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Novalis' Metaphysics of Having: A Step Towards an Environmental Conception of the Human-Nature relationship.

Giulia Valpione

Abstract: This article focuses on Novalis' understanding of the "I-nature" relationship demonstrating that he anticipates some aspects developed by later environmental and ecological philosophies. After an introductory part on Novalis' criticism against Fichte's conception of the Self, the article investigates the crucial role played by Spinoza for the reassessment of natural sciences (physiology in particular) in Novalis' philosophy and, as a consequence, for the conception of a "metaphysics of Having". This particular metaphysics implies that subjects and objects interpenetrate each other, and that this relationship precedes their respective identities. In the last part, the article sketches a parallel with the current philosophical debate on ecology.

Keywords: Romanticism, Novalis, Spinoza, Environment, Natural Sciences.

Introduction

The climate crisis has led the humanities to dwell increasingly on the relationship between human beings and nature. In this debate, Romanticism is the most frequently mentioned philosophy of the past, seen as an important archive to turn to, because of the importance given by the Romantics to the reflection on our relationship with nature.¹ For German Romanticism, the Self is part and manifestation of the absolute that manifests itself as organic nature, eternally creative, in which beings are connected. This idea was also justified by the science of the time. C.F. Kielmeyer, for example, highlighted in early 1793 the presence of a connection between beings, describing nature as an organic whole that unites the organic and inorganic (Kielmeyer, 1793, pp. 29-49). Consistently, humans are conceived by the Romantics as part of nature and not as its counterpart; as integral parts of the infinite development of the absolute, human beings influence nature and are in turn

¹ Romanticism is both seen as an inspiration (Bate, 1991) and as an object of criticism for environmental philosophy (for example Morton, 2010 often refers to the limits of the Romantic conception of 'nature').

influenced by it. How this reciprocal relationship is understood by Romanticism, however, has not yet been sufficiently investigated, and this is the focus of this article, dedicated in particular to Novalis' philosophy.

In the first part of the article (§2) I will focus on the Romantic idea that the self and nature interpenetrate each other; as a consequence of this, the Romantics (and Novalis in particular) tried to integrate Fichte's philosophy with Spinoza's thought, but also (§3) with the *Naturphilosophie* and the natural sciences; only through this intersection shall it be possible to discover the 'I-nature' connection. Through this, (§4) Novalis attains a metaphysics of 'Having' that encompasses the development of the human–nature relationship in such a way as to challenge the idea of two juxtaposed identities united by a simple external interaction. As will be shortly explained, this anticipates later theories formulated by environmental philosophers.

Physics and Metaphysics: back to Spinoza

Fichte's philosophy was crucial to the development of Romanticism. Fichte was "the very soul of Jena" (Hölderlin, 1959, 6, p. 152), and his thought was surely one of the focal points of Novalis' early reflections. In a letter to Schlegel (Novalis, 1960-2006, hereafter 'HKA', 6, p. 188), Novalis describes the role Fichte played in his philosophy as an awakening. The enthusiasm for Fichtean philosophy is also reflected in Novalis's personal notes, especially the *Fichte-Studien*. Nevertheless, he soon moved away from it.² In another letter to Schlegel, Novalis expressed his own interest in Spinoza's philosophy, with which he had become acquainted through Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinozas* (Beiser 2008, pp. 418-421). This led Novalis to the demand to 'open' Fichte's idealism, which has remained closed in the interiority of the Self and

² Many interpreters of Romantic philosophy have focused on the relationship between Fichte and Novalis. Some of them focus on Novalis' early collection of fragments *Fichte-Studien*, thus they emphasise the importance of the *Doctrine of Science* for the Romantic philosopher (Frank, 1997; Loheide, 2000); others, on the contrary, concentrate more on Novalis' works, where Fichte's influence is weaker (Stone, 2018; Behler, 1992; Nassar, 2014). In an original way, Susan-Judith Hoffmann emphasises how Fichte's later works have nevertheless some points in common with Romantic philosophy (Hoffmann, 2019).

in dogmatism (HKA 3, 249, n.57). In a collection of fragments, *Bluthenstaub (Pollen)* published in 1798 in the journal *Athenäum*, this approach to Spinoza's philosophy, conceived as a necessary integration to Fichte's thought, becomes clear: 'The first step consists in the inner look, in an analytical contemplation of our Self. Whoever stops here, only gains half the result. The second step must consist in a more effective look at the outside, in a spontaneous and persistent observation of the external world' (HKA 2:423, n.24).

Novalis' gradual distancing from the *Wissenschaftslehre* corresponds to the beginning of an intense study of the natural sciences during his permanence at the *Bergakademie* in Freiburg between 1797 and 1799. He studied chemistry, geology, mathematics and physics and developed the idea of writing an encyclopaedia in which philosophy should not be the foundation of knowledge, but rather develop an internal reflection on natural sciences and direct them towards completeness (HKA 3, p. 302, n.343).

His training at the *Bergakademie* required him to be familiar with the latest scientific discoveries, and in his notes, it is possible to find precise references (sometimes even copies of entire paragraphs) to works by physicists, mathematicians and geologists as well as to scientific journals, such as the *Neues Journal der Physik* edited by the chemist F.A.C. Gren or the *Allgemeines Journal der Chemie* by A.N. Scherer. Novalis linked all these disciplines and was obliged to study them in depth, in order 'to collect material for the encyclopaedia' (HKA 3, p. 279, n.229), that is, his *Allgemeines Brouillon*. He also thought that the various disciplines must have unity; otherwise, they will lose their systematicity.

Novalis maintains that "all sciences are one" (HKA 3, p. 356, n.526) and that their unity is given by two elements: (1) the first consists in the analogies, references and metamorphosis that connect the sciences, (2) the second is the philosophical spirit. In order to better understand the role of philosophy in relation to the sciences, it is worth referring to the annotations written by the philosopher to F.A.C. Gren's text, *Grundriß der Naturlehre* (1797, HKA 3, p. 173-178), where Novalis lists the functions that a 'metaphysics of natural science (*Naturlehre*)' (HKA 3, p. 173) should perform.

A metaphysics of natural science, first of all, has to assume a critical perspective; secondly, it has to play a resolutive role (HKA 3, p. 174). In short, it must collect the data and concepts provided by science concerning an object, arrange them and search for possible missing elements (HKA 3, p. 175). The relationship between metaphysics and science, Novalis argues, is in fact comparable to that between the artist and the artisan. Like the artist, the metaphysician (the “metaphysical physicist”, HKA 3, p. 175) has to project and prescribe, while the artisan (the “physical physicist”, HKA 3, p. 175) has to apply what has been prescribed by the metaphysician. The distance between the two is (partially) bridged because the metaphysician, while “preparing the model, must take into account the artisan and must be able to judge his insight, his skill and in particular the sphere of his craft and operations” (HKA 3, p. 175). Namely, metaphysics can, of course, propose models, give prescriptions and identify the shortcomings of science in order to improve it, but none of its activities can be accomplished independently of science itself; metaphysics must not be imposed from outside but must be based on the empirical sciences. Consistently, Novalis’ metaphysics was not formulated without considering the scientific discoveries in the fields of dynamics, chemistry, and physiology. However, while these scientific fields deal with particular aspects of nature (HKA 3:176), metaphysics must strive towards the whole. Metaphysics is a constant elaboration of physics, an elaboration that must occur within science and must give it a more general view in order to discover connections with other disciplines and to indicate gaps that need to be filled, towards the wholeness of nature (HKA 3:176).

Metaphysics (and philosophy in general) are therefore necessary for the sciences (HKA 2:437, n.62). And all the sciences collaborate for the sake of a deeper understanding of nature: “Since each member of nature is a function of it and vice versa, so the science of each member must also be a function of the general science of nature and vice versa” (HKA 3:295, n.313).

The further step Novalis took beyond Fichte’s philosophy and his conception of the relationship between philosophy and science was influenced by his reading of the third volume of Dietrich Tiedemann’s *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie* (1791–97), which deals with Plotinus’ thought (Mähl 1963). In Plotinian philosophy, Novalis

identifies the attempt to unify idealism and realism, as opposed to Fichte, whose point of view remained limited to consciousness. In Plotinus' metaphysics, human beings and nature participate in the same creative dynamic; they are both members and products of the divine emanation. This, therefore, does not only concern the subject and its consciousness or its transcendental elaboration of the object, as in Fichte's metaphysics. Through Plotinus' theory of hypostases, 'inside' and 'outside' no longer remain juxtaposed but engage in a continuous exchange, similar to a reciprocal phagocytosis, whereby what is internal is also external and what is external is also considered internal. For example, Novalis speaks of organs outside the human body that process nature;³ this means that the comprehension of nature begins in nature itself, deeply connecting it with the spirit. Mathematics, for example, is, according to Novalis,

the exteriorised psychic force of the intellect, transformed into an external object and organ—a realised and objectified intellect—Should this not also be the case with others and perhaps with all psychic forces—which through our efforts must become external instruments? (HKA 3, p. 251-2, n.69).

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, following Novalis' interpretation, remains bound to the interiority of consciousness and is not able to establish a productive relationship with the sciences, in relation to which philosophy is only an 'imposition' from outside. In contrast, it is precisely the external/internal relationship that is examined and questioned by Novalis. I and Not-I are not separate or external to each other; this is the core of the Romantic philosopher's argument, which substitutes the Not-I with a You, (HKA 3, p. 430, n.820) understanding it not as another 'I' against the self or as that which is 'other' in respect to me, but rather as a set of processes that makes it necessary to question whether the movements proper to consciousness are internal movements within closed limits or not:

³ Novalis refers here to Hemsterhuis' philosophy. According to his thought, organs are the instruments that makes it possible for the soul to be affected by an object (see Hemsterhuis, 2022¹ and Hemsterhuis, 2022²).

For us, to withdraw into oneself means to abstract oneself from the external world. By analogy, for spirits, earthly life involves an intimate introspection, a turning inward, and an immanent activity. Thus, life on earth flows from an original reflection, a primitive entering and recollecting into oneself (HKA 2, p. 431, n.45).

This passage certainly indicates the importance of the reflective movement of consciousness, as it is also reflected in nature; at the same time, it questions the difference between the ‘inner space’ derived from the introspective movement of consciousness and that which is external to it. In fact, the passage continues:

Spiritual life arises, in this world, from a rupture of that primitive reflection—the spirit comes out of itself again, partly eliminates that reflection again—and at this moment it says for the first time—I. In this we see how outgoing and incoming are relative. What we call entering is actually going out (HKA 2, p. 431, n.45).

Entering is not accessing a space and time of consciousness from which the movement of nature is excluded (expelled and limited to an external dimension). The ‘I’ is self-reflection, but it is, at the same time, the spirit that develops and expands outside this introspection.

Physiology and ‘World’.

Romantic philosophy was strongly influenced by the scientific discoveries of the time; in particular, they led the Romantics to reject mechanistic science and philosophy—based on the presupposition that everything can be explained in terms of masses and movements (Gaukroger, 2010)—in favour of dynamic philosophy. In Novalis’ reflections on science, physiology progressively assumes more importance, to the point that he seeks to interpret knowledge in physiological terms. The theme of digestion assumes a prominent role. For example, Novalis expresses the intention to integrate physiology within the theory of heat; he departs from the theory of phlogiston in favour of another theory, which, for him, is a theory of nutrition (HKA 3, p. 265, n.133). Phlogiston theory assumes that the flame is the consequence of the

loss, in a body, of phlogiston. According to this hypothesis, heating is caused by separation and subtraction, whereas according to the theory proposed by Novalis, this process can be described as the assimilation of chemical elements, similar to digestion, which indeed, as the philosopher emphasises, heats (HKA 3, p. 265, n.133).

Against Kant and in accordance with Wolff's position—for whom digestion is essential for the *organisation* of organic matter (Duchesneau 2012, p. 479-80)—Novalis thinks that the digestion is more than just one activity among others that keep an organism alive. According to Wolff, digestion is an organising operation that is at the origin of the production of the organ, and (contrary to Blumenbach's view),⁴ it is so fundamental that the *vis essentialis* of an organism is portrayed as the power through which the nutrition is supplied to the different parts of the animal or plant. In a fragment in which Novalis refers, indirectly, to John Brown's theories on the relationship between disease, death and life, he describes death as the consequence of the absolute life that seeks to destroy every imperfect life, and as a process of continuous digestion, as the production of *Freßpunkte*, new stomachs (HKA 3, p. 61); life is therefore a "continual devouring (*Fressen*)" (HKA 3, p. 61).

All stages of knowledge, including the functioning of our senses, can be analysed as a feeding relationship: in *Pollen*, Novalis writes that "what I learn is nourishment" (HKA 2, p. 419, n.18). This fragment is further elaborated by Schlegel in his personal notes entitled *Zur Physik* (Novalis' *Pollen* was published in May 1798, while this group of Schlegelian fragments dates to the summer of the same year), which in turn stimulated Novalis to extend his reflections, as other notes clearly show. In these, Novalis reports the words of his friend and comments on them. For example, he quotes Schlegel's fragment: "In order to perceive an object, I must eat it" (Schlegel 1958, 18:146, n.276), which is parallel to some words written on it by Novalis: "In general, the sense (*Sinn*) eats, digests, secretes, or fertilises" (HKA 3, p. 88).

⁴ Blumenbach thought indeed that nutrition is only a modification (together with generation and regeneration) of the same force, the *Bildungstrieb* (Blumenbach, 1781).

Between 1797 and 1799, Novalis collects some excerpts from the *Neues Journal der Physik*, and, also in this case, takes some notes. Among the sentences he wrote, he presents the perceptive activity of the eye not as an *Anstoß* or as a stimulus received from a ray of light, but as a kind of nutrition: “An eye that sees [...] devours light” (HKA 3:96). For Novalis, all the senses are eaters—in the *Allgemeines Brouillon*, he asks: “Are not the external senses, perhaps, devourers?” (HKA 3:271, n.171) and in the same book he answers: “maybe perceiving (*empfinden*) is devouring” (HKA 3:288, n.273).

The process of digestion not only serves to describe the development of knowledge, but also portrays the organic relationship among natural beings. The relationship between minerals, plants and animals is a nutritive one, describing multiple two-sided relationships. For example, plants certainly ‘ingest’ minerals through the assimilation of water, but at the same time they provide the oxygen that is ‘ingested’ by minerals (HKA 3, p. 82). More generally, all the realms of nature are in a reciprocal relationship of nutrition and digestion:⁵ “The philosophy which raises nature from the mineral to human beings—this is the theory of nutrition” (HKA 3, p. 265, n. 130). The living world is to be described as a constant digesting, eating and defecating of elements, which are formed (as in Wolff’s physiological theory) in this very process (HKA 3, p. 255, n.83), and their identities can hardly be thought of as a fixed characteristic. In fact, the relationship of devouring does not merely imply a struggle in which ‘the stronger eats the weaker’, thus imposing its own identity as a devourer. That which is eaten, in turn, devours that which has eaten it (HKA 3, p. 99). Once again, for Novalis, the relationships are bidirectional, as it was for the idea of interiority, which always corresponds to an exteriority, to a continuous compenetrating activity and to extra-flexion. This external–internal relativity is in line with Novalis’ idea of knowledge, whereby this is not simply about the subject–object concordance, which is a simple external relationship; on the contrary, knowledge is the result of the organic interaction between the two (Beiser 2008, 433).

Eating, in Novalis’s extended sense, is strongly present in every moment of human life, and it determines its entire relationship with its ‘world’. This is intended

⁵ Cf. Schlegel, 1958, 18, p. 147, n.295.

as the field of possible perceptions by each human sense (HKA 2:577, n.234), produced by our points of view (HKA 2:587, n.257). If this last characteristic of the ‘world’ is similar Kant’s cosmological idea expressed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, other passages in Novalis’ works clearly demonstrate the distance between the two philosophers. First of all, Novalis claims that not only humans, but also plants (HKA 3, p. 84) and animals (HKA 3, p. 92) have ‘worlds’, thus these cannot be—in this sense—intended as transcendental ideas. The world is more in general the natural space (with its laws and inclusive of all the other beings that belong to it) where all activities of an organism take place, and which is influenced by these very activities.

An organism and its world are not simply juxtaposed; the world is part of the organism (HKA 2, p. 551), but, nonetheless, “an organic body does not [...] entirely belong in the world – it is a composite product (*gemischte Produkt*)” (HKA 2, p. 555, n.125). Neither can be reduced to the other but nor can they be regarded as separated (HKA 2, p. 548).

Their relationship is comparable to that between internal-external and eater-eaten explained above. With many similarities with the actual concept of “environment” (*Umwelt*),⁶ Novalis places the living being inside her own world, but, at the same time, claims that the world is inside of her: as a consequence, they are in constant interaction. On the one hand, the world of the human being, in particular, “is held together like the constituent parts of her body *through her life*” (HKA 3, p. 66, italics mine) and can be changed by the organism—Novalis writes, for example, that “through the modification of my body I modify *my world*” (HKA 2, p. 651, n.485). On the other, the world is not simply a product of the organism: not even the human being could radically change it—“my spiritual capacity cannot [...] be a decomposition and recreation of the world—at least insofar as I am member of this determined world—but can simply be a variation (*Variations Operation*)” (HKA 2, p. 554, n.125). The world is not something static, opposed to the living being, nor something merely passive, opposed to the activity of the organism; but is the dynamic result of a *Wechselwirkung* (HKA 2, p. 594, n.311).

⁶ The word ‘*Umwelt*’ was used for the first time by the Danish poet J. I. Baggesen in his *Napoleon* (1814). For this reason, we can reasonably presume that Novalis’ *Welt* derives from Herder, who (as Nassar 2022 notes) translates Buffon’s ‘climate’ as ‘world’.

A metaphysics of ‘Having’: Novalis towards an environmental philosophy

This physiological perspective, and the life sciences in general, condition Novalis’ metaphysics in a radical way, leading him to claim that it is Having, not Being that is central to metaphysical speculation—he writes, indeed: “All *Being* should be transformed into a *Having*” (HKA 3, p. 255, n.79). And Having is the synthesis between two elements united by the copula ‘to have’, opposed to the unilaterality of Being, which subsumes a predicate to a subject and an attribute to a substance: “*Being* is one-sided – *Having* [is] synthetic” (HKA 3:255, n.79).

It is not clear if Novalis’ conception of this metaphysics of Having was elaborated also in relation to other philosophies; presumably, it relates to an anti-Augustinian metaphysical tradition that sees, among its most important protagonist, the German mystic Meister Eckhart. Even if Meister Eckhart does not suggest substituting the concept of Being with that of Having, he criticises St. Augustin’s and St. Thomas’ idea that the conditions and states of the soul are to be explained as attributes to a substance (the *subjectum*), that suggest, indeed, a unilateral relationship – using Novalis’ words–: the substance is stable and essential and the attributes could change or disappear, since they are not mutually interwoven. Furthermore, Meister Eckhart describes the mystical union with God as the ecstatic union within the One-Being—sometimes also called the ‘I’⁷ (Eckhart 1963-1988, 2, p. 67, *Predigt 28*)—where both God’s and the human being’s covering veils are torn up, together becoming a ‘mine’ (Eckhart 1963-1988, 3, p. 443, *Predigt 83*). Eckhart’s philosophy might have inspired Novalis’ reflections, giving him the idea of how science and metaphysics can be consistently intertwined.

Besides these possible metaphysical precedents, physiology is essential for the comprehension of the meaning and conceptual consequences of a metaphysics of Having. Without doubt, physiology was the cornerstone of Novalis’s metaphysics; it is the instrument for achieving a unified and organic theory of nature and of the

⁷ It is noticeable that in Meister Eckhart “the meaning of ‘I’ is not [...] personal” (de Libera, 1984, p. 240).

human–nature relationship, in which beings are not individuals external to one another. ‘Having’ indicates a union that is devouring, a process of assimilation in which the one who has (the subject) is transformed into what it has (the object), a course in which the boundary between the inside and the outside is thinned (HKA 3:85). Because Having intends to highlight the role of relationships and because it is meant as a bi-directional relationship, it cannot be equated to ‘property’: this would imply a possessive subject (a being) that has something, and that does not, reciprocally, possess the subject—Novalis would then be unsympathetic to Gabriel Marcel’s definition of Having as a specific relation between two beings that exist independently from each other (Marcel 1935). According to Novalis’ metaphysics, Having is prior to Being; thus, the union is not between two already determined entities, but rather their individuality results from the phagocytising relation. Two individuals are the result of their mutual interpenetration: this constantly creates new individualities through interactions, through relationships that precede identities and make them exist.

Studies of Romantic philosophy have underestimated the importance of a metaphysics centered on Having instead of Being. Because of lack of secondary literature on this aspect of Romantic philosophy and because of the absence of an extensive and systematic description by Novalis of the theoretical consequences that derive from this metaphysical perspective, it can be useful to make reference to another philosophical archive centered on a metaphysics of Having formulated in France many years after Novalis’ death, that is: Gabriel Tarde’s monadology and its many interpreters (including Gilles Deleuze). It would be a foolhardy to posit a direct historical connection between Novalis’ and Tarde’s formulations of a metaphysics of Having (Tarde, 1999). Nonetheless, some reflections by Tarde’s interpreters can be used to shed light on Novalis’ thought, highlighting the potentialities of what has been discussed in this article—keeping in mind the dangers behind this operation, the transposition of concepts and categories that properly belong only to a later philosophical period.

It has been highlighted (and by Romantic philosophers, too) that Being implies identity and leads to the idea that things are withdrawn into themselves: things are defined first of all through their relationship with themselves (Vargas, 2010, p. 212).

On the contrary, Having captures the relational nature of things:⁸ they cannot be regarded as separated. Consequently, they are open to their surroundings (Viveiros de Castro, 2003, p. 17) or, more accurately, to their environment. Jean Milet writes, indeed, that the metaphysics of Having is an ecological metaphysics (Milet, 1970, p. 192).

This point of view clearly sheds new light on the history of environmental thought, and places German Romanticism as its first chapter. Indeed, even if Novalis cannot be labelled an ‘environmentalist’ in the proper sense, he not only gives priority to relationship over identity, but also claims that everything is the dynamic result of constant and mutual permeations, leading to the comprehension of nature not as a static object before the human being, but as an organic whole, in which each member, including human beings, influences and is influenced by the others.

Conclusion

Physiology leads Novalis to focus on nutrition, which is central to the formation of the organism, to the point that it conditions his metaphysics. Therefore, he conceives each organism as a factor in a constant assimilation process: it assimilates others and, at the same time, it is assimilated by others, and this leads both to a steady transformation. Consistently, the relationship between humans and Nature is not one of opposition but of mutual belonging; the encounter between the two is primordial, and just as humans are part of nature, nature is part of humans. Moreover, even if Novalis’ cannot be called environmentalist or ecologist in the proper sense, traces of proto-environmentalist reflections can already be found in his works. The separation between the human being and her world is an illusion; the relationship between the two is such that each one is in the other. And if we try to abstract an individuality from its world, this would not be possible, as it contains (and is already contained by) its surroundings.

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⁸ For the centrality of relationship in Romantic philosophy see also (Valpione, 2023).

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