Ethics in Progress (ISSN 2084-9257). Vol. 15 (2024). No. 2,
Art. #3, pp. 36-61. DOI:10.14746/eip.2024.2.3

The Wonders of the World and the Wonder of Man: Sophocles' Ode to Man in Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas

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Abstract: This article brings Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Jonas into conversation about man's relationship to nature on the basis of their references to the "Ode to Man" from Sophocles' *Antigone*. Hegel's reference to the ode in his *Naturphilosophie* highlights the violence of man's practical relation to nature even as it also points beyond all opposition to a philosophic relation that discerns man's underlying unity with nature. By stressing that the ode's evocation of man's violence against nature is undergirded by the overwhelming violence that nature perpetrates upon man, Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* raises the possibility that Hegel's "higher" relation to nature is an outgrowth of Western history's oblivion of man's essentially violent exposedness to being. Jonas concurs with a version of Heidegger's concern in his *Imperative of Responsibility* and asserts that man's violent mastery of nature has reached an uncanny excess that renders the ode almost quaint, but he insists above all that man must now assume the degree of responsibility that accords with his vast powers. Insofar as his exhortation to responsibility drives Jonas to a partial renewal of metaphysics, his position could be considered a retrieval of the Hegelian standpoint.

Keywords: Hegel; Heidegger; Jonas; Antigone; Ode to Man; philosophy; nature; being at home.

I. Introduction

At the heart of Sophocles' *Antigone* lies the question, "What is the human?" The conflict between Antigone and Creon over whether to bury Polynices is a conflict over whether the divine law of the family or the political decree of the state determines who counts as human – who deserves to be treated even in death as more than merely natural.

The basis of the conflict between the divine law and the political law is therefore the inherent ambiguity of the human vis-à-vis nature. This ambiguity is expressed in the first stasimon of the play, the so-called „Ode to Man," which opens with the famous words:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον [πέλει].
Many are the wonders, but nothing more wondrous than the human [abides].

In being *deinoteron*, the human being is at once both like and unlike other beings. He is marked out as distinct by exhibiting to a superlative degree the characteristic common to the class as a whole. The peculiar character of the human as *deinoteron* is thus expressed in terms of his always surpassing all other natural beings.

The ode thus presents the human without a natural home. He roams over land and sea, cultivating the earth and sailing the oceans; superior to all other living beings, he preys upon fish and fowl and beast alike, and what he does not hunt he tames, yoking the ox to his plow and the horse to bit and bridle (Sophocles 1994, lines 335–355). With speech and thought, he constructs not only physical shelter from wind and rain but gives order to himself by attempting to limit his own daring through law and custom (Ibid., lines 355–358). Yet despite this inventiveness that secures mastery over all other natural beings, man remains subject to death's dominion. All-resourceful (*pantoporos*), he is resourceless (*aporos*) in the face of mortality – the one limit he cannot defy (Ibid., lines 359–361). The ultimate futility of technical mastery points to a deeper problem: the root of the need that drives man to subdue nature cannot be addressed through technical ingenuity. If the human difference lies in the propensity to break boundaries, then human freedom is equally the need for self-determination. The indeterminate being is driven by necessity to determine himself, but even self-determination proves unstable, as the impulse to transgress natural limits likewise leads to the trespassing of the city's laws (Ibid., lines 365–370). In his antagonism toward nature, man discovers his difference from nature, but in the absence of any higher identity this difference remains indeterminate – a negatively determined flight from death.

Given the beautiful precision with which Sophocles' ode states the question of the human being, it is no surprise that it has become a *locus classicus* in the philosophic tradition's reflection on the relationship between humanity and nature. The ode is given a prominent place not only in Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* but also in Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* and Hans Jonas's *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The ode articulates the problem – taken up by Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas – of that being for whom nature as such, and therewith his own nature, is a question. Our comparative study of their divergent interpretations of the ancient poet's depiction of human ambiguity amounts to a dialogue on the prospects for self-knowledge in our knowledge of nature, the relation between practical need and theoretical inquiry, and the limits of the mastery of nature and humanity's moral responsibility toward it.

Our exploration will proceed in three stages. In section one, we examine Hegel's attempt to delineate both the continuity and discontinuity of the human with the natural world as a response to the opposition of mind to nature operative in modern philosophy. We argue that through the appropriation of Aristotelian modes of reasoning, Hegel sublates the partial truth of our practical orientation to nature in the higher theoretical outlook of the philosophy of nature and thereby effects the rational reconciliation of spirit with nature that allows the human being to be at home in nature. Section two explores Heidegger's interpretation of the ode in his attempt to initiate another inception in the midst of the oblivion of being, which is supposed to have become dominant through the tradition that reaches its fulfillment with Hegel. From Heidegger's perspective, Hegel's scientific comprehension of the idea of nature overlooks the primordial experience of violent confrontation with the whole of beings that first gave rise to philosophic questioning. On this reading, Hegel perfects what is passed onto him without grasping its radically historical origins, promising a home for man in the homelessness of universal knowing. We turn in section three to Jonas's interpretation of the ode, which sheds light on the "altered nature of human action" in the technological age (Jonas 1984, 1). In response to this ethical "novum," Jonas appropriates aspects of Heidegger's critique of modern philosophy but resists Heidegger's radical historicism, since the historical novelty of our contemporary conditions reveals the moral responsibility that has always been implicit in human freedom. Jonas argues that this revelation of moral responsibility reopens the possibility of metaphysical speculation and points to a recovery and transformation of the Hegelian rational reconciliation with nature as the ground of our new ethical duties.

In bringing these three thinkers into dialogue with one another we aim to exhibit a kind of thinking that runs counter to the prevailing mode of rationality, which approaches the questions of nature, human nature, and humanity's relationship to nature in terms of a value-neutral science that consigns all distinctions between better and worse forms of human comportment to the natural world to the supposedly irrational realm of metaphysical speculation. Whether in the guise of a reductive, materialist natural science or in the guise of Weberian social science, contemporary thinking, even when striving to address the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, remains largely beholden to an epistemology that equates knowledge with know-how, insight with rational control, and comprehension of the truth of nature with the power to transform nature. As we argue in our conclusion, the import of our inquiry for environmental philosophy today lies neither in a novel theoretical thesis about the ecological crisis and its spiritual causes and effects, nor in the elaboration of specific practical prescriptions, but in a demonstration of the need for an alternative form of thinking – one that the paper itself aims to evince. Indeed, despite the profound differences between Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas, they themselves are models for such thinking; for they all emphatically reject the Baconian conceit to judge the veracity of thought and the value of thinking in terms of its practical applicability – as though the worth of inquiry were rightly measured by the extent of its contribution to the

production of novel works. Contra the Baconian vision of natural science as a machine for the production of works, whereby each researcher contributes to humanity's mastery over nature through an ever more specialized knowledge of nature's parts, the end of the thinking pursued in this essay is intrinsic to the activity of the inquiry itself – exhibiting the logic of internal as opposed to external purposiveness, infinite as opposed to finite teleology (Jonas 2001, 188–210). In sum, this essay is an exercise in a different kind of thinking and a different form of attending to what Hegel calls *die Sache selbst* than the instrumental rationality which today is so ubiquitous, dominant, and familiar [*bekannt*] as to remain unthought [*nicht erkannt*], and whose preoccupation with the effectual truth of things has obscured the possibility of a different, higher form of knowing, thinking, and attending (cf. Hegel 2018, 20; Heidegger 2002, 71–72).

II. Hegel, the Logic of Nature, and the Natural Ground of *Geist*

Hegel frames his exposition [*Darstellung*] of the logic of nature – the systematic articulation of the multiple, multifaceted modes of natural being – with a reflection on the current disrepute of philosophy in general and the even lower regard for the philosophy of nature in particular, especially in comparison to the esteem enjoyed by the natural sciences. The ill repute stems from a confusion about the form of reason adequate to the philosophy of nature, which has "been transformed into an external formalism and perverted into a thoughtless instrument for superficial thinking and fanciful imagination" (Hegel 2004, 1). Although an adequate correction of this erroneous conception requires the full elaboration of a genuine philosophic science of nature, a preliminary clarity about the distinctive character of Hegel's theoretical inquiry can be gleaned from his prefatory introduction of the idea of a philosophy of nature, which stresses three distinctions that are also determinations of the domain of scientific inquiry that conceptually comprehending reason seeks to grasp.

First, Hegel distinguishes nature as a domain in its own right in relation to logic and spirit – that which precedes nature and that which proceeds from natural existence. As Hegel remarks, "the science of philosophy is a circle in which each member has an antecedent and a successor." In the *Encyclopedia*, the Philosophy of Nature is "only one circle in the whole," and therefore "the procession of nature from the eternal idea, its creation, the proof that there necessarily is a Nature, lies in the preceding exposition" of the absolute idea (Hegel 2004, 2). If the first presupposition of the philosophy of nature is the proof that nature exists, the complement to this beginning or *archē* is the culmination or *telos* of nature in that which transcends nature, namely, spirit. When the concept, which is only in-itself in nature, has become for-itself, then nature "has passed over into its truth" (Hegel 2004, 443). The idea of the philosophy of nature is thus determined by a double determinate negation that differentiates natural existence from the logic of being as such, on the one hand, and the logic of spirit, on the other – or, more generally stated,

from the ontological-logic of the whole and from the logic of the rational animal, that is, that part of the whole capable of self-knowledge, knowledge of nature, and knowledge of the whole.

Second, the philosophy of nature must also be distinguished from and understood in relation to natural science – to physics, natural history, and physiology. Although the true nature of this relation is one of deep affinity and even kinship, this kinship has been obscured by the manner of modern knowing, which, as Hegel argues in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, is prone to a degree of abstract thinking and merely formal understanding unknown to the ancients (Hegel 2018, § 37). Hegel illustrates this difference between ancients and moderns by way of a contrast between Aristotle, for whom the philosophy of nature is not distinct from physics, and Wolff, who opposes physics to cosmology, which "though supposed to be a metaphysics of the world or of nature was confined to the wholly abstract categories of the understanding" (Hegel 2004, 3). Operating with an abstract idea of reason that presupposed an opposition between universal principles and empirical particulars, Wolff's philosophy is emblematic of the abstract understanding of the moderns, which opposes physics to philosophy and therefore fails to grasp that the philosophy of nature is "nothing but rational physics" (Hegel 2004, 2). The ostensible disjunctive opposition of *Naturwissenschaft* and *Naturphilosophie* thus proves to be a consequence of the prejudice of modern epistemology, which tends to oppose perception to thought, being to concept, experience to pure cognition, content to form. The truth of the matter is that "Physics and the Philosophy of Nature (…) are not distinguished from each other as perception and thought, but only by *the kind and manner of their thought*; they are both a thinking apprehension of Nature."

Third, there is the familiar opposition between the theoretical and the practical comportments to nature that is a logical determination of the idea and that thus proves integral to answering the question, "what is nature?" (Hegel 2010, 290–291). To grasp [*auffassen*] the idea of nature concretely – to cognize its differentiated determinations [*verschiedene Bestimmungen*] and then to grasp together [*zusammenfassen*] these differentiated determinations as logical moments of an organic totality – requires ascending from the opposition of the theoretical and practical ways of considering nature [*Betrachtungsweisen der Natur*] to a higher standpoint that, by incorporating "what is peculiar to the practical relationship to nature," unites the theoretical with the practical in an integrated unity (Hegel 2010, 4).

Each of these three determinations of the idea of the philosophy of nature turns on the relation of *self-conscious Dasein* to *natural Dasein*, of spirit to nature or, as Hegel's philosophy seeks to demonstrate, reason for-itself to reason in-itself. Accordingly, a true apprehension of nature requires apprehending the nature of that being that asks about nature. For Hegel, the nature of the human is at stake in our knowledge of nature. Consequently, the first question of the philosophy of nature, namely, "what is nature?", is inseparable from the question of how nature is *for* the human – how nature presents to

and is appropriated by the human both practically and theoretically. It is in the context of articulating the logic at work both within and between these two basic *Betrachtungsweisen der Natur* that Hegel turns to Sophocles' choral ode to illuminate the ambiguous relation of the human to the natural world – a relation that reflects the "amphibious" character of the human as belonging to two worlds – nature and spirit – on account of being aware of being a particular natural Dasein (Hegel 1975, 54 and 80).

Before considering more closely Hegel's interpretation of the ode, however, a further elaboration of the difference between ancients and moderns is instructive. Aligning his approach with an Aristotelian mode of philosophizing, Hegel states, "Nature confronts us as a riddle and a problem, whose solution both attracts and repels us: attracts us, because spirit is presaged in nature; repels us, because nature seems an alien existence, in which spirit does not find itself. That is why Aristotle said that philosophy started from wonder" (Hegel 2004, 3). Wonder is provoked by the convergence of familiarity and strangeness; to wonder at the world is to see it simultaneously as that which is like and unlike, commensurate with and yet alien to the rationality that defines the human. According to Hegel, following Aristotle, it is because the natural world presents itself as partially intelligible that our experience of its incomprehensibility or our lack of understanding can provoke the wonder that spurs further inquiry; that is, the experience of *aporia* is predicated on a partial knowing that encounters a phenomenon that defies one's formerly adequate rubric for understanding. To come up short, to literally (as the etymology implies) be without a way forward, does not lead to skepticism, but to the revision of one's conception of nature. The experience of wonder in response to *aporia* leads to the expansion of one's horizon and the cognizance of the limitations of a particular conceptual determination. To progress in knowledge of nature is possible only because self-knowledge is possible and, on the basis of such self-knowledge, the revision of one's presuppositions about the being of nature. Such an approach to nature is predicated on a belief in the intelligibility of nature or the notion that reason is sovereign and operative not only in us but also in that which we seek to know, and, consequently, that our knowledge of nature requires surrendering to the immanent logic at work in *die Sache selbst* (Hegel 2010, 57; cf. Hegel 2018, § 53, §§ 56–58). To grasp the idea of nature, and thus to answer the question "what is nature?" demands that we give ourselves over to the logos of nature (Ferrarin 2019, 12–15, 195–199).

This deference of the human mind to the *nous* operative in the world is, however, wholly repudiated by the twin principal progenitors of modern natural science, who seek to establish new foundations for our knowledge of nature – foundations that secure the certainty of our knowing and the autonomy of human reason – and thereby "to lay the foundation (…) of human utility and power" (Bacon 1999, 75). The rejection of Aristotle and the depreciation of wonder in the thought of Francis Bacon and René Descartes are indicative of a novel method of inquiry intended to compel nature to reveal her secrets (Bacon 1999, 82, 130, 134 f.). As Descartes remarks in *The Passions of the Soul,* though

wonder "disposes us to the acquisition of the sciences," after acquiring such knowledge we ought "to deliver ourselves from it as much as possible" (Descartes 1985, 355). In place of wonder, modern natural science promises mastery over nature, wherein our knowledge of nature is confirmed by our ability to manipulate nature, since as Bacon states in the *New Organon* (i.e., the new tool for investigating nature intended to supplant the Aristotelian organon), "Human knowledge and human power meet in one" (Bacon 1999, 90). The end of such mastery is not only the myriad practical goods – above all the good of health – secured by the "invention of an infinity of artifices" (Descartes 1985, 143, translation modified), but also the restitution of the mind's sovereignty over nature, wherein nature serves our purposes and "the goal of the sciences" is to endow human life with "new powers" secured by "new works" (Bacon 1999, 117).

Implicit in Hegel's elaboration of a philosophy of nature is a comprehensive critique of modern natural science – of its epistemic grounds, which remain at the level of the understanding, of the abstract metaphysics underlying its mechanistic and mathematical physics, which reduces qualitative distinctions to quantitative difference, and of the priority of the practical in its reflections on natural phenomena, which discovers only external finite relations in nature, just as the outlook as a whole presumes a merely external relation of spirit to nature (Hegel 2004, 10–13, 38–42; cf. Hegel 2009, 89 and 92). For Hegel, the answer of modern natural science to the question "What is nature?" precludes the possibility of a genuine philosophy of nature and therewith the rational reconciliation of nature and spirit that is its determination [*Bestimmung*] and telos [*Zweck*]. Only if the partial truth of modern physics is not the final truth of nature is a philosophy of nature possible. Rather than begin with the historical opposition of ancients and moderns, however, Hegel's elaboration of the speculative perspective capable of comprehending that "nature is *in itself* a living whole" (Hegel 2004, 24) begins from the fundamental (because logically necessary) duality of willing and knowing, or practice and theory, in order to demonstrate the necessity of ascending from the finite perspective of the former to the infinite contemplative posture of the latter.

Hegel's interpretation of the ode illustrates why the need to ascend to the philosophic perspective from the ordinary outlook of natural consciousness is inherent in spirit's relation to nature – a relation conditioned throughout by knowledge of mortality. As the dialectic of §§ 245–246 demonstrates, although the rational animal employs artifice to secure its natural existence, to be fully rational requires transcending natural necessity in knowledge of nature's necessity (cf. §§ 374–376).

Our practical comportment to nature "is determined in general by desire [*Begierde*], which is self-seeking," and by need [*Bedürfnis*] which impels us to take a utilitarian approach to nature, wherein we relate to nature as the raw material for the satisfaction of our purposes, in the course of which nature is worn out [*abreiben*], worn down [*aufreiben*], and ultimately annihilated [*vernichten*]. Driven by a fundamental neediness [*Not*] to discover "an endless variety of ways of using and mastering nature,"

the *deinoteron* character of the human is disclosed in humanity's antagonistic struggle against the "forces nature develops and lets loose against man." In combat with nature, man uses nature against the onslaught of nature "by sheltering behind other products of nature, and letting these suffer her destructive attacks" (Hegel 2004, 5).

Though his limitless creativity allows man to triumph over every particular obstacle to his welfare or discrete threat to his security, "nature herself, however, in her universal aspect he cannot overcome in this way, nor can he turn her to his own purposes." The satisfaction attained through the negation of nature in its particularity proves fleeting – engendering a form of bad infinity, wherein man's restless activity remains negatively determined by nature's universal negativity. The ostensible supremacy of spirit to nature proves illusory as every victory is but the prelude to further struggle; for despite the great "cunning of his reason," man remains *amechanon* in the confrontation with death. Relating to nature in its finite particularity, man remains bound to the finite. Rather than achieve his liberation from nature's dominion, he remains subject to natural necessity – the fear of death remains the chain from which he cannot break free.

Thus, the ode depicts the tragic contradiction at the heart of our practical relation to nature: the need that drives us to master nature cannot be satisfied [*befriedigt*] through such mastery. We may for a time forestall the demise of our natural existence, but the overarching end of the practical approach to nature – to secure spirit's self-sufficiency [*Selbständigkeit*] – cannot be attained by treating nature as a means to our finite purposes.

Nevertheless, to see nature from the practical standpoint, wherein nature is considered as something external to and opposed to man and thus as having its being in being-for the purposes of man, does disclose the truth that "nature does not itself contain the absolute final end." The end-relation [*Zweckverhältnis*] of nature to spirit, however, "demands for itself a deeper mode of treatment than that appropriate to external and finite relationships, namely, the mode of treatment of the concept, which in its own general nature is immanent, and therefore is immanent in nature as such." The limits of the practical approach prove coextensive with the limits of external or finite purposiveness, which not only disregards the self-subsistent integrity of natural beings but likewise considers spirit only as "finite spirit caught up in natural ends." For spirit to relate to nature "in her universal aspect" requires spirit to pursue ends beyond mere self-preservation (Hegel 2004, 4–5).

The resolution of the perennial problem disclosed in Hegel's interpretation of the ode requires a threefold transfiguration of the relation of the human to nature – of what is known, how it is known, and the ground of such knowing – each facet of which employs the logic of immanent teleology, wherein the oppositions of means and ends, form and content, particular and universal are sublated in the conceptual relation of inner difference or identity-in-difference (Hegel 2010, 276–279). Hegel's adumbration of the perspective capable of grasping the true idea of nature proves to be a further elaboration of the aforementioned threefold preliminary determination of the philosophy of nature

as simultaneously spirit's highest relation [*Verhältnis*] to nature, spirit's knowledge of its own natural ground, and the fulfillment of nature in spirit or the discovery that the truth of nature is spirit. The threefold dialectical ascent thus involves:

(1) Clarifying the conceptual relation between physics and *Naturphilosophie* as two theoretical perspectives on nature in its universality, wherein the former knows the universal only in opposition to finite particulars as their "inner truth," while the latter knows the universal as "the concept, which contains specific differences as moments of an immanent self-moving unity" (Hegel 2010, 12).

(2) Sublating the opposition of the practical and theoretical *Betrachtungsweisen der Natur* in a higher form of theoretical comprehension wherein the truth disclosed in our practical relation to nature, namely, that "particular things are nothing in themselves," is incorporated into a philosophical idealism that knows the truth of things in their immediate singularity (i.e., as sensuous things), to be mere appearance – a moment of the self-determination of the concept – and thus knows their dissolution to be the effect of their *own* immanent activity (Hegel 2010, 9, 20, 385, 441 f.).

(3) Adumbrating nature's place within the whole as the mediating ground of logic and spirit, wherein the comprehension of nature in its universal aspect by spirit in its universality is not only "an end in itself" for spirit insofar as such knowing alone truly satisfies the desire of the human for "unity of himself with himself" through the negation of otherness, but is also the fulfillment of nature itself as a whole insofar as such knowing is nature's own relation to itself (Hegel 2010, 7 f. and 12 f.). Nature's fulfillment is thus nature's self-negation, and the self-sublation of the absolute idea in its externality is its return to itself (Hegel 2010, 443–445).

In knowing philosophical universality "which fulfills itself, and which, in its diamantine identity, also contains difference," the philosophy of nature knows "the true infinite [which] is the unity of itself and the finite." In grasping the concrete universal as the "purposive activity" that Aristotle called "the *nature of a thing,*" this consummate theoretical orientation knows the concept to be at work in nature and, by grasping "nature as free in her own peculiar vital activity," knows that "nature is in itself reason" (Hegel 2010, 12 and 6; cf. Hegel 2010, 277 and Hegel 2019, § 22, § 55). Spirit, thereby, "finds in nature its own essence" and effects the reconciliation of spirit and nature: the self-knowledge of spirit in nature is equally "the liberation of spirit from nature" and "the liberation of nature," since "it is through spirit that reason as such first emerges from nature into existence" (Hegel 2004, 13). To know that "spirit is the *truth* of nature" is to demonstrate that the circle of nature, which taken by itself is a self-contained, self-sufficient whole, constitutes a part of a larger whole – a moment in the logical articulation of the absolute idea (Hegel 2007, 9, translation modified; cf. Fackenheim 1967, 83–106). The philosophy of nature thus not only accounts for how a part of the whole could know

the whole but also demonstrates that such knowing is an integral moment of the whole (cf. Hegel 2019, § 20, § 25, § 47).

Hegel's interpretation of the *Ode to Man* illustrates how and why implicit in the contradiction inherent in our practical orientation to nature is the dialectical ascent to the rational reconciliation of the human and nature in our conceptual comprehension of reason at work in nature. Starting from what is most immediate for us as natural beings, Hegel demonstrates that the true purpose of our rational capacity cannot be the technological mastery of nature. The truth of the *deinoteron* is the self-transcendence of man's finite particularity in the universal knowing of the true infinity of the absolute idea. Hegel's philosophy of nature is thus the highest response to the awareness of death that distinguishes spirit from nature and that drives man to master nature for the sake of self-preservation. The rational reconciliation that enables spirit to know itself in knowing nature is the reconciliation of the human with the natural ground of his own individuated being. For Hegel, we are at home with ourselves in knowing the universal as "the inner being of nature" because in such knowing we simultaneously know ourselves to be in our essence not finite particulars but universal reason. Knowledge of nature allows one to be at home in the world because at its highest it allows one to reconcile oneself to one's own finitude, to the natural necessity of death. In this manner, the philosophy of nature as a part of philosophy in general might be said to be, following Socrates, "the practice of dying and being dead" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a).

III. Heidegger, the Violence of Being, and the Unhomeliness of the Human

It is far from obvious why a lecture course entitled *Introduction to Metaphysics* should be concerned with the interpretation of a Greek tragedy. Our first task, then, is to determine the broader context in which Heidegger sees fit to attend to Sophocles' ode in these lectures. Familiarity with this context will also shed light on Heidegger's understanding of himself in relation to Hegel. On that basis, we will then aim to assume the proper vantage from which to indicate the implicit confrontation between these two thinkers as it arises in Heidegger's interpretation of the ode. A preliminary remark may suffice here to anticipate the basic character of this confrontation: whereas Hegel interprets the ode as an illustration of man's practical relation to nature in general, Heidegger discerns in the ode the "poetic projection" of the inceptual Greek understanding of the being of beings and hence also of the human being, in which "the authentic *Greek* definition of the human" is first brought to language (Heidegger 2014, 163 and 168). Accordingly, the ode in no way arises for Heidegger in the service of illustrating any universal relation to a timeless object called "nature." It therefore becomes necessary to ask in the first place why, according to Heidegger, we should concern ourselves at all with what the Greeks alone are supposed to have thought.

What is at stake, according to Heidegger, is "the spiritual fate of the West" (Heidegger 2014, 41). We must examine how this could be so, for Heidegger's thought is unintelligible without some sense of the urgency that drives his questioning. The lectures begin by asking abruptly what Heidegger deems "the fundamental question of metaphysics": "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" (Ibid., 1). This question, however, which is initially directed to beings – asking about the ground of this or that being – cannot in the end evade the question about the *being* of those beings, for it asks "about the ground for the fact that beings *are*, and are what they *are*" (Ibid., 36). Accordingly, serious reflection on the fundamental question forces us to ask a "prior question": "How does it stand with being?" Yet unlike beings, which are all around us, being seems to be "undiscoverable, almost like nothing, or in the end *entirely* so" (Ibid., 39). "It" therefore "stands with being" for us in such a way that we appear to be at a complete loss when it comes to the "meaning of being." And so our answers to the fundamental question remain superficial, owing to "the fact" that being, in the words of Nietzsche, is a "vapor" and an "error" among us (Ibid., 40 and 55). If being for us turns out to be nothing, then the beings that undoubtedly surround us seem to be drained of their being: in the midst of our cluelessness or indifference about being, beings, too, "waver" and seem to slide into nothingness (Ibid., 32). We therefore find ourselves in a condition of testiness and anxiety, since in our clinging to beings "we are always trying to defend and guard ourselves against the impertinence of saying that all beings *are not*," even as, in our proclivity to pass over being, we secure for ourselves this fitfully defensive stance in relation to beings, which remain at once nearest to us and yet invaded, as it were, by some alien lack (Ibid., 39).

But in this brief account of the relationship between the fundamental and prior questions, we seem to have said nothing about "the spiritual fate of the West." In fact, however, this merely seems to be so. For according to Heidegger, "the asking of this prior question, and thereby the asking of the fundamental question of metaphysics, is a historical questioning through and through" (Ibid., 47). Why are *we* so clueless or indifferent when it comes to the question of the meaning of being? Has this question always been perceived as empty, hence as no real question at all? Heidegger answers *this* question in the negative, attributing our peculiar helplessness in the face of the question of being to "an increasingly rigid *oblivion of being*" (Ibid., 28). In his clearest answer to the "prior question," Heidegger speaks of the oblivion in this way: "The question of how it stands with being also proves to be the question of how it stands with our Dasein in history, of whether we *stand* in history or merely stagger. Seen metaphysically, *we are staggering*" (Ibid., 226). This oblivion of being in which we are ensnared unfolds *through* history and manifests itself in our "staggering" *in* history: "Everywhere we are underway amid beings, and yet we no longer know how it stands with being. We do not even know that we no longer know it." The correlative phenomenon of this staggering oblivion is that "on the earth, all over it, a darkening of the world is happening," whose signs are these: "the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass,

the preeminence of the mediocre" (Ibid., 49). Content merely "to be familiar with beings and to secure mastery over them," we are also caught in a "hopeless frenzy of unchained technology" that disguises this darkening as progress (Ibid., 35 and 41). Insofar as the spiritual world of the human is darkening "all over the earth," the initially outrageous assertion that the "spiritual fate of the West" is at stake in Heidegger's questioning now proves to be *an understatement*. This is the broader context of Heidegger's turn to the ode.

But we do not yet see how Hegel is related to this "darkening," nor how interpreting Sophocles could be a sensible, let alone necessary, response to it. We notice that Heidegger says that "we *no longer* know how it stands with being." We may then begin to wonder who is to blame for this gross negligence. Who was it, then, who first forgot being and cast humanity into a woeful world-darkening? Hegel, perhaps, or Plato? These are the wrong questions. In these lectures, Heidegger poses his guiding thought first in the form of a rhetorical question:

> What if the fault is not our own, we of today, nor that of our immediate or most distant forebears, but rather is based in a happening that runs through Western history from the inception onwards, a happening that the eyes of all historians will never reach, but which nevertheless happens – formerly, today, and in the future? (Heidegger 2014, 41).

The oblivion is a "happening" [*Geschehnis*] as old as Western history. In a certain sense, it *is* Western history [*Geschichte*]. To understand this happening, one must inquire into its "inception." The inception is the beginning of "questioning about beings as such and as a whole," which begins "in the age of the first and definitive unfolding of Western philosophy among the Greeks," above all in the thinking of Parmenides and Heraclitus (Ibid., 15). Yet this inception, though decisive for the West, "was not preserved" as such (Ibid., 194). Instead, there was a "falling-away" into the "inceptive end" of the thought of Plato and Aristotle: "The philosophy of the Greeks attains dominance in the West not on the basis of its originary inception, but on the basis of the inceptive end, which in Hegel is brought to fulfillment in a great and final manner" (Ibid., 210 f.). Yet this falling-away is not due to a misstep on the part of the thinkers of the inceptive end but lies rather in "the essence of the inception itself," for "the inception that initiates can never directly preserve its initiating," since this is possible *only* "by retrieving it more originally" (Ibid., 213). Just as one cannot truly preserve a Greek *kylix* by securing it behind glass and removing it from all laughter and revelry, one cannot preserve the inception by collecting its sayings as "fragments" and debating their logical consistency in academies. This preservation can instead occur only as the birth of "the other inception," which entails "all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that a genuine inception brings with it" (Ibid., 43). Accordingly, Heidegger's turn to the Greeks is not so much a turn as a "leap" into the origin, a "leap away from all the previous safety of [our] Dasein" (Ibid., 7). Provided that it is posed seriously enough to entail the "prior question," "the fundamental question" *is* this leap, which, by "restoring rootedness to historical Dasein," stands athwart the world-darkening (Ibid.,

44). Accordingly, Heidegger's leap into the origin of Greek antiquity has no interest in some point in the past *wie es eigentlich **gewesen** ist*, acquiring knowledge of a worldview that is now dead and gone. It is rather concerned with *wie es **eigentlich** gewesen **ist***, how it authentically "stands with being" for us, and how this "standing" and our "staggering" are presaged in the most primordial utterances of Western thinking and poetizing.

Heidegger's interpretation of the ode arises in his discussion of the third of four distinctions that unfold in history, which – in their most extreme development – amount to the "restriction of being" signifying the "maximum in confusion and deracination" now at work in the world-darkening (Ibid., 221). Heidegger devotes the most attention to this third distinction, "Being and Thinking" (Ibid., 128), which he identifies repeatedly as the most important and most questionable – hence "the real target of our attack": "The entire Western tradition and conception of being, and accordingly the fundamental relation to being that is still dominant today, is summed up in the title *being and thinking*" (Ibid., 129 and 228). In short, it is chiefly through the unfolding of this distinction that *logos* ("originary gatheredness") became assertion (hence "logic"), that being (originally, *physis*) became *idea*, and that truth (originally, *aletheia*) became correctness (Ibid., 200–213). In the first two of these three domains, Heidegger explicitly identifies the thought of Hegel as the fulfillment of these trajectories of falling-away (Ibid., 134; 200). At the same time, he is at pains to insist that Greek thinking in the inception, especially that of Parmenides (even when this seems similar to Hegel's idealism), is "the opposite" of any notion of "a subject that absorbs everything objective" (Ibid., 155). Instead, his gloss on the Parmenidean *Ursatz* on the sameness of thinking and being is: "being holds sway [*waltet*], but because it holds sway and insofar as it holds sway and appears, apprehending *also* necessarily happens *along with* appearance." Accordingly, apprehending is not in the first place the preeminent faculty that the human being "has," whose perfect activity is identical to the being of what is, inasmuch as this faculty alone provides the measure for what is; instead, "apprehending is the happening [*Geschehnis*] that has the human being," through which the latter first "steps into history [*Geschichte*]," viz., *is*, as "questioning-historical" (Ibid., 157 and 160). Despite this elaboration, however, Heidegger expects that we will continue to see in Parmenides' saying an anticipation of Hegel's overcoming of the subject-object division. Most proximately, therefore, it is *for this reason*, viz., to exhibit the radical separation between Parmenides and Hegel, that Heidegger turns to the ode as testimony of "something positive from Greek Dasein and being," the space for which is first "opened up" by the thinking of Parmenides' saying (Ibid., 160).

The "authentic *Greek* definition of the human" is *to deinotaton*, "the uncanniest" [*das Unheimlichste*], the most unhomely. But the human is the most unhomely only because he is "the most violent [*das Gewaltigste*]: violence-doing [*Gewalt-tätig*] in the midst of the overwhelming [*Überwältigenden*]" (Ibid., 167 f.). Since Heidegger clearly intends these words to be understood within a single nexus of meanings whose common root is evident in the verb *walten*, they do not readily admit of translation. We must hear in them first of

all a coursing, surging force that prevails through, lords over, and thereby determines all that lies within its domain [*walten*], whose gathered instantiations and effects [*Gewalt*], even if not simply to be condemned, are nevertheless domineering and for the most part unwelcome, hence generally violent and violating [*gewalt-tätig*]. What prevails in this manner to such a degree that it sweeps away whatever it encounters as if it were nothing is the overwhelming that always overpowers [*das Überwältigende*]. Heidegger often stresses that this power that always overpowers is what is eminent in this nexus of meanings by granting it the distinction of the base form: *das überwältigende Walten*, which the Greeks elsewhere called *physis* (Ibid., 16). The human, therefore, is the most unhomely because he opposes and must oppose the essentially overpowering power with his own limited acts of prevailing, ruling, and determining; to this end, man puts *techne* to work – the ancient progenitor of our "technology" – which Heidegger describes as "violence-doing" in the form of a "knowing" that is "constantly looking out beyond what, in each case, is already present at hand" (Ibid., 177). Knowing so conceived is essentially *transgressive* and thus never finds a limit where it can come to rest; the higher the peak of knowing, the farther must the knower prepare to fall when he can no longer climb. This knowing human, as violence-doer, suffers and must suffer being knocked out of what is homely for him – not by accident or on account of vain hubris, but because he must "step out beyond" the "limits" of the homely *if there is even to be a home in the first place*: "When one is put out of the home in this way, the home first discloses itself as such" (Ibid., 186). In venturing beyond the home that his daring first opens up for others, the most unhomely one challenges the whole of beings whose very essence it is to defeat and crush him. This human who is most fully human embraces his own inevitable "downfall" in this confrontation with the singularly indomitable as "the deepest and broadest yes to the overwhelming" (Ibid., 182). This aspect of doomed confrontation thoroughly pervades Heidegger's interpretation of the ode and leads him to devote special attention to the sharp antitheses in lines 360 [*pantoporos aporos*] and 370 [*hypsipolis apolis*]. In both instances, the human – that being who does violence against what is excessively violent – precisely by doing what he must do (seeking out myriad ways and thus rising high in the site, *polis*, where all these ways cross), *nevertheless* and yet precisely *therefore* finds "no way out" amidst beings, "loses the site" of his being-human, and comes to nothing, *ep' ouden erchetai* (Ibid., 169 f.).

Instead of proceeding to Heidegger's discussion of why Parmenides's apprehending must be conceived in accordance with the ode as an "act of violence," we may now hazard a Heideggerian critique of Hegel's discussion of the ode (Ibid., 187). As noted above, Hegel cites Sophocles' ode in order to illustrate the human's practical relation to nature. This relation is defined by the "mastery of nature": the human being ranges through nature negating its particulars as negativities and thus recurrently attains for himself a positive "satisfaction" (Hegel 2004, 5). The ode is construed as proof of the human's persistent cunning of reason, whereby he triumphs over every obstacle and always secures for himself

the feeling only of himself. The determination of nature as the negative to be negated by man qua finite *Geist* also characterizes Hegel's philosophic relation to nature, whereby infinite *Geist* overcomes the opposition between subject and object, discovering a home for man in the dimension of universality that man and nature share: "I in my essence is the Concept, the Same itself with itself, [the Same] Going-hence-through everything, which, in that it holds fast to the mastery over the particular differences, is the Universal returning into itself" (Ibid., 13, translation modified). In my essence as absolute knower, I pervade everything as master of the differences that inhere in me and in nature alike; as universal reason, I overcome every opposition by overcoming opposition as such. In this manner, I find theoretical satisfaction. I hold sway as the overwhelming, overriding Concept: I am *das überwältigende Walten*, I am in my essence *physis*. Surely this is the antipode of Heidegger's interpretation of the Sophoclean determination of man as the most unhomely. Here there is no longer violence, for there is no longer opposition; in his essence, the human is everywhere at home. But perhaps to be everywhere at home is never truly to be at home anywhere. Might this homelessness that is everywhere at home be the ultimate attestation and confirmation of the essential unhomeliness of the human?

IV. Hans Jonas, the Technological Novum, and the Ethics of Responsibility

Jonas begins *The Imperative of Responsibility* with an appeal to Sophocles' ode, an "ancient voice on man's power and deeds" (Jonas 1984, 2), which highlights by comparison the novelty of human action in the modern technological age. Granted, the ode strikes "a technological note" as it presents man's "violent and violating irruption into the cosmic order" through a "restless cleverness," even as it also presents man's building of "the home for his very humanity, the artifact of the city" through speech, thought, and social sentiment (Ibid.). *Techne* and *nomos* arise together and point to the wondrous nature of man. Accordingly, Jonas writes that "[t]he raping of nature and the civilizing of man go hand in hand" (Ibid.). But one could not mistake Sophocles' description of man's daring for "immodest bragging" about man's superiority to nature (Ibid., 3). The necessary condition of Sophocles' praise of man's creative ingenuity is the overwhelming power of nature which agelessly remains self-same through countless generations of mortal men, who take the stability of her "enduring patience" for granted (Ibid.). Assured of nature's permanence, there is no sense that human cleverness might aspire to the mastery of nature nor any indication that the artifice of ancient man is "only a beginning" to be continually superseded by future generations (Ibid.). Nature's reliable regularity was the enveloping context for the domain determined by the city's *nomos*, which existed between "the abiding and the changing: the abiding was Nature, the changing his own works" (Ibid., 2). The cosmic order provided the enduring conditions for the creation of the *polis* and the ethical sphere, which is characterized by "an entropy of sorts," as all

cities, families, and empires rise and fall (Ibid., 4). While man needed to treat nature only with cleverness, his actions with and toward other men were regulated by notions of good and evil, noble and base, just and unjust. All traditional notions of ethics presuppose that human action in the strict sense occurs within the circumscribed realm of the polis.

Jonas claims that this chorus would "have to read differently now" (Ibid., 6). Sophocles' ode brings to light "the altered nature of human action" by showing how our relationship to nature has changed. Modern technology has introduced an unprecedented kind of action – novel in scale, scope, and character – defying all traditional ethical frameworks. Our actions are not only incomparably more effective, capable of causing irreparable damage to local ecologies, they also harness the powers of nature in order to act into nature. *Techne*'s unrestrained expansion and domination of the natural world has undermined the ancient distinction between the realms of *physis* and *nomos*. We have endangered the enduring patience of nature and now must rethink moral responsibility in light of our novel power to radically and permanently effect nature. Jonas raises the question of whether an ethics can be discovered that can rein in the technological drive for mastery, but the intensity of our need for moral guidance is no guarantee of discovering an ethics of action that can rule the technological drive.

Jonas's interpretation is thus intended to illuminate the radical transformation in the basic structural conditions of human action, from whence Jonas derives the fundamental premise of his ethical and philosophical project: "Nature as a human responsibility is surely a novum to be pondered in ethical theory" (Ibid., 7). Our power has brought nature into the realm of the changing affairs of human action. We must be concerned for the future of what was once assumed to be permanent, and so must extend the temporal horizon of our notion of responsibility. The sheer efficacy of modern action so outstrips our capacity for rational foresight as to preclude the exercise of prudential judgment about the potential costs of the unintended consequences of technological action. Its overwhelming power extends our concern to the "global condition of human life and the far-off future," demanding the discovery of new duties and rights found in no "previous ethics and metaphysics" (Ibid., 8).

The conclusion Jonas derives from his interpretation of the ode encapsulates the central insight that serves as the starting point for three interwoven investigations concerning the ethical novum: (1) What precisely is different about human action in the present epoch? (2) How did this historical novum come about? (3) What ought we to do in light of the novelty of our situation? Only after answering the first two questions can Jonas discover the grounds on which we can answer the third.

Jonas thus undertakes a genealogical investigation of modern science to understand both the altered nature of human action and how man has arrived at the technological crisis. This propaedeutic genealogy aims to think through the limits of modern metaphysics and ethics and open up the possibility of a recovery of speculative metaphysics in the technological age. Even while Jonas pursues ends at odds with Heidegger's critique of

modernity, he borrows much from his analysis of its underlying self-conception. According to Jonas, the ultimate consequence of Bacon's subordination of theory to praxis is that modern science has itself become a technology wherein theoretical inquiry is not only in service of practical goods but is itself a form of action that continually transforms the human situation by constantly intervening in the conditions of subsequent actions. The modern project of mastering nature is characterized by an ever-accelerating "dynamism" that leads to "the indefinitely cumulative propagation of its effects" (Ibid., 23). "Dynamism," according to Jonas, "is the signature of modernity" and "our fate" (Ibid., 119).

Jonas's deepest critique of modern science is that it rests on an erroneous anthropology that understands man only with respect to what is lower than man. Accordingly, "man-the-knower apprehends man-*qua*-lower-than-himself"; this outlook is not only in principle skeptical of any higher motives for moral action but it also undermines the very conditions of the scientific project, namely, the "freedom of inquiry and [the] openness to reason" (Jonas 2001, 196). The method of modern science precludes the possibility of the scientist's self-knowledge. The modern scientific framework above all denies an objective basis for human values. Indeed, the charitable aims of modern science are rooted in sources outside the scientific framework, even as these aims are transformed to conform to the conception of man as lower than man. The cumulative effect of these epistemological shortcomings is the temptation to conceive of man as an "object" of technology: for the relief of man's estate, man himself must be transformed. With the advent of genetic engineering, we are on the verge of changing human nature in light of a partial understanding of the human. Modern scientists become the new image makers of humanity, but in the absence of an adequate "idea of man," they risk permanently dehumanizing the human.

The spiritual crisis of the present moment is, however, equally the revelation of a profound moral and metaphysical truth: the ethical novum of the technological age discloses the primacy of human freedom and the grounds of a philosophical anthropology – and by extension a view of nature – antithetical to the reductive debunking outlook of modern science. To recognize our responsibility for nature is already an act of human freedom. The ethical novum is therefore also implicitly a rejection of Heidegger's history of being and its collapse of the distinction between faith and reason. Jonas notes that "faith in revealed truth" can supply the "foundation for metaphysics, but it is not there on command, and not even the strongest argument of need permits resorting to a faith that is absent or discredited" (Jonas 1984, 45). Reason, on the other hand, "can be set to work upon demand" (Ibid.). Jonas seems to have the decline of religious faith in the West in mind, but this practical critique of "faith in revealed truth" applies just as well to Heidegger's resigned statement that "only a god can save us." The situation is urgent and now is not the time to lose faith in the efficacy of human freedom.

In appealing to the high rather than the low in man, the very question of human responsibility prompts one to wonder whether "natural science may not tell the whole

story about Nature" (Ibid., 8). The practical imperative of finding "an ethics for the technological age" leads to a renewal of precisely the sort of metaphysical inquiry that Heidegger believes to have come to an end. The first imperative of responsibility, that "there be a mankind," raises the question of "*why* there should be men"; only an answer to this question can tell us "*how* they should be" (Ibid., 43). The question of why there should be men means that Jonas "cannot avoid taking the imprudent plunge into ontology," which means that the "worldly philosopher struggling for an ethics" must allow for "the possibility of a rational metaphysics" (Ibid., 45). Gaining clarity on what we owe to each other and to nature requires pursuing the very questions that lie at the heart of Sophocles' Ode to Man: what is the human, and what is our place within the whole?

Thus, Jonas's appropriation of the Heideggerian critique of modern technology aims to think through the historical process culminating in the urgent awareness of the theoretical and practical limits of modern technology. However, Jonas does not trace the origins of the current crisis to the original turning away from Being in Plato and Aristotle, but to the modern project of mastery over nature. Modern science has obscured what is highest in man – the freedom of rational inquiry and the freedom entailed in moral responsibility. The imperatives of the ethical novum reopen the question of man, which, in turn, reopens the question of being. The poverty of modern ethics in the face of the historical novum prompts Jonas to undertake metaphysical examinations that not only defy the modern "dogma" that "there is no metaphysical truth," but also challenge the modern prohibition against deriving an "ought" from being (Ibid., 44). From the perspective of these modern dogmas, Jonas may seem to return to prideful conceptions of man's place within nature and of philosophy, understood as the examination of unanswerable questions. But Jonas argues that the apparent theoretical humility of modern natural science obscures the "Promethean immodesty" of its practical aims (Jonas 1984, 201). Jonas's metaphysical speculations are, in fact, emblematic of "a new kind of humility" before the awesome power of modern technology – a humility that recognizes that, in the words of another interpretation of the choral ode, "man's competence always outstrips his self-knowledge" (Ibid., 22; Benardete 1999, 40).

Jonas's theoretical inquiries begin from an epistemological premise that counteracts the modern epistemology of suspicion. He writes: "What reality is must be gathered from its testimony, and naturally from that which tells the most – from the most manifest, not the most hidden; the most developed, not the least developed; the fullest and not the poorest – hence from the highest that is accessible to us" (Jonas 1984, 69 f.). By means of a phenomenological study of metabolism (defined conceptually as the enduring freedom of form over matter), Jonas argues that the purposiveness of the organism – so often dismissed by the modern mind – in fact makes manifest the fundamental character of the whole. In contrast to the modern scientific perspective, which takes inanimate matter as the fundamental phenomenon, Jonas prioritizes the emergence of life and mind from matter as the key to the comprehension of the whole. Human reason as the pinnacle of

this metabolic process is the most manifest, developed, fullest, and highest example of the possibilities inherent in nature; it is the most telling fact about "what reality is."

The purposiveness inherent in metabolism is evidence of an "ought" rooted in an "is." Inherent in the nature of life is the positing of the value of life over non-life. When the idea of life as the maintenance of form through change is applied to man and his concerns, what is at stake is not simply the metabolic life of the human animal but the preservation of what is highest in the "idea of man," which is threatened by technological power and obscured by the latent scientific anthropology (Ibid., 43). We have a responsibility to preserve this idea and its "embodiment in the world." The ethics of responsibility thus rests on Jonas's philosophy of nature, which reintroduces a hierarchy of beings whose pinnacle is man. In this way, Jonas replaces the "ruthless anthropocentrism which characterizes traditional ethics," which culminates in the "apocalyptic possibilities inherent in modern technology," with a new kind of anthropocentric ethics that stresses the paradoxical ambiguity of man as both continuous and discontinuous with the natural world. Man is the part of nature that transcends nature in thought and action, and so becomes responsible for protecting nature just as he finds his highest fulfillment in contemplating nature.

The contemplation of the wondrous nature of man lies at the heart of Jonas's philosophy. Like the ancient voice of Sophocles, this contemplation concerns both the technical cleverness of man and his need for ethical imperatives. Unlike Sophocles, Jonas is burdened with an insight into human historicity brought about by the dynamism of our technological age. The ancient humility in the face of an enduring cosmic order is supplemented by humility in the face of man's own power to harness the forces of nature and irrevocably alter nature. And yet, Jonas's reflections on the novelty of man's responsibility lead him to a contemplation of the whole that transcends a merely practical use of theory, offering instead an insight into the fundamental question of metaphysics: why is there something and not nothing? This question can only be answered, according to Jonas, when one transforms it into the question of value: "why *ought* there to be something in preference to nothingness, whatever the *cause* of its coming to be might be?" (Ibid., 48).

This question is determined by the question of whether a particular being, man, that locus of responsibility, ought to exist. Jonas claims that a parent's love for an infant exemplifies the demands of the imperative of responsibility. The newborn's "mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him" (Ibid., 131). The being who asks the question about being begins to do so most urgently out of care for a particular kind of being. Natality throws our concern into the future as we seek to nourish and bring to actuality the infinite potential of ever-renewing human life. The "immanent ought-to-be of the suckling" turns into the "transitive ought-to-do of others" who alone can "make possible the gradual coming true of the teleological promise" inherent in every newborn (Ibid., 134). Thus, responsibility looks at things *sub specie temporis* and not *sub specie aeternitatis* (Ibid., 135). But it is the temporal orientation

of our practical concern that opens up the possibility of responding to Leibniz's question with any theoretical satisfaction. In giving primacy to birth over death, Jonas affirms the imperative that there ought to be man, which is first and foremost a metaphysical claim about nature and being.

V. Conclusion

Sophocles' ode presents unnaturalness as somehow natural to the human. The human naturally exceeds the limits imposed not only by nature but also by the laws, conventions, and pieties of his political community. The ode's articulation of man's uncanniness provides an occasion for the three philosophers we have examined to think through man's relationship with the natural world, which encompasses both his theoretical efforts to comprehend it and his practical responsibilities toward it. Through our reading of the interpretations of Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas, we have articulated the outlines of a rich philosophical dialogue on the nature of the human being, the difference between ancients and moderns, the limitations of the project to master nature, and the relation between the practical and theoretical, moral and intellectual expressions of human reason.

Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles' ode illustrates the intractable limitations, the intrinsic contradiction, and the tragic irony of spirit's pursuit of mastery over nature, when the partial truth of praxis is taken as the final or definitive truth of spirit's relation to nature; for although the human may succeed in using nature as a means to his own particular ends – his own satisfaction and self-preservation – spirit remains essentially beholden to the finite purposes common to all natural Dasein. In pursuit of dominion, the human remains subject to the universal negativity of nature, and in our perpetual flight from death, life becomes the "restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death" (Hobbes 1994, 58). The bad infinity engendered by the antagonistic opposition of spirit to nature presupposed in external relations of utility is, however, but a reflection of the inner diremption suffered by self-conscious Dasein. The rational animal can overcome such self-alienation only through the rational reconciliation effected by the philosophy of nature, "which overcomes the division between nature and spirit, and assures to spirit the knowledge of its essence in nature" (Hegel 2004, 14). Such reconciliation is spirit's "genuine liberation" in which it discards its attachment to particularity and "sheds its merely personal habits of thought and ways of looking at things" (Ibid., 444). Spirit's "liberation from nature and from nature's necessity" in knowing reason as the ground of its basic identity with nature is, moreover, equally "the liberation of nature;" for "nature is in its own self this process of becoming spirit, of sublating its otherness" (Ibid., 444, 13, 14). Just as "nothing whatever can have a positive relation to the living being if this latter is not in its own self the possibility of this relation, i.e., if the relation is not determined by the concept and hence not directly immanent in the subject," so too can nature as a

whole be known by spirit only because its being known is the actualization of nature's own relation to spirit—a relation through which what nature is in itself becomes for itself (Ibid., 385). Just as spirit transcends the particularity of its individuated existence in finding "in nature its own essence, i.e., the concept," so too does nature transcend itself and "find its consummation" in spirit when "the concept, which in nature is only *in itself*, has become *for itself*" (Ibid., 13, 444, 443).

Driven by the urgency of the oblivion of being that has brought forth a stifling darkness upon man's historical world, Heidegger turns to the Greeks in general and to Sophocles' ode in particular in order to retrieve the long-forgotten inception of the Western thinking of the being of beings. In the poetic saying of Sophocles, the Greek inception defines man as the uncanniest, the most unhomely. Man is the most unhomely because he is the most violent, and he is the most violent because he must do violence against what is overwhelming in its violence: the almighty sway of beings as a whole. In the Greek inceptive definition, then, man is most essentially man when he is called forth by, and ventures into, the battle with beings as a whole – a battle that he must in each case always lose in the end. On this view, man is only ever at home through the violent ventures of the most unhomely ones, who are also the most distinctively human – which distinction, however, ensures their exclusion and downfall. Unlike Hegel, then, Heidegger discerns in the ode not a practical relation to nature defined by mastery but a basic relation to beings as a whole (called, by the Greeks, *physis*) defined by defeat: the ode discloses being-human as "the constant plight [*Not*] of defeat and of the ever-renewed resurgence of the act of violence against being" (Heidegger 2014, 198). It is this basic relation to the being of beings that, in Heidegger's view, gives rise to the subsequent distinction between the practical and theoretical relations to nature. According to Heidegger, Hegel presumably sees only mastery in the ode because his thought brings to its fulfillment that tradition of thinking that, by devoting its attention to overcoming oppositions both practical and theoretical and thus securing beings as a home for man, thereby also forgets the unhomely essence of precisely this securing.

While Jonas offers a different genealogy of the technological age, he inherits from Heidegger a sense of urgency regarding the unprecedented vulnerability of nature. The prudential concern that arises from this conception of nature's vulnerability raises anew the question of Sophocles' ode – what is man's place within the whole? In the course of Jonas's metaphysical speculations, which are rooted in the epistemological primacy of the phenomenon of life, a conception of man as the pinnacle of nature emerges. Our responsibility toward nature is not simply a matter of prudence, of securing the correct policy proposals to ward off our self-destruction, but involves the articulation and preservation of the idea of nature in its totality. The idea of nature, without the presence of human freedom, would cease to be a unity. In other words, the emergence of human freedom realizes a potential inherent in the material world and thus brings nature to a kind of completion. The practical and theoretical are intertwined in such a way that Jonas

is theoretically and morally the post-Heideggerian heir to the Hegelian legacy, which knows that the power that comes from knowledge of nature is not the highest aim of human intellect, but rather, in the words of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history, that the ultimate vocation of the human is "knowledge of good and evil" (Hegel 1988, 37). Such knowledge, for Jonas, provides an answer to the question of why there are beings at all, and not nothing.

It is fitting to conclude this essay with a final reflection on the purpose of our reconstruction of the threefold *Auseinandersetzung* between Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas over the inextricably interwoven questions of the being of nature [*physis*] and of the being that asks about the being of nature. While it is customary to offer in conclusion to an academic article a summary of results, of hypotheses confirmed, or of theses verified, all three thinkers warn against the temptation to turn philosophy into a form of research that, like other sciences, issues in actionable results, a set of facts, or a series of discrete propositional truth-claims. Indeed, all three reject the still-regnant conceit that the paradigmatic form of human knowing is mathematics and the preeminent science mathematical physics, the clarity, certainty, and precision of which are taken to be epistemically normative for every form of human thinking. All three warn against the allure of scientific specialization which attains its exact knowledge of a part by abstracting both from the whole to which the part belongs as well as from the conditions of the possibility of such knowing. And all three are skeptical of the representational thinking operative in the theories of truth that equate rigorous inquiry with scientific research (Hegel 2018, 3–4, 24–29, 33–37; Heidegger 2002, 58–70, 73–84; Jonas 2001, 191–199).

Hence, despite the substantive disagreements highlighted in this essay, Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas all concur that, in Hegel's words, philosophic "truth is not a minted coin that can be readily given and pocketed" (Hegel 2018, 24; translation modified). Accordingly, they agree that the highest form of human thinking proceeds in a different manner than that of Baconian natural science and that the value of such thinking lies elsewhere than in its contribution to the sum total of factual truth or in the power such research makes possible. If, however, the kind of thinking exemplified by Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas arrives at neither clearly demonstrated theories nor specific practical prescriptions, what is the value or purpose of such thinking? Even if our paper has succeeded in establishing the negative conclusion that the mechanistic, reductionist materialist view of nature is not the final truth of things, and accordingly that the vocation of philosophy cannot be, as Locke envisioned, to serve as "the Under-Labourer" of natural science, whose task consists in "removing some of the Rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge" (Locke 1979, 9–10), the question of the positive purpose of the thinking pursued in this paper remains.

To begin to provide a positive answer to the question why such thinking, though lacking utility in the conventional sense, may be "the one thing needful" both for human beings in general and for confronting the novel challenges posed by the contemporary

ecological crisis, the recent work of neuro-psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist (2019) proves instructive. McGilchrist uses the left-brain/right-brain heuristic to describe how our modes of attention and thinking inform how the world shows up for us. Our consciousness of the world, and thus what we experience, is a consequence of the dynamic interplay between the narrowly focused attention of the left-brain, which in its focus on isolable parts tends to picture the world as inanimate, mechanical, and manipulable, and the right-brain, which in its broader, more capacious and holistic form of attention, experiences the world as a living, complex, organic totality. Whereas the former conceives of the human agent as independent of the whole, the latter conceives of the human as an integrated part of a larger whole. According to McGilchrist, both our experience of alienation and the source of the contemporary environmental crisis are downstream from our contemporary culture's prioritization of the instrumental rationality and representational understanding of the left-brain over the contemplative receptivity to the holistic order of right-brain thinking. The root of our contemporary malaise is the ascendancy of the technical efficacy of the former to the depreciation of the metaphysical speculation of the latter. If McGilchrist is correct that the hypertrophic excess of left-brain thinking is the source of both the ecological crisis of environmental despoliation and the anthropological crisis of the widespread sense that life is meaningless, then the positive good of the thinking pursued in this paper lies first and foremost in attempting to redress this baleful imbalance and recover a sense of humanity's place within the whole; for only on that basis can humanity hope to find a manner of comporting itself to nature in accordance with the deepest needs of human nature (McGilchrist 2019).

While the unanimity of Hegel, Heidegger, and Jonas regarding the need to overcome the abstract thinking underlying reductive materialism, on the one hand, and the disembodied, acosmic conception of the human subject, on the other, is in itself significant for environmental philosophy today, their disagreement is no less significant; for it discloses three distinct paths we might pursue in attempting to correct for the hypertrophic excess of left-brain thinking and the corollary spiritual destitution consequent to our dislocation from the whole. Their divergent accounts of the human and of the human's place within the whole provide a framework for thinking about our custodial responsibility to the natural environment, and their implicit dialogue about the fitting and properly human mode of attending to nature grounds the possible alternatives that a thoughtful response to our technological Novum might take. Our aim in this essay has not been to decide conclusively which of these three alternatives is "the right one" – indeed, the authors of this essay are far from attaining unanimity on this score – but rather to exhibit the kind of dialectical thinking we believe is called for in our present crisis. In McGilchrist's idiom, this essay is an exercise in right-brain thinking in defense of the importance of such thinking – the value of which lies in the activity itself. For, as McGilchrist has argued, the kind of attention one pays determines the kind of person one is.

And yet, such thinking might also be needful in a more immediate way insofar as to be actively engaged in an attentive openness to the presence of things might provide the sole bulwark against the dehumanizing effects of our most recent technological innovation. In a recent study of the astonishing transformation of the human condition wrought by the digital revolution, Antón Barba-Kay has argued that the common denominator underlying the ubiquitous and multi-faceted effects of this novel form of technology on human life is its deformation of human attention – that intentionality of consciousness which Barba-Kay describes as "the blessing of our care" (Barba-Kay 2023, 70). The digital network, and its web of all-consuming devices, poses such a grave danger to the human because while promising, like every form of technology, greater efficiency in the pursuit of our ends, this tool in fact transforms the user rather than the external world. Unlike former technological innovations, this tool is not an "inert object interpolated as a means between the acting bodily organ (usually the hand) and the extra-corporeal object of the action" that serves to mediate between man and his environment (Jonas 1999, 78). Nor is it merely a novel means to securing determinate ends that exist independently of the medium of their satisfaction. Rather, this "web of our own making" becomes the environment we inhabit. As the denizens of this brave new world, our consciousness is shaped according to the logic of its laws, and rather than promoting our freedom, like the tools of previous epochs, by securing our independence from natural necessity, this form of artifice, this novel "natural technology of attention," engenders new forms of dependence (Ibid., 78 f., 84–86; Barba-Kay 2023, 63–70, 162–169). Through its capacity to foreclose opportunities for the kind of attention and the way of thinking needed for transcending the horizon of a merely utilitarian relationship to nature, this most recent fruit of Baconian science threatens to make us oblivious to the fact that, due to a preponderance of instrumental rationality not only in our dealings with nature but also in our relations to one another, our world has become, to use Weber's famous image, an iron cage. If we are not to succumb to such a tragic fate, then what is most needed, even before any concrete action, is a transformation in what Kant called our *Denkungsart*. We must become more aware of the way we attend to the world, even as the intrusion of technology into every aspect of our lives makes fostering this awareness all the more challenging. Hence, the first task of any serious environmental philosophy must be an investigation of the mode of thinking that would enable humanity to be more fully human and, on that basis, attain a relationship to nature that is more truly natural.

Though the study of first philosophy, especially one undertaken through a comparative analysis of different interpretations of a choral ode from an ancient Greek tragedy, may seem a world away from, if not a flight from, the urgency of our present crisis, this essay has sought to refute such an assumption, which is itself emblematic of the very mode of thinking that underlies this crisis, and instead to defend the primacy of such fundamental reflection as the one thing truly needful if we are to be truly human. Only a different mode of attending to things will enable us to hear "the outcry of mute

things" and heed their warning that we must curb "our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation" (Jonas 1999, 202).

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