Ethics in Progress (ISSN 2084-9257). Vol. 16 (2025). No. 1,
Art. #7, pp. 93-115. DOI:10.14746/eip.2025.1.7

The Life of/in Nature. From Hegel to British Idealism and Its Twentieth-Century Afterlives

Giulia Battistoni

(Università degli Studi di Verona, Verona, Italy; giulia.battistoni@univr.it)
ORCID: 0000-0002-5391-8590

Abstract: This essay traces the philosophical development of the concept of organic life and nature from Hegel's Philosophy of Nature through British Idealism to the twentieth-century thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Hans Jonas. It highlights how Hegel's idea of the organism as a self-producing, purposive unity influenced later thinkers, directly or indirectly, shaping views of nature as inherently processual, relational, and teleological. By uncovering the Hegelian echoes in British Idealism and beyond, the essay argues for the continuing relevance of speculative conceptions of life and nature. This reconstruction offers new insights into contemporary philosophical biology and environmental ethics, suggesting that the categories of organism, purposiveness, and selfhood remain vital for rethinking the place of life within nature today.

Keywords: Hegel; organism; life; nature; British Idealism; Whitehead; Jonas.

I. Introductory Remarks

For decades, Hegel's Philosophy of Nature has been largely neglected by both Hegelians and non-Hegelians, dismissed as obscure and, in many respects, simply mistaken[1]. A case in point is the severe criticism levelled by Benedetto Croce against this part of Hegel's system – a critique that resonated even in the Anglophone world, where Croce was highly active and where his works were translated (see Croce 1997; Croce 2006). Still in 1973 John Findlay should claim that "no careful study of the Dialectic in the Philosophy of Nature has been recently attempted, possibly owing to fear aroused

1 This essay is part of the project *Collective Responsibility towards Nature and Future Generations (ReNa)*, that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie (grant agreement No 101064728; funded by the European Union). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

by the wealth of scientific difficulty in that work" (Findlay 1973, 72). In his view, Hegel's Philosophy of Nature was, on the contrary, "the best Nature-Philosophy of the classical type" (Findlay 1973, 73). However, as Errol Harris (Harris 1993, 117) points out, Findlay was an exception within the field of Hegelian studies, particularly in the Anglophone world, which was largely focused on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*[2].

A renewed interest in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature thus began to emerge in the 1970s. Over the past decades, scholars have in particular sought to reconstruct his theory of the living organism (for a complete study on Hegel's understanding of 'das Organische', in the context of the philosophy of nature and the biology around 1800, see Breidbach 1982; more recently, Illetterati 2015), highlighting its critical stance toward Schelling and German Romanticism, its dialogue with the natural sciences of his time[3], and its potential relevance for contemporary biology (the following studies go in this fruitful direction: Gambarotto & Illetterati 2020; Michelini 2011). Central to these studies is Hegel's engagement with the legacy of Kant and Aristotle on life and teleology. Scholars have shown how Hegel sought to integrate both traditions: unlike Kant, who saw teleology as a merely regulative and subjective principle[4], Hegel treats it as a constitutive feature of living beings – and of nature as a whole. In doing so, he draws significantly on Aristotle's conception of natural purposiveness. As one can read in the addition to § 245 of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*: "To see purpose as inherent within natural objects is to grasp nature in its simple determinateness, e.g. the seed of a plant, which contains the real potential of everything pertaining to the tree, and which as purposeful activity is therefore orientated solely towards self-preservation" (Petry 1970, I, § 245a, 196; Hegel 2016, 1177). And, with explicit reference to Aristotle and Kant: "The fundamental determination of living existence is that it is to be regarded as acting purposively. This has been grasped by *Aristotle*, but has been almost forgotten in more recent times. *Kant* revived the concept in his own way however, with the doctrine of the *inner* purposiveness of living existence, which implies that this existence is to be regarded as an *end in itself* [*Selbstzweck*]" (Petry 1970, III, § 360r, 145)[5].

2 Findlay was born in South Africa and educated at the University of Pretoria, Oxford, and Graz. He went on to teach at various universities in South Africa, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA, concluding his career at Boston University (on the role of Findlay's work in the revival of interest in Hegel's philosophy, and in particular in his philosophy of nature, see Harris 1985). Note that with his comprehensive and valuable work on Hegel in 1958, Findlay anticipated the American Hegel-Renaissance, realised by the so called 'Pittsburgh School', in the names of Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom.

3 On this topic, Findlay and Milič Čapek defend two opposing ideas: according to Findlay, Hegel's view was a manifestation of the science of his time, while Čapek takes Hegel's philosophy of nature to be "far *behind* the science of his own time" (Čapek 1984, 109; Findlay 1984; Findlay 1958, 268).

4 "The concept of a thing as intrinsically a natural end is (…) not a constitutive concept either of understanding or of reason, but yet it may be used by reflective judgement as a regulative concept for guiding our investigation of objects of this kind (…)" (Kant 2007, § 65, 203).

5 As is well known, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant underlines that organic beings must be understood as products of immanent purpose tendencies, that they are to be regarded as something that produces itself through itself (with a kind of inner teleology) (on the concept of teleology and idea of life in the thought of Aristotle and Kant, see Chiereghin 1995).

As is well known, in the § 65 of the *Critique of Judgement*, devoted to "Things considered as natural ends," namely to organisms, characterised by final causes (*nexus finalis*), Kant recognises a "*first* requisite of a thing, considered as a natural end," namely "that its parts, both as to their existence and form, are only possible by their relation to the whole"; and a second requisite "that the parts of the thing combine of themselves into the unity of a whole by being reciprocally cause and effect of their form" (Kant 2007, § 65, 200–201). As a result, Kant claims that "In such a natural product as this every part is thought as *owing* its presence to the *agency* of all the remaining parts, and also as existing *for the sake of the others* and of the whole, that is as an instrument, or organ" (Kant 2007, § 65, 201–202). Natural ends, namely organisms are for Kant organised and self-organised beings. For "in the case of organisms we have already represented to ourselves a causality according to ends – a creative understanding – to account for their intrinsic purposiveness" (Kant 2007, § 82, 254). It is precisely the idea that organisms are actively self-organising and self-producing beings – capable of maintaining and reproducing themselves – that would go on to influence the next generation of natural philosophers, including the Romantics, Schelling, and Hegel, albeit in different ways[6].

Drawing on this background, the main aim of this essay is to develop the following working hypothesis: Hegel's conception of nature – and in particular of the living organism – played a significant role in shaping the reflections of British Idealism, a philosophical and cultural movement that has received only limited and often superficial scholarly attention. From there, this influence – albeit indirectly – extended to key twentieth-century positions, such as Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and Hans Jonas's philosophical biology. This reconstruction has never been fully undertaken before, partly because serious interest in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature and his concept of life has re-emerged relatively recently, but also due to the fact that the little work done on British Idealism tends to focus primarily on its metaphysical doctrines, rather than on its conception of nature. Furthermore, in the cases of Whitehead and Jonas, scholarship has often emphasised other sources of influence, thereby overlooking the indirect – yet crucial – impact that Hegelian thought had on the development of their philosophical positions. These, in turn, offer valuable resources today, particularly in the context of environmental ethics.

The essay is divided into three parts. In the first paragraph, I will highlight – without any claim to completeness – the essential and core elements of Hegel's conception of the living organism – elements that, as I will show, proved fruitful (including in a critical sense) for the development of certain positions within British Idealism and, later, in the thought of Whitehead and Jonas (1). The second paragraph will outline some key features of British Idealism, focusing in particular on aspects of the conception of nature in the works of John Ellis McTaggart and Samuel Alexander, which can be seen as significantly

6 I have argued for the possibility of identifying a common model of the organism in these thinkers elsewhere (Battistoni 2024).

shaped – albeit often critically and not passively – by Hegel's philosophy (2). Finally, the third paragraph will explore selected elements of Whitehead's and Jonas's thought that, I argue, can be situated along this reconstructive trajectory, in order to show how fundamental aspects of Hegel's philosophy of nature and his theory of the living organism not only endured over time but were reworked and meaningfully carried into twentieth-century thought (3).

II. Key Themes in Hegel's Idea of Organic Life in Relation to Jena Romanticism and the Natural Sciences

Hegel's conception of organic life and the living organism can be seen as partially aligned with the perspective developed by the Jena Romantics, who sought to emphasise a continuity between nature and spirit by viewing nature as already an expression or manifestation of spirit[7]. However, Hegel articulates a form of continuity that does not collapse into identity: while affirming a developmental link between the natural and spiritual realms, he insists on preserving their essential differences[8].

One of the central themes of Romantic speculation was the concept of life. This focus prompted a reevaluation of the organic model in opposition to mechanistic explanations, both on a macrocosmic and microcosmic scale (on this see Breidbach 1998; for an analysis of the essential significance of *Leben* in Hegel's system, and the influence of contemporary natural scientists on its development, see Achella 2019). The *Romantik* developed a dynamic and organic conceptual framework aimed at interpreting natural phenomena in ways that diverged from the atomistic and mechanistic worldview, thus marking a reaction against the Enlightenment. A key starting point was Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (Kant 2004), where matter ceased to be viewed as a mere aggregation of discrete atoms. On the side of the natural sciences, the discovery of galvanic electricity and of gas chemistry plaid a crucial role in the romantic understanding of the unity of organic and inorganic nature, and with it of the *process of life*; magnetism influenced the idea that everything operates through the action of antagonistic forces (the idea of *Polarität*, which

7 Of course, it is important to bear in mind that German Romanticism was not a coherent or unified movement. As Giampiero Moretti has pointed out, a fundamental distinction must generally be drawn between the Romantics of Heidelberg and those of Jena, particularly in their respective conceptions of nature. According to Moretti, the Heidelberg group was directly influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder, whereas the Jena Romantics were shaped more by Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophy (for further discussion, see Moretti 2013, 22–23; Korff 1923–; on the internal diversity of *Romantische Naturphilosophie*, see also Köchy 2021).

8 Alison Stone argues that Hegel can be seen as adopting an anti-naturalistic stance regarding human autonomy and spirit. In her view, autonomy is precisely what sets the human being – namely, spirit – apart from nature, such that in its highest functions, spirit is no longer natural (see Stone 2009). While there is some validity to this interpretation, it is important to remember that, for Hegel, a form of freedom is already present within nature itself, and that spirit does not simply break away from nature but rather retains and transforms it (see Hegel's Anthropology and his account of the natural soul).

is central for the romantics) (for further details, see Snelders 1970)[9]. It seemed, however, that natural sciences were at that moment actually unable to explain and define the phenomenon of life, seen as crucial in nature, and for this reason speculative philosophy of nature had to intervene.

If one looks at the early 19th-century Jena lectures on the philosophy of nature (on this see Breidbach 2000 and Moretti 1992, 310–311), one finds Franz Joseph Schelver – Hegel's friend, director of the botanical garden in Jena, and later extraordinary professor of botany – delivering a lecture in 1804 in which he adopted the Schellingian vocabulary to interpret nature as a living organism. Similarly, the philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause held lectures on the philosophy of nature in Jena in 1803 and 1804 (Krause 1804), articulating a holistic and organicist understanding of the world. In an 1807 letter to the French naturalist Georges Cuvier, the German biologist Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer – a crucial figure in German *Naturphilosophie* for his efforts to relate the organic and inorganic realms, thus laying the groundwork for a unified conception of nature – responded to his friend's inquiry about the state of German philosophy of nature and the natural sciences by asserting that *Naturphilosophie* had fostered an awareness of nature as a great organism, in which individual parts were seen as representatives of the whole [*Naturorganismus*] (see Snelders 1970, 196)[10].

The living organism, examined in its concrete forms – such as plant and animal life – but also developed as a conceptual model, served to illuminate nature as an organic, living whole, in which all parts mutually generate and depend upon one another. In this way, it became a foundational paradigm for interpreting both nature and reality on a macrocosmic scale.

Hegel's reflections are situated within this intellectual context. In the *Jenaer Naturphilosophie*, particularly in the section devoted to the organic, he repeatedly emphasises the concept of *organische Flüssigkeit* (organic fluidity) in relation to the dynamic between inorganic and organic nature and to the process of assimilation (for the significance of the concept of fluidity as a key to understanding Hegel's Philosophy

9 The idea that everything in nature develops through dynamic processes characterised by antagonistic couples had been philosophically elaborated by Schelling in his *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (1799).

10 It is worth noting that Kielmeyer was, in fact, critical of German *Naturphilosophie* (see Balss 1930, 286). His long 1807 letter to Cuvier has been published in English in Azadpour and Whistler (2021, Chap. 6). Kielmeyer was the scientist who identified three fundamental powers of the organism: reproduction [*Reproduktion*], irritability [*Irritabilität*], and sensibility [*Sensibilität*]. This view is elaborated in his 1793 discourse, *Über die Verhältnisse der organischen Kräfte unter einander in der Reihe der verschiedenen Organisationen, die Gesetze und Folgen dieser Verhältnisse* (Bernoulli & Kern 1926, III). Hegel later incorporated these categories into his own theory of the organism, though with modifications and specific reinterpretations. For Kielmeyer, *reproduction* included nourishment, digestion, and procreation; Hegel, however, associated it more narrowly with the digestive system. *Irritability*, in Kielmeyer's framework, referred to excitability [*Reizbarkeit*] and the motor functions of the body, while Hegel linked it to the circulatory system. Finally, *sensibility* for Kielmeyer denoted the faculties of representation and intelligence, whereas for Hegel it corresponded to the nervous system (see Hegel 2016, 1523 ff.). These three organic properties – reproduction, irritability, and sensibility – were also recognised by Albrecht von Haller as vital functions through which the organism sustains itself.

of Nature – as well as its roots in ancient thought and its close association with the "fifth element," the ether – see Erle 2001 and Erle 2002). Organic fluidity conveys the idea of a unity that sustains itself through the very process of becoming – where the parts generate the whole and are defined by their fluid interpenetration (see Hegel 1976, 108 f., the part dedicated to "Das Organische" within the *Naturphilosophie*). The *Organische* is thus conceived as something that already is, in itself, what it becomes in actuality: a movement in which the outcome is implicitly contained in its beginning[11]. The Earth, in turn, is understood as an organic totality, inherently characterised by life[12]. In this sense, Hegel's conception of organic nature as a self-organising whole aligns closely with Romantic thought[13], particularly in his use of the organism as a model on a macrocosmic scale. With regard to the animal organism, Hegel – already in his Jena period, and likely influenced by the aforementioned scientific and philosophical context – conceives it as an "exclusive self," characterised by individuality and the capacity for arbitrary movement, and as a being that exists as an end [*Zweck*] in itself.

The examples Hegel employs in the mature *Encyclopedic Philosophy of Nature*, particularly in the section devoted to the organism and its functioning, still reflect – and in some respects further develop – the insights of the Jena period. Central to this development is again Hegel's appropriation of Kantian and Aristotelian conceptions of inner purposiveness and teleology in living beings, which plays a pivotal role in illustrating how the organic anticipates the spiritual (on this see the part on Teleology in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel 1991, in particular § 204 An, 279–281). With this, Hegel's position enables a transcendence of both Cartesian dualism and the post-Cartesian monistic alternatives: namely, vitalism or spiritualism on one side, and materialism or physicalist reductionism

11 "Das organische [sic] ist schon *an sich* das was es *wirklich* ist. Es ist die Bewegung seines *Werdens*. Aber was das Resultat ist, ist auch das Vorhergehende" (Hegel 1976, 108–109).

12 In Harris's words, the Earth is conceived as "an organic whole pregnant with the conditions of burgeoning life." In this view, Harris sees Hegel as anticipating the position later articulated by contemporary biologist Lewis Thomas (Harris 1985, 220).

13 This view is strongly defended by Alison Stone through a comparison between Hegel and Novalis, which however takes other reference points rather than the model of the organicism (Stone 2009). Stone claims that Hegel systematises the *romantische Naturphilosophie*. She argues that in Novalis' view the human being is the highest realisation of the self-organisation of nature, of a kind of rationality which is already present in nature itself. Nature lets us glimpse a kind of freedom – a kind of inner telos – that prefigures human freedom. This is linked to the understanding of the human being as the last level in the development of the cosmos, a typical romantic idea, which united Carl Gustav Carus, Friedrich Schiller, and the young Hegel (see Nadler 1938 , 167). Through a comparison between Hegel and Carus, also Käte Nadler argues that the young Hegel's view of nature is very close to the romantic one, arguing that the romantic concept of *Polarität* develops in Hegel to the dialectical contradiction, a polarity which however is then overcome in Hegel's *Dialektik* – unlike in the romantic scheme. Consequently, for Nadler, idealism – embodied by Hegel – and romanticism – embodied by Carus – do not simply represent a contrast between rationalism and irrationalism. On the contrary, a "deep inner kinship" between the two should be recognised (Nadler 1938, 167). Felix Duque claims, on the contrary, that Hegel gradually detached from the romantic philosophy of nature. He emphasises that, already in the *Naturvorlesung* of 1804/05, Hegel detaches from Schelling's and the romantics' view of nature in that his interest seems to be not in nature in itself but in the *Geist der Natur* (against the romantic view, according to which nature always has priority and the philosophy of nature is accordingly the basis for the philosophy of spirit) (see Duque 1998; on Hegel's position with respect to Romantic philosophy of nature, see also Illetterati 1992).

on the other. This is because the living organism, for Hegel, cannot be reduced either to mere naturality or to pure spirituality[14].

In § 350 of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), which introduces his treatment of the animal organism in the Philosophy of Nature, Hegel immediately brings to the fore the key concepts that define the living organism: "Organic individuality exists as *subjectivity* in so far as the externality proper to shape is *idealised* into members, and in its process outwards, the organism preserves within itself the unity of selfhood [*die selbstische Einheit*]" (Petry 1970, III, § 350, 102; Hegel 1992, 352)[15]. In Hegel's view, the animal organism is most fundamentally characterised by *subjectivity*. This refers to its capacity for self-movement and self-production, through which it maintains the unity of its selfhood (Hegel 1992, § 351), thereby securing its self-preservation in relation to the external world. Hegel's conception of subjectivity in this context points to a dual movement: on the one hand, a naturalisation of the subject, and on the other, a subjectification of nature. What is typically considered a distinctively human mode of being finds its first concrete expression within nature itself – specifically, in the animal organism. As a result, nature appears denaturalised, while subjectivity becomes inseparably linked to the natural and bodily dimension (see Achella 2012, 24).

Furthermore, Hegel's theory of the organism engages with externality in a way that does not oppose it to the organism but rather integrates it dialectically. His use of the term "idealisation" in this context refers to the organism's capacity – as an individualised organic totality – to internalise inorganic nature, transforming it through assimilation into its own interiority. This act of incorporation is not external but immanent to the organism's process of self-formation: a further expression of its *subjectivity*. Through its openness and orientation toward the external world, the organism sustains its identity, individuality, and unity. The animal organism does not merely adapt to or consume the external world: rather, it constitutes itself by passing through externality, without dissolving into it or becoming something else. Its defining power lies in its capacity to transform inorganic nature into its own being (Hegel 2016, § 356a), in a circular process of self-production and self-preservation that ultimately returns to itself. This dynamic embodies its intrinsic teleology: "animal life is its own product and purpose – it is at once both means and end."

For Hegel, this marks a first form of freedom: a manifestation of inner purposiveness, or *causa finalis*, which distinguishes life from inorganic nature. Unlike *causa efficiens*,

14 Note that Hegel's theory of the organism dialectically develops in three stages (earth-plants-animal organism). Harris summarises this dialectical path as follows: "the earth represents the immediate unity of organic conditions. Plant life displays the proliferation of associated living units, loosely coordinated and largely equipotential. Animal life, finally, realises itself in the form of an integrated diversity, of immense complexity, but of such intimate interdependence of organs and processes that none can exist or function except within the living totality" (Harris 1985, 221). The animal organism represents the fullest development of the concept of organism, where the continuity between nature and *Geist*, and the emergence of *Geist* within nature, become manifest.

15 The German expressions in square brackets have been added by me.

the mechanical causality of non-living matter, *causa finalis* implies that the organism's goal is already present at the beginning of the process – its purpose coincides with its outcome. The living organism is not a mere assemblage of separate parts, as in a mechanical construct, but a unified whole in which each part is intrinsically connected to and dependent upon the others. These parts are "ideal" in the sense that they exist only in relation to the whole and derive their identity from it. As Hegel notes in § 356 of the *Encyclopedia*, each member of the organism "is interchangeably both end and means", sustaining itself through its interaction with the other members, even in tension with them. The interdependence of the organism's components means that none can function – or even properly exist – in isolation. As Hegel illustrates in the addition to § 350, if a finger is severed, it undergoes chemical decomposition and ceases to be a finger in any meaningful sense. Similarly, when an organ within an animal asserts its independence, placing itself above the whole and disrupting the organism's integrated activity, illness arises (§ 371), and the isolated part reverts to the status of inorganic matter[16]. This perspective reflects Hegel's broader conception of the organism as a system – a term he was already employing during his Jena period – to denote a totality in which each part is functionally and purposefully linked to the others. The integrity of the whole depends on this reciprocal interrelation: a disruption in one part inevitably affects the others, and thereby alters the organism as a whole.

According to Hegel, in the processes of self-production and self-preservation, animals experience a sense of deficiency[17] – unlike plants. That is, animals are aware of their dependence on external matter for survival and are thus marked by a feeling of vulnerability, anxiety, and unease in their relation to the world. This condition reflects what Hegel calls the *Tätigkeit des Mangels* – the 'activity of lack' – which, for him, is a defining characteristic of living beings and sets them apart from inorganic matter. As a result, on the one hand, the animal organism is a self-producing being endowed with a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it remains fundamentally dependent on the external world for both its production and ongoing maintenance.

According to Hegel, assimilation is the process through which the organism reconciles the fundamental tension between its selfhood and its orientation toward externality – that is, its dependence on an external, inorganic nature that exists independently of it. Assimilation represents the appropriation of this external nature, a

16 The part–whole relation can thus be interpreted as reflecting the broader relation between organic and inorganic nature. The individual elements – or members – of an organism can be considered 'inorganic' in the sense that they lack autonomy and derive their function and identity solely from their integration within the whole (see Cinemre 2022). This marks a key difference between animal organisms and plants: in the latter, certain parts can continue to live and function even when separated from the whole, unlike in animals where such separation typically results in the loss of vitality.

17 This sense of lack and deficiency forms the basis of the organism's intrinsic unity and inseparable relationship with its environment (see Cinemre 2022). This dynamic also reflects the deeper unity between interiority and exteriority, as well as between freedom and necessity (for a detailed discussion of the significance of this concepts, see Michelini 2011).

movement by which the organism reclaims itself through what initially appears as other. In this sense, it is the process in which externality is transformed into subjectivity, reducing the dispersed elements of inorganic nature to the unified interiority of the subject. This transformation marks the 'idealisation' of externality. Most concretely, it is realised in the act of nourishment, where inorganic matter is converted into living substance – a "transition of inorganic nature into a soma belonging to the subject" (Petry 1970, III, § 365a, 155)[18]. Through assimilation and digestion, the organism not only maintains its health but also actualises its inherent purpose: self-preservation, a goal already implicit at the outset. This dynamic unfolds as a kind of instinct – an unconscious teleology – through which the organism strives to reshape what is external into a bodily expression of its own subjectivity.

Having laid out these conceptual premises – which are not meant to offer an exhaustive account of Hegel's conception of nature and the living organism, but rather to outline the key points of the argument – I will now turn to an analysis of certain elements of British Idealism, in order to examine how they relate to the views just outlined.

III. Nature and Life from Hegel to British Idealism: Alexander and McTaggart

First of all, it is important to clarify certain aspects and elements of the movement known as British Idealism, which is too often treated superficially by critics as merely the opposing pole to the emerging tradition of analytic philosophy – a tradition that, in turn, frequently had only a limited understanding of the idealist and Hegelian position it was reacting against[19]. British Idealism itself encompasses a wide range of views and internal disagreements, which make it difficult to characterise as a homogeneous movement, contrary to how it is often portrayed by analytic philosophers[20]. The latter generally targeted a form of idealism understood as denying the existence of an external world, a position frequently (and mistakenly) attributed to Hegel. However, attentive readers of Hegel and of the British neo-Hegelians are well aware that none of these thinkers denied the existence of a mind-independent world. The idealist position, in both Hegel and his British interpreters, is far more nuanced and complex than such reductive interpretations suggest. It is often a form of epistemological constructivism – rather than ontological constructivism – that is upheld by the philosophers of German Idealism, beginning with

18 Although assimilation entails mechanical and chemical moments and the organism itself has mechanical and chemical properties, these ones are not sufficient to explain its life, in Hegel's view, meaning that lower stages happen to be insufficient to explain the upper ones. In this, despite recognising a kind of continuity between nature and spirit, Hegel seems to defend an anti-reductionist account of organic nature (on this topic, see Kabeshkin 2021).

19 On the contrary, British Idealism deserves attention for at least two reasons: as one of the major post-Hegelian currents; as one of the catalysts behind the emergence of analytic philosophy.

20 What possibly unites the British Idealists is their common opposition to traditional British empiricism.

Kant[21]. As Tom Rockmore points out, this position holds that "the subject must 'construct' what it knows," meaning that the subject plays an active, not passive, role in the act of knowing (Rockmore 2004, 17). And it is clear that such a position can be perfectly compatible with a form of ontological realism. What analytic philosophers actually criticise is closer to what Kant himself rejected as 'bad' idealism[22]. Following Hegel's own distinction among different forms of idealism – critical (Kant), subjective (Fichte), objective (Schelling), and absolute (Hegel himself) – British Idealism is generally associated with a form of absolute idealism, which is why it is often linked to Hegelian thought (on these aspects, and for a deeper examination of the concept of idealism – particularly with reference to the British Idealist movement as opposed by analytic philosophy – see Rockmore 2004, in particular the chapter on "Idealism, British Idealism, and Analytic Philosophy," 11 ff.). Hegel's idealism is an idealism which seeks unity – an identity that both overcomes and preserves difference: it is a speculative identity, one that differentiates itself within itself.

James Hutchison Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) is widely regarded as the foundational work that sparked the emergence of the British Idealist movement. It played a crucial role in introducing Hegel's thought to the British philosophical landscape and in shaping the intellectual direction of the thinkers who would later be identified as British Idealists (see Mander 2013, 168). However, as for the relationship between British Idealism and Hegelian thought, it must be acknowledged that it was never one of passive assimilation. While the British Idealists adopted Hegelian categories, they also engaged with them critically, reinterpreting and developing them in original ways as the foundation of their own philosophical systems and idealism. This aspect, too, is of considerable interest, as it highlights the generative power of Hegel's philosophy in stimulating further philosophical development[23]. What seemed to particularly attract the British Idealists was precisely the idea of an organic totality – so much so that, as it has been noted, "Idealists were holistic thinkers" (Mander 2013, 173).

It is already evident that British Idealism warrants closer philosophical attention. However, already in his 2004 book, Rockmore (2004, 31) observed that British Idealism had been more condemned than studied and was, at that time, no longer well known. It does not seem that the situation has significantly changed in the decades since his diagnosis. If this holds true in general, it applies even more strongly to the conceptions of nature developed by the British Idealists – an area that has never received sustained

21 Recent studies have discussed and reassessed an interpretation of moral constructivism in Kant (see at least Bagnoli 2016; Bagnoli 2022).

22 As Rockmore underlines: "According to Kant, an acceptable theory of knowledge includes an empirical input, or 'external' source of the contents of the mind, as well as the activity of the mind in constructing, on the basis of the empirical input, objects of experience and knowledge." Consequently, "For Kant, idealism is unacceptable when it claims to know things apart from and prior to experience, and rejects experience as a source of knowledge" (Rockmore 2004, 20–21). However, according to this view knowledge cannot be wholly reduced to experience.

23 According to Rockmore, British Idealists were never 'orthodox' Hegelians (Rockmore 2004, 35).

analysis nor been meaningfully brought to light. For these reasons, and building upon what has been said so far, an attempt to reconstruct and highlight its key elements is not only timely, but also philosophically valuable in its own right. In what follows, I will focus in particular on the positions of John McTaggart and Samuel Alexander, as they are the main figures who directly engaged with Hegelian philosophy and Hegel's conception of life and nature[24].

Alexander (1859–1938) is regarded as the forerunner of British Emergentism – the view that mind emerges from nature and that change within nature occurs gradually. While this perspective naturally aligns with Darwin's principle of continuity, it also exhibits distinct Hegelian influences. He also had a significant impact on Whitehead (see Thomas 2014)[25], which further justifies the inclusion of his thought in this discussion. During his time at Oxford (beginning in 1881), Alexander was closely aligned with the Absolute Idealists, including Bradley, though he later appears to have moved toward anti-idealist positions. What is certain is that, in 1939, he was regarded as "the thinker who, since the death of F. H. Bradley in 1924, has been the leading figure in British philosophy" (Muirhead 1939, 3).

His first publication, *Hegel's Conception of Nature* (1886) reflects his intellectual connection with the Oxford British Hegelians. In that work – addressed below –, Alexander articulates certain ideas that he would later retain in his mature system. From Hegel, he also inherits the notion of an evolutionary ethics (see Muirhead 1939, 6), in which a progressive development can be traced from lower to higher levels, analogous to processes in the biological and natural realms. Moreover, he extends the organic model to his conception of society, going beyond an atomistic view of society. In his later works, Alexander comes to embrace realism – a stance that, as previously noted, is not necessarily incompatible with Hegelian thought. However, Alexander's realism takes the

24 Here too, the aim is not completeness – which would be impossible within the scope of an article like this and would rather require a full-length book – but rather to highlight elements that may support the initial working hypothesis. The decision was made not to consider Bradley's thought, even though he is often regarded as the most Hegelian among the British Idealists, since he himself did not consider himself as a Hegelian and, in fact, was at odds with several of Hegel's core assumptions. In *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley devotes an entire chapter to the concept of Nature, yet he appears to offer no definitive answers. He conceives of Nature *in relation* to the human body, but at the same time as an abstraction and, in this sense, as 'appearance' – something not truly 'real'. He views it as external to the domain of the psyche, detached from our feelings, thoughts, and volitions, and he offers no clear resolution regarding the existence of inorganic nature – that is, lifeless nature. Nonetheless, Bradley does affirm the existence of a mind-independent world, stating that "The physical world exists, of course, independent of me, and does not depend on the accident of my sensations" (Bradley 1893, 243). Overall, his conception of nature appears to differ, at least in part, from that of Hegel – though like Hegel, he also describes it as the "region of externality" (Bradley 1893, 260; for a detailed discussion of his role and philosophical stance – respectively, a "holistic theory of relations" – see Candlish 1996, Blanshard 1925 and McHenry 1989).

25 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Whitehead's and Alexander's thought in general, see Emmet (Emmet 1992), who also highlights that Alexander's conception of emergence – where genuinely novel qualities arise at successive levels of organisation – allows him to articulate a naturalistic account of mind that avoids reductionism. While mind is, in one sense, continuous with its neural and physiological basis, it also represents a distinct quality that operates in a unique manner within conscious experience.

form of a naturalistic realism, in which mind exists within the natural world alongside other entities (for a more in-depth discussion of these aspects, see Thomas 2014). But let us now take a closer look at some of the key ideas in his essay on Hegel's concept of nature.

To begin with, it is noteworthy that Alexander mentions not only Hegel's Philosophy of Nature as presented in the *Encyclopaedia*, but also Hegel's lectures on the subject, as well as his earlier reflections from the Frankfurt and Nuremberg periods. Alexander acknowledges that "The *Philosophy of Nature* is certainly one of the most suggestive, and just as certainly the most perplexing of Hegel's works" (Alexander 1886, 495). It is the most perplexing, he suggests – echoing a view still shared today – because Hegel's Philosophy of Nature was grounded in the scientific knowledge of his time, which was undeniably limited not only by today's standards, but even by those of Alexander's own day, just a few decades after Hegel's death. Nevertheless, Alexander is convinced that Hegel's Philosophy of Nature still contains insights of value for contemporary thought. Regarding the relationship between the philosophy of nature and the natural sciences, Alexander emphasises that the former should not be an a priori construction. Rather, it should represent experience transformed into thought – beginning with the findings of the sciences, which in turn provide the raw material for philosophical reflection.

According to Alexander, it is science itself that ultimately leads to the philosophy of nature, as its method eventually proves inadequate – particularly when it comes to explaining the meaning of life and the transition from inorganic to organic nature. Faced with these limitations, the role of a philosophy of nature is, in his view, to "exhibit the whole world of nature as a system of ideas, each of its ideas being contained in the supreme and concrete idea of nature" (Alexander 1886, 498). It is not science that asks the question "What is Nature?", but philosophy. And this is precisely the question Alexander poses in his essay. A possible answer, drawing on the Hegelian system, lies in defining nature either in relation to what precedes it – namely, logic – or in relation to what follows it – spirit. While it is not possible here to examine the argument in detail, the central point is that Nature is characterised as the *'otherness of the Idea'* – it carries within itself the principle of otherness. It is precisely this feature that leads to the dispersion of the Idea into a multiplicity and variety of forms, in which the unity of the Idea appears to fragment – a multiplicity that Hegel, however, could not embrace and appreciate. And this is precisely one of the limitations Alexander identifies in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: the fact that Hegel is ultimately unable to "explain the variety of nature" (Alexander 1886, 516).

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is Alexander's emphasis on *organic life*: it marks the point at which nature – though not yet spirit – begins to display a form of "self-concentration" and "inward reflection" that anticipates the life of spirit (Alexander 1886, 501), which, like the phoenix, is reborn from its own flames. It is in life, Alexander observes, that the concept becomes clear and manifest. He then proceeds to a systematic analysis of the three levels that structure Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: mechanics,

physics, and the organic – "where Nature first acquires the character of subject", as we have already noted in our earlier reading of Hegel's text, "with the power which a subject has of gathering up all its parts or differences under its own control" (Alexander 1886, 504–505). Furthermore, Alexander emphasises that in the organism we are no longer dealing with a mere relation between external bodies, but with a negative unity that sustains itself through its differentiated parts: "Such a unity is Life" (Alexander 1886, 505). While plant life still appears simple and immediate, animal life represents true life – real life – characterised by reaction and assimilation, and bearing the mark of life's inherent freedom, to which all its members contribute: "And in its feeling it reaches the highest expression of self-contained unity which Nature can hope to attain" (Ibid.). From this, it becomes clear just how central the concept of the organism is within nature. In this context, the Earth is reintroduced as the first form of life and as the source of all life[26]. However, it is "Hegel's treatment of the idea of animal life" that, for Alexander, represents "perhaps the most interesting and profitable part" of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature – a part which contains processes which represent "the most suggestive results of Hegel's work" (Alexander 1886, 508). After reviewing the three characteristics of the animal organism – which we have already mentioned – namely sensibility, irritability, and reproduction, Alexander turns to the fundamental process of assimilation. He conceives of it as arising from the organism's antagonistic relationship with inorganic nature: a process in which the animal transforms what it needs to its own advantage, integrating it into its unified structure. This dynamic defines the organism's relation to its environment, which, for Alexander, is not merely a causal interaction but rather "a life-process." He then goes on to examine the organism's relation to its genus, leading up to the death of the individual and the emergence of spirit.

At this stage, Alexander makes his own reflections explicit. In his view, Hegel's Philosophy of Nature aims to understand the forms of nature as they truly are, seeking to grasp things as an integrated whole. He also situates Hegel's philosophy in relation to earlier approaches, particularly that of Kant in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, highlighting in particular the conception of matter as inherently characterised by opposing forces – attraction and repulsion – which had before typically been attributed to the interactions between bodies rather than seen as intrinsic to matter itself. However, Hegel could not agree with the conception of these two forces as independent – a position that also explains his disagreement with Newton, who understood motion as the result of the combination of two separate forces. As Alexander notes, Hegel consistently sought to grasp phenomena in their totality: "these two forces are not different and independent, but identical in the same way as repulsion and attraction, two elements of the total motion which involve each other: they are not combined externally, but exist only in their union" (Alexander 1886, 514). It now becomes clear why, in Alexander's interpretation,

26 Alexander also devotes attention to Hegel's conception of space and time – concepts that would also become central in his later, more mature works – as well as to sound and heat.

the animal organism is "the highest expression of self-contained unity which Nature can hope to attain": precisely because within it we see a unity of organs, forces, and members that exist only through – and within – that very unity. This unity – one that Hegel sought to grasp within the whole of nature – is precisely what Alexander, along with other British Idealists, appears to appreciate most in Hegel's thought: "And strange as Hegel's method of proof may seem, we cannot help seeing the value of his totality of view: he will not dissect nature, but will in each conception take it as a whole" (Alexander 1886, 515).

Finally, Alexander turns to certain modern theories that he believes could prove fruitful for an updated discussion of Hegel's conception of nature. In particular, the theory of evolution: with strong conviction, Alexander emphasises the similarity between evolutionary theory and Hegel's system, which he sees as a form of evolution expressed through the structure of dialectic – though, of course, he is also aware of the important differences between the two[27]. Given that many of the issues that concerned Alexander's contemporaries – such as the difficulty of distinguishing between plants and animals – would not have been particularly relevant for Hegel, Alexander agrees with Hegel that the central notion philosophy should seek to explain is that of *animal life*. This, he believes, still allows for the preservation of variety, understood as a vehicle for expressing the *animal type*. In conclusion, what Alexander finds of great value in Hegel's treatment of nature is the idea that "the spirit is at one with nature in spite of its apparent antagonism". The very aim of the philosophy of nature, he argues, is "to explain how it is that nature, which is penetrated by the spirit, can in the first place be different from spirit and next is by insensible stages overcome so as to be spirit" (Alexander 1886, 523). And this occurs precisely in the living organism. Let us now briefly turn to some key aspects of McTaggart's thought, which will later prove relevant for the comparison with Whitehead and Jonas.

McTaggart is considered one of the most important systematic metaphysicians of the twentieth century. In his own time, he was widely read and well-known – something that, like in the case of other British Idealists, can no longer be said today. He was a major interpreter of Hegelian thought, to which he dedicated several significant works, including *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (1896), *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (1901) – from which we will draw some relevant elements for our discussion – and *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic* (1910). Despite these interpretative efforts, his writings on Hegel have received relatively little attention among Hegel scholars, perhaps because, as noted earlier, his approach cannot be classified as orthodox Hegelianism[28]. Nevertheless, McTaggart

27 "Evolution is a history of how things in nature come to pass; dialectic is the process by which one idea logically leads on to the higher idea which is implicit in it and is its truth. Evolution is a history of a process in time; dialectic is a history of ideas which form a process not in time" (Alexander 1886, 518).

28 For example, consider Chapter VII of *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, titled *The Conception of Society as an Organism*, where McTaggart offers strong criticism of the idea that Hegel provides a metaphysical basis for conceiving society as an organism – one in which unity serves as the end of its parts. Although McTaggart does believe that the ultimate ideal for the state or society is indeed the organic ideal, he rejects the notion that our current society should be regarded as our end. While the parts of a living body may find their purpose in the whole, individuals will always seek a

remains a key figure, not least for the influence he had on major thinkers such as Bertrand Russell and Whitehead. McTaggart embraces an ontological idealism alongside an epistemological realism, according to which knowledge is justified true belief, and truth consists in correspondence with reality. His ontological idealism was clearly inspired by Hegel, particularly in the notion of the Absolute as composed of many finite individuals, each in relation to the others. In this sense, he reinterprets Hegel's idea that the Absolute is not an undifferentiated unity, but rather a differentiated one.

In his *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, McTaggart remarkably begins with the category of Life in order to understand how the Absolute is determined. He writes: "There seems to be very little doubt or ambiguity about Hegel's conception of this category as a whole, although the subdivisions which he introduces into it are among the most confused parts of the whole dialectic" (McTaggart 1901, 13). The crucial turning point is when McTaggart applies the category of Life to the entirety of reality – a move that will resonate in Whitehead's thought. He writes:

> According to that category [life] reality is a unity differentiated into a plurality, (or a plurality combined into a unity) in such a way that the whole meaning and significance of the unity lies in its being differentiated into that particular plurality, and that the whole meaning and significance of the parts of the plurality lies in their being combined into that particular unity (McTaggart 1901, 13).

Here, we find the application to reality of the part–whole relationship we previously encountered in Hegel's conception of the living animal organism. It is a unity *provided by life itself* – not something external to the individuals it unites, but rather internal to them. The very nature of each individual lies in being part of that unity, just as a regiment has no reality apart from its soldiers, nor is it something found in any one soldier, but in the unity formed by all of them taken together. However, while in the case of the regiment each man would still exist independently of it, "in the category of Life (...) no differentiations can exist independently of the unity. (...) The unity cannot (...) be in each individual as a *merely* separated individual. But it must (...) be found in each of the united individuals, and not merely in the sum of them" (McTaggart 1901, 14). The conclusion of his reasoning is as follows:

> Reality is a differentiated unity, in which the unity has no meaning but the differentiations, and the differentiations have no meaning but the unity. The differentiations are individuals for each of whom the unity exists, and whose whole nature consists in the fact that the unity is for them, as the whole nature of the unity consists in the fact that it is for the individuals. And, finally, in this harmony between the unity and the individuals neither side is subordinated to

kind of perfection that society itself cannot provide. He also expresses a deeply critical stance and skepticism toward philosophy in general when he writes: "The result seems to be that philosophy can give us very little, if any, guidance in action. (...) Why should a Hegelian citizen be surprised that his belief as to the organic nature of the Absolute does not help him in deciding how to vote? Would a Hegelian engineer be reasonable in expecting that his belief that all matter is spirit should help him in planning a bridge"? He concludes, then, that philosophy does not offer guidance, but rather hope (McTaggart 1901, 151 ff., here 166). Nonetheless, there are several Hegelian insights that he adopts and further develops.

> the other, but the harmony is an immediate and ultimate fact (McTaggart 1901, 21).

And again:

> All reality must be conceived as in perfect unity, and, therefore, individuals must be conceived as forming, not a mere aggregate or mechanical system, but a whole which only differs from an organism in being a closer and more vital unity than any organism can be. The various individuals, then, must be conceived as forming a differentiated and multiplex whole, but by no means as an unconnected manifold (McTaggart 1901, 242).

Starting from what appear to be more than mere suggestions – indeed, actual applications of Hegel's conception of life and the living organism to reality as a whole, understood through an organic and biocentric model – it is now possible to examine to what extent these Hegelian intuitions can also be found in the thought of Whitehead[29], who was, in turn, appreciated by Jonas.

IV. Thinking Nature and Life beyond Idealism: Hegelian Echoes in Whitehead and Jonas

Drawing on the most recent discoveries in physics at the time, Whitehead developed a processual metaphysical conception of reality, in which becoming is understood as the very essence of being. In Whitehead's terminology, what is – or more precisely, what happens – is defined as an *actual entity*, a foundational concept in his ontology. The unfolding of the world, according to his processual view, is *not* to be understood as the interaction of *isolated, self-contained atoms* scattered in space and time – a view Whitehead explicitly seeks to deconstruct. Instead, reality is composed of *relational nodes*, each intrinsically connected to the whole of which it is a part. In this sense, process metaphysics entails a *relational ontology*, in which being is constituted through interdependence and dynamic interaction. This aspect reflects the legacy of British Idealism, which understood unity as the differentiated identity of parts bound together by essential relations. Reality itself coincides with the process of becoming of actual entities, whose being consists in *concrescence* – that is, in becoming themselves through a process of self-production, a form of self-causation (Lucas 1990, 79; Whitehead 1929; I first developed these aspects in Battistoni 2023). This appears to share certain features of the self-causation and self-production process typical of living beings, in Hegelian terms. For Whitehead, it is a process in which each actual entity is "an act of experience arising out of data" – meaning the elements that are given in the world – "a process of 'feeling' the many data, so as to absorb them into the unity of one individual 'satisfaction'. Here 'feeling' is the term used for the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity

29 McTaggart and Whitehead were, in fact, close friends and had daily opportunities to discuss Hegelian thought. Scholarly discussions have rarely addressed the influence of McTaggart on Whitehead. Rémy Lestienne offers a few remarks on this topic (Lestienne 2020, 6).

of the actual entity in question" (Whitehead 1929, 40). It is a kind of "absorption" by the actual entity of objective data into the unity of its individual satisfaction – a transition from objectivity to subjectivity through a process of appropriation of particular elements, which Whitehead defines as *prehension*.

Despite the inevitable linguistic and conceptual differences, Whitehead's notions of 'appropriation' and 'absorption' – as well as the transition from objectivity to subjectivity – seem to resonate with the process of assimilation that, in Hegel, characterises the animal organism. In both frameworks, this process leads to a form of satisfaction of the lack or deficiency that ontologically defines the living being, as we have previously seen. For both thinkers, it is a 'movement outward' through which the organism produces and sustains itself in unity by assimilating external elements – elements that, in the process, lose their character of externality. This vision of reality as a process of generating individual actual entities – self-realising and purposive – is precisely what defines Whitehead's philosophy of the organism. Its aim, as he states, is to "to express a coherent cosmology based upon the notions of 'system', 'process', 'creative advance into novelty'" (Whitehead 1929, 128). The term *organism* in Whitehead carries both a macroscopic and a microscopic meaning: on the one hand, "the universe in any stage of its expansion is the first meaning of 'organism'"; on the other hand, the actual entity is understood as an organic process, to the extent that "it repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm" (Whitehead 1929, 215). Organic bodies, as more complex entities, are understood by Whitehead as living societies – systems that require nourishment in order to survive. As in Hegel and later in Jonas, nourishment is closely linked to life itself and entails an ongoing interaction between the living being and its environment. While no actual entity can be considered entirely isolated from its surroundings, this interdependence is even more pronounced in complex living organisms, whose survival fundamentally depends on the external world.

In this application of the category of organism – both at the micro and macro levels – it becomes clear that Whitehead is engaging in a productive reworking of key Hegelian categories, mediated through British Idealism. Whitehead's organicist thought became an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Hans Jonas, who began to explore it in depth after emigrating to the United States, at a time when he perceived a striking absence of philosophy of nature within twentieth-century philosophical systems. For Jonas, any metaphysical framework, to be complete, had to include a philosophical biology capable of addressing the world of life.

Jonas particularly appreciated Whitehead's theory of reality for its overcoming of the "annoying dualism" inherited from the mechanistic view of nature, achieved through an "ingenious conceptual scheme" (Jonas 1966, 95). For Jonas, this amounted to a "bold proposition of basic ontology, whose intellectual force and philosophical importance are unequaled in our time" (Jonas 1966, 96). Under the banner of "nature alive" (Jonas 2016, 498 ff.), Whitehead had in Jonas's view undertaken a genuine reform of both epistemology and ontology, making possible an adequate concept of nature by discovering life within it.

Indeed, Whitehead had shown that neither physical Nature nor life can be understood unless they are fused together as essential factors of the 'really real' entities whose interconnections and individual properties constitute the universe (Whitehead 1934). In *Nature and Life* – a text Jonas valued highly alongside *Process and Reality* – life takes on a central theoretical role, specified in terms of self-enjoyment, and tied to a process of appropriation that echoes the 'absorption' and prehension discussed in *Process and Reality*. Life, in this context, is characterised in Aristotelian terms: as purpose and creative activity.

Unlike Jonas, however, Whitehead holds that life pertains to all of reality, not just to biologically living and sentient organisms. Yet, according to him, life cannot be directly observed in nature by science, which remains blind to it – precisely due to the dualisms introduced in European thought since Descartes. For Whitehead, the sharp division between mentality and nature has no basis in our fundamental experience since we recognise ourselves as living *within* nature. There is, then, a continuity between the human being and nature – an intuition that, despite the differences, is clearly Hegelian in origin. As already said, in Hegel, spirit emerges *from* and *within* nature.

While Jonas highly values Whitehead's recognition of the vital dimension of nature, he criticises him for failing to acknowledge the deep ontological distinction between life and non-life – transforming what Jonas sees as a qualitative difference into a mere difference of degree[30]. In doing so, Jonas argues, Whitehead loses sight of the mystery of biological identity, and with it, the full significance of the ontological rupture that life introduces into nature. For Whitehead, there is no such rupture, since everything is 'alive' from the beginning. As a result, according to Jonas, the boundary between the animate and the inanimate is blurred, and with it, the existential anxiety inherent in biological life – and the existential significance of death – is lost.

For Jonas, however, the interrelation, interaction, and mutual immanence of the parts of nature – so central to Whitehead's thought – are not general features of reality, but rather defining characteristics of life as it becomes manifest in the biological organism. In his interpretation, the organism represents the true ontological revolution within nature: with life come subjectivity, inwardness, and a form of spirituality – features that recent scholarship has traced back to Hegel's theory of the organism (see Battistoni & Erle 2021; Erle 2020; Michelini 2018). Jonas's philosophical biology exhibits Hegelian influences – albeit indirect, and likely mediated through Whitehead and the British Idealism. For example, in Jonas, metabolism corresponds closely to what Hegel describes as assimilation, as previously discussed. Moreover, living beings are seen to develop through a kind of graded progression, from the less complex to the more complex and freer – culminating in the self-aware human being. In this way, spirit emerges from nature in a manner that is

30 On this point, Whitehead appears rather ambiguous: "In a sense, the difference between a living organism and the inorganic environment is only a question of degree; but it is a difference of degree which makes all the difference – in effect, it is a difference of quality" (Whitethead 1929, 179).

deeply Hegelian and in line with the positions of certain British Idealists.

V. Concluding Remarks

From what has been shown, a coherent philosophical thread emerges – beginning with the Romantics and Hegel's Philosophy of Nature, developed through British Idealism, and carried forward in the frameworks of Whitehead and Jonas. At the center of this tradition lies the idea that nature is not a fragmented aggregate of isolated parts, but a differentiated unity: a living, dynamic whole in which each part exists only through its relation to the others. Originally grounded in Hegel's conception of the living organism, this vision of mutual interdependence was expanded by British Idealists to encompass all of reality, and reinterpreted by Whitehead and Jonas in response to the metaphysical and scientific challenges of the modern age. Such a view – relational, processual, and non-reductionist – offers a powerful lens through which to reconsider the place of life within nature and of human beings within the world. In a time of ecological urgency and ontological uncertainty, this tradition reminds us that to exist is to participate in a dynamic and integrated totality. Rediscovering these Hegelian insights means more than recovering a chapter of the history of philosophy; it means reclaiming a vision of the world in which everything is connected – and where to understand life is to understand the whole to which we belong.

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