Quite a few philosophical questions owe their existence to societal or cultural conflicts. From Plato's ethics over the young Hegel's diagnosis of modernity to Marxism and the social philosophy of the *Frankfurt School*, societal and cultural problems that have left an exceptionally profound mark provide the point of departure of philosophical reflections about the foundations of the principles of these social spheres. Thus the philosophy of law, ethics and the history of philosophy are philosophical disciplines that more or less explicitly arose as responses to societal *crises*. This paper addresses environmental philosophy from the perspective of environmental crisis.

1. Philosophy and the concept of crisis.

We talk about economic, social, political crises and about crises in friendships and marriage. In political and social science it has long been a central concept. 'Crisis' (from gr./lat.: to discern; judge; decide[1]) in its original Greek meaning refers to the procedure in the court of justice, the phase in a trial which leads to a decision, to a verdict. In medical science (lat.) 'crisis' refers to the turning point of a disease where the fever reaches its maximum and the patient either recovers his health or dies. 'Crisis' in both the court of justice and in medical science thus refers to a short but critical period where the durability of the status quo of a certain condition is in danger of collapse in respect to, respectively, its health or legality. Here the truth or the order of things manifests itself in a particular case or condition.

In early modernity 'crisis' begins to be applied in the philosophy of history. Rousseau used the term to characterize the political condition of his age (1760), where – as he saw it – the old institutions of the state no longer corresponded to a new social, economical and cultural situation. Rousseau predicted that the societal development in the late 18th century would enter a critical phase in which revolution would eventually overthrow the existing constitutions of the European states[2].

In the 19th and 20th centuries, 'crisis' became a key concept in critical philosophies of history that focused on history as an organic though conflict-ridden process and which investigated the causes of fundamental economical, social and political changes whereby old and new institutions and ways of thinking about justice, moral and ethics were in conflict. The Hegelian political philosopher Arnold Ruge characterized his century – the 19th century – as an age of criticism, and he claimed that, "the aim of a crisis is to break with and dispel the surface of the past to see that a new content has already developed"[3]. As is well known, Marxism and the *Frankfurt School* arose to develop critical analyses of society in the tradition from Hegel and Marx, and they became the most prominent examples of 20th century

theories that diagnosed societal totality on the basis of experiences of social conflicts or societal crises. Both of these interrelated traditions in social philosophy share a focus on the relation between the political, legal order and institutions on the one hand and on the other the economical, social reality. The idea is that when societal developments result in severe social problems the integrity of society as a whole is affected to such a degree that the established political, legal and moral order loses its legitimacy. It is the role of social philosophy to make this diagnosis, i.e. to describe how the normative order governing societal conditions has become out of step with the social reality that it should serve.

But a crisis does not just signify a conflict between old institutions and burgeoning social needs or values that have not yet found their form and fulfillment. It also gives rise to public debates and to a critique of present ideas and in attempts to construe new ideas that can make the new age or situation comprehensible. In addition to this, societal crises have even been significant in some cases for philosophers' very understanding of what philosophy and its role in society is. For example, it can be argued that for Plato philosophy was a response to a political crisis, perceived as a weakening of the community. Plato's ethical idealism was intended to counter the relativism and subjectivism encouraged by the Sophists, which was, according to Plato, responsible for the ethical decay that had led to Athens' defeat to Sparta. When the patriotic virtues that once united the citizens of Athens in a common cause had disappeared, philosophy must compensate and demonstrate the ideal metaphysical reality of ideas as universal truths capable of providing a new basis for a development of virtues in order to reunite the citizens and regenerate the community. It is the role of philosophy to provide education based on knowledge of the notion of universal justice, since education ('Bildung') is the foundation of the ethical renewal which is necessary for the reestablishment of the community. Thus crisis means a loss of an old ethical order but it also provides the opportunity of making a spiritual basis for a new order.

The young Hegel, too, sees a close connection between philosophical activity and societal crisis. According to him philosophical thinking arises in intellectuals as a response to a political, social and cultural situation whose normative foundations have lost their legitimacy. In the late 1790s – in the age of revolution – severe political problems in the German states challenged young intellectuals to new ways of thinking that could make their societal context intelligible, to make a diagnosis of society as a patient and contribute to the cure for the illness. In the *Oldest System Program of German Idealism* (1796/97), Hegel and his friends Schelling and Hölderlin express their joint declaration for a community of the future. The central question of the revolutionary-minded young philosophers went: "How must a world be

constituted ["beschaffen sein"] for a moral being?"[4] According to the program, the idea of a moral, i.e. free, being must create the foundation for radical criticism both of the existing political order (of state institutions) and of outdated ways of thinking about social and natural life. The age was in a state of crisis because it went through a radical change and so it has a "need for philosophy", whose task it is – says Hegel – to construe ideas that can serve as the foundation of a modern community[5].

In his *Differenzschrift* (1801) Hegel says: "When the power of unification has disappeared from people's life and the opposites have lost their living interplay and gain independence, then the need for philosophy arises"[6]. Here Hegel sketches a diagnosis. He suggests that modernity itself suffers from a division ('*Entzweiung*'), whereby the central elements of the enlightenment's idea of modern progress – rationality, freedom, individualism and the education of intellectual skills – have a downside. To reject religion as superstition as the enlightenment did is also to reject the values that previously ensured the spiritual coherence of society. Instead of community the modern secularized and enlightened world is left with schisms: between individuals, between man and nature and between man and God.

It is remarkable that the young Hegel considers himself an educator of the people (*Volkserzieher*) when he sets himself the social task of reconciling the academics (the enlightened class) with the uneducated, and the philosophical task of reuniting intellect (*Verstand*) with nature. Social unification should begin – says Hegel – with a liberation of nature, both inner and outer nature. In Hegel's vision folk religion (*Volksreligion*) and aesthetic education should play the role of giving *nature* back the dignity that it has lost through the Enlightenment's one-sided focus on intellectual skills. Defending Schelling's philosophy of nature in his *Differenzschrift* he claims that Kant's and Fichte's philosophies reflect the division between intellect and nature which the enlightenment is responsible for. Here he speaks about the "need for a philosophy by which nature can be reconciled for the ill-treatment it suffers under Kant's and Fichte's systems, and by which reason itself can be put in conformity with nature […], not as a vapid imitator but by making reason give itself the shape of nature by its [reason's] own inner power"[7].

Consequently Hegel does not regret the modernization of society; on the contrary he supports the modern condition, integrating into his philosophical theory the concepts of division, conflict and strife as essential features in the dialectical theory of history which he develops. Instead of judging the present age on the basis of a romantic idea of a past free from conflict, intellectuals should regard themselves as being challenged by the tasks that the present age assigns to them. Philosophical thinking is an intellectual enterprise that

should be engaged in comprehending the present condition and its divisions and in overcoming them: "To sublate (*aufheben*) such fixed oppositions is philosophy's only interest"[8], he says.

2. Crisis as self-alienation.

What has nature got to do with the idea of crisis in the critical philosophies of early modernity? A lot, it might be expected, for self-alienation was considered the original 'disease' of civilization, according to Rousseau and his successors. Rousseau's early theory contained a notion of an original nature of man, which had been suppressed by the artificial constructions of the modern development of science, technology, arts and skills. And his idea of an *original* natural state of innocence and social virtues opposed to the specific 'civilized' or artificial forms of self-cultivation was later taken up by Schiller, who in his *Aesthetic Letters*[9] expressed his concerns about the societal development of his age. The development leads, according to Schiller, to a condition in which scientific specialization and the division of labor result both in a one-sided education of the human character and in a separation of citizens into social classes according to rank and occupation. These separations and divisions make of the societal whole a complicated machinery, and they threaten the integrity of the community. Schiller traced this social division back to a division in the human character between reason – or rationality – and nature, and he expressed the hope that an aesthetic education of the individual would counter the social problem of division. An aesthetic reshaping of the union of the individual character would form harmonious citizens, and only an educated (*gebildet*) man deserves the rank of a true citizen who is capable of administering his task in a true state.

But in critical theories from Rousseau to the *Frankfurt School*, the idea of oppressed nature relates to man's self-alienation and not the natural environment. That goes for Schiller, too. The original thought behind his program for an aesthetic education of man is the notion of a 'play drive' (*Spieltrieb*), which can allegedly harmonize the conflicting powers of human character, reason and emotional nature. As we have seen, the young Hegel is partly inspired by Schiller's project. And in the 20th century even members of the early *Frankfurt School* who explicitly subjected 20th century industrialized society to severe criticism kept their focus exclusively on the human being when – drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis – they argued that nature is the real victim of modern rationalization of society. Whereas, according to the authors of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*[10], the original intention of the enlightenment project was to support the development of modern science and technology insofar as these

made it possible to control the powers of nature for the sake of human freedom and self-realization in a community, enlightenment soon came to favor a rationality that aimed at creating systems that exercise control over the social world as well. The enlightenment's original idea of human natural and social liberation turns into a practice of coercion by anonymous societal powers. So what both Rousseau, Schiller, the young Hegel and Adorno meant when they pointed to the shadow of the enlightenment is the oppression of the nature of *man* and of man's *social* life. Apart from the young Hegel, who adopted a more comprehensive concept of nature[11], they did not have the natural environment in mind. But can the concept of crisis in these critical philosophies also be applied in the shaping of a critical environmental philosophy?

3. The environmental crisis.
The idea of an 'environmental crisis' did not become an issue in public debate until the 1960s. From various quarters, aspects of a problem appeared that had until then been hidden. Now it became clear that the world faced a population explosion and that, for example, commercial farming was using pesticides and other chemical substances to optimize its production in a way that would eventually threaten public health [12]. Many people realized that growing industrial production in response to the needs of an increasing world population also led to the development of the advanced technology that had put nature under pressure in exploiting its resources and polluting the earth.

At the same time space technology made it possible for NASA to produce a photograph of the earth taken from space. This photograph changed the image of the earth. From the beginning of the modern era, nature was considered an object for the discovery and exploitation of inexhaustible resources, which could be extracted and used for the benefit of mankind. Now the earth was seen as no more than a small and fragile planet in an infinite physical universe. The world realized that the earth was finite, that it was a being which should be taken care of. Consequently, the growing use of natural resources, pollution and the extinction of species were seen as potential threats, not only to the public health but also to the diversity and survival of species, one of which was man. In the following years research in various areas of the natural environment and in climate changes has sharpened public awareness of the earth as a finely balanced ecological system.

Since then predictions about further substantial changes in eco-systems have contributed to more basic philosophical reflections on relations between man and nature. From being merely a resource for industrial production, nature's 'answer' to mankind's exploitation has

drawn attention to nature as an organic system of which man is only a part. In view of this development, many experts consider the options for mankind to be either to continue its exploitation and play the opponent in a play in which it is forced to partake or to choose to be nature's partner in a living interplay for the sake of the survival and wellbeing of mankind and of the diversity of species. The point is that in both these scenarios mankind is exposed to the reactions of nature and is not a force controlling an object from a safe place.

4. Environmental ethics.

As our experience of the environmental problems of the present age shows, our traditional attitude and practice in relation to nature suggests the need for a new understanding of the relation of man to nature, an atttitude characterized by an awareness of the interdependence on one hand of our interest in keeping and protecting our welfare and on the other hand of consideration for ecological balance on earth with a high degree of biodiversity. In philosophy this environmental consciousness is also reflected, in theories of environmental ethics and in attempts to argue for the moral consideration of nature and to formulate moral principles for our treatment of the natural environment.

As is well known[13], environmental ethics addresses issues deriving from life-, animal- and eco-centered ethics as possible alternatives to the traditional 'human-centered' ethics. Basically, the question is whether our 'non-human partner' can be regarded as morally considerable, i.e. whether principles can be established that ascribe intrinsic and not just instrumental value to nature, whether it be nature as a whole or as specific parts in the form of species or eco-systems. Can nature or natural beings be said to be ends in themselves, even though they do not possess the features that are normally considered preconditions for being morally considerable. Here the Kantian idea that only conscious, self-determining beings – i.e. humans – are morally considerable is challenged by attempts to argue for the moral inviolability of non-human beings. The arguments extend from the strong demand of respect even for inorganic beings such as mountains and rivers, over ascribing rights to individual animals, to the weaker claim that at least universal beings such as species, eco-systems and the most universal being, namely the biosphere as a whole, possess a status that should be considered morally inviolable.

5. Environmental ethics and attitudes to nature.

It is not the place for a detailed discussion of these particular theories here, but I will finish my paper with a few suggestions about what a crisis perspective on environmental ethics

could contribute. Since the specific discussion about the possible moral status of nature is the philosophical outcome of the environmental crisis, it could be claimed that the idea of moral consideration of nature – be it rocks, mountains, rivers, animals, species, eco-systems or the entire biosphere – expresses a response arising from man's bad conscience as regards the misuse of nature. Ascribing moral consideration to rocks and mountains and rivers seems partly motivated by moral feelings of that kind. As early as in 1801 the young Hegel spoke about the need of the age for a new natural philosophy that could "reconcile nature for the ill-treatment caused by human rationality"[14]. A similar emotional response is found in deep ecology. And this attitude tends toward ascribing anthropomorphic features to nature.

But the general thrust of non-human centered ethical positions seems to go in the direction of assigning quasi-moral value – even approximately intrinsic value – to natural beings according to their degree of complexity and aesthetic quality. For example, it seems plain that leopards, say, possess higher value than flies. But what is more interesting is that the concept of a natural *being* in environmental ethics not only comprises individual beings but also universal or quasi-universal entities like species and eco-systems. These are 'wholes' on which their individual parts are dependent. As a consequence it could be argued that the most comprehensive universal, the substance of all life, namely the entire biosphere, which comprises all natural and human life on earth as its parts, should be the highest ranking object for moral concern.

What I want to draw attention to here is the point that the ethical discussion centers on ontological presuppositions in natural philosophy. An interesting perspective would be to confront these presuppositions with traditional scientific ontology (physicalism) and pose the question whether the new environmental agenda essentially implies an organic image of the world and that therefore it challenges the positivist, scientistic image of the world, which has dominated the sciences since Galileo and Descartes. Here elements of an Aristotelian image of the world, for example, could be reconsidered, namely the Aristotelian idea of a *scala naturae* which based on a notion of nature as ontologically differentiated in species according to degree of universality and complication. In modern environmental philosophy this could mean that – as regards complexity – organic life is more valuable than physical matter and mammals rank more highly than insects. As regards 'degree of universality', species should be considered more valuable than individuals and eco-systems more valuable than individual species. Finally the entire biosphere that contains them all as their ultimate life condition should take the most prominent position.

This hierarchical system is based on the principle of ontological dependence. What is most

universal and fundamental (substantial) possesses the highest value. In nature, the biosphere is the ontological *sine qua non* for all eco-systems, species and individuals that it nourishes. But, although objects such as mountain ranges and rivers are only inorganic individuals, they still hold a unique status among physical entities because they contribute to drawing the total picture of the planet earth, its life and its climate. Although individual physical beings, they are not just accidental but substantial since they make the physical conditions for the existence of organic individuals, species and eco-systems. As a relatively self-sustaining whole of life, the earth with its entire biosphere is a 'universal individual'[15]. And as the ultimate condition for all life phenomena, it differs from these in being an almost independent self-positing substance that is distinct from its accidental, dependent beings. For whereas individual organic beings are interrelated as means and ends, the biosphere as a totality seems to be only an end; it does not co-exist with other biospheres but only has its parts as means for its own self-preservation. Though not possessing ability for conscious self-determination like humans do, the biosphere still comes close to being an end in itself, i.e. to being something like a self-determining individual. Therefore it possesses intrinsic value and should be considered an object of a certain moral concern.

6. Conclusion.

The conclusion of these preliminary considerations about environmental ethics is that it does not seem possible to consider non-human nature as a moral subject in a strict sense. Neither natural individuals nor species possess the essential features that constitute a moral subject, namely the ability for conscious self-determination (autonomy). Here Kant is right when he makes consciousness and reason the preconditions for self-determination and bases his categorical imperative on the precept that the moral obligation to treat the humanity in a person not only as a means but always also as an end in itself is justified by the fact that only humans are capable of rational self-determination[16]. But, as I see it, we can extend the notions of 'intrinsic value' and 'end in itself' to comprise organic universal and substantial individuals, i.e. to species, eco-systems and to inorganic individuals such as mountains or rivers, which are conditions for the existence of whole eco-systems. Thus it is not moral injunction but a change in the attitude of humans to nature brought about by a new understanding of what nature, especially life, is that would make us realize the value of nature. The thought that human life is an integrated and dependent part of the life of the planet as a whole should strengthen our environmental awareness and concern and urge us to devise new values, technologies, practices and political initiatives on the basis of a vision

of a potential *interplay* rather than a *power struggle* between man and nature. Here the notion of environmental *crisis* can prove fruitful for the development of new and essential philosophical knowledge capable of underpinning central practical initiatives.

[1] Ritter, J. et al. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Basel 1971 ff. 'Krise': 1235 ff.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. All translations of quotations from German into English in this paper are mine, pw.

[4] G.W.F.Hegel *Werke* 1-20. Suhrkamp Verlag. Frankfurt am Main. 1971.1, 234.

[5] Hegel Werke 2, 20

[6] Werke, 2, 22

[7] Hegel, Werke 2, 13

[8] Werke 2, 21

[9] Schiller: *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man,* particularly "Letter no. 6"

[10] Original German title: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*

[11] I will not develop that point further in this paper.

[12] "Environmental Ethics" in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 4ff.

[13] Cf. e.g. the presentation by Elliot, Robert: "Environmental ethics" in: Singer, P. (ed.) *A Companion to Ethic.* Blackwell 1991.

[14] Werke 2, 13

[15] See Hegel: "Beobachtende Vernunft" in: *Phänomenologie des Geistes.* Werke 3, 224 for this expression.

[16] Kant: *Critique of Judgment.* §84.