist for the mill'? This is a key consideration in the question of the relationship between Hegel and biodiversity.

It has been argued that according to Hegel in terms of the order of deduction the later grades in nature are higher than the earlier grades.

The latter stage is explicitly what the earlier is only implicitly. The earlier is the mere potentiality of what the later is in actuality. The later therefore contains and is all that the earlier contains and is, and more also. It is a fuller, completer, more adequate version of the earlier. It is what the earlier was only trying to be.

If this were true then it would seem that any attempt to argue for the intrinsic value of 'lower' life forms is prevented from the outset. But here we must recall that this progression is a logical one which does not necessarily cohere with a temporal (ie real) progression. Nevertheless, this loses a lot of force when one considers that for Hegel there is an essential connection between the logical and real in such a way that although his system is undoubtedly flawed in many of its observations, Hegel's argumentation discloses his real objective: namely, that 'truth is the whole'.

In relation to nature the whole seems to be the earth. For Hegel it is the earth that is the 'universal individual . . . the concrete living

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10. Stace, Philosophy of Hegel, 314.
11. Ibid.
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whole. It is the earth that seems to qualify for the definition of ‘individual’. What we commonly call individuals (whether human or non-human) are regarded by Hegel not as atomistic units but rather as parts of intermeshing systems. But are we really sure what we mean when we speak of an individual?

According to the dictionary, an individual is something that is indivisible, but unicellular organisms actually reproduce by division. Is a tubular worm an individual when it can be cut into several pieces, each one capable of growing into a complete organism? Experiments with freshwater polyps throw doubt on the immediacy of an individual. By making an incision at the anterior end of the polyp, one can produce a double-headed water polyp. Yet should it ever capture a water flea, both heads will fight over the spoils—even though whichever head takes it, it still goes into the same digestive system. Are we speaking of one or two individuals? Or does it make sense to speak of individuals at all in this context?

Hegel’s point is that there exist no foundational criteria for individuality. What exist instead are interlocking systems that embrace both the organic and inorganic spheres of nature. And it is the system that gives meaning to the parts within it, yet without the parts there would be no system. Is this at least an implicit claim for a real diversity of nature by which the earth is constituted?

David Lamb claims that Hegel’s vision of nature as a hierarchy of systems that eventually build up the earth is somewhat reminiscent of the Gaia hypothesis, where the earth exists as a single organism capable of defining the conditions needed for its survival. While I am rather less confident that Hegel can be made to fit into this frame—partly because according to Hegel’s system the Idea outside of itself, or nature, is to be sublated into the totality itself—it does at least suggest that insofar as nature is constituted by systems and the organic and inorganic ‘individuals’ within them, there may yet be room for biodiversity within the Hegelian vision.

I remarked earlier that Hegel introduces the notion of change as development. This is obviously related to the idea of teleology. He distinguishes between ‘external and finite’ teleology on the one hand and ‘inner design’ on the other. In this way is modified Hegel’s primary intuition that ‘all descriptions of biological phenomena are ultimately teleological, since they are rendered explicable to conceptual systems determined by human interests’. Hegel observes that ‘in general, the practical approach to nature is determined by the self-seeking of appetite; need impels us to turn nature to our advantage, to exploit and harness and in short to annihilate it... Need and ingenuity have enabled man to discover endlessly varied ways of mastering and making use of nature’. This is what is meant by finite teleology and if this were the only meaning that Hegel ascribed to teleology then it might be that the theme of biodiversity would be thoroughly relativised by the instrumentalist framework of human interests. However, Hegel moves further than this when he addresses the issue of teleology from the aspect of ‘inner design.’

To see purpose as inherent within natural objects, is to grasp nature in its simple determinateness, eg, the seed of a plant, which contains the real potential of everything pertaining to the tree, and which as purposive activity is therefore oriented solely towards self-preservation. Aristotle had already noticed this notion of purpose in nature, and he called the activity the nature of a thing. This is the true teleological view, for it regards nature in its proper animation as free, and is therefore the highest view of nature.

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15. Ibid, 158.
19. Ibid, emphasis in the original.
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micro-organisms in their own right. However, with the passage of time and greater knowledge, there came a desire to discover more about these organisms as biological entities in their own right. Research now became focused upon ‘scientific and philosophical questions about the nature of life itself. The interest remains teleological insofar as it reflects a human end’, in this case the nature of life. But the end is now ‘internal and infinite’ rather than external and finite.20

3. Conclusion

Commenting on Hegel’s concept of teleology, Jacques D’Hondt has claimed that ‘Nothing can resist the concept. Nothing in nature can escape the rule of human praxis and its ends’.21 But this hardly means that human praxis is inimical to nature and thus to biodiversity. On the contrary, without such praxis which, to be sure, begins in an external mode, there could be no transition to the internal mode, where there is introduced the notion of ends or purposes ‘into both the organic and inorganic spheres’.22

An understanding of change as development requires a notion of teleology or purpose and such a notion is, for Hegel, tied to human interests. However, it is not tied to human interests in a trivial sense but rather in the sense that the entity under consideration tells us something about the nature of life. In this way the teleological viewpoint becomes inner and infinite. But all this happens not merely as a consequence of observation, but rather, an observation made within a conceptual framework. It is, of course, that very conceptual framework that pulls everything toward the Hegelian Idea, the totality. But none of this, it seems to me, is necessarily inimical to biodiversity.