

The Re-Emergence of Schelling: Philosophy in a Time of Emergency

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Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, c. 1850. “Aged, exhausted, worried, and angst-ridden: the photo of Schelling seems to speak of an incapacity to accept the loss that freedom exacts on the system’s drive to orient the activity of thinking in relationship to itself. But is this the only reading of the photo? Perhaps it speaks to the exhaustion of having been born *in* a time but not living such that one is *of* that time” (Jason Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time*, 201).

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Preface

The philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) cannot be adequately grasped in abstraction from the unique personality that animated his spirit. While he spent his philosophical career striving to realize the Absolute system, he did so in full recognition of the fact that the Absolute is not finally a logical system, but a living actuality.¹ Accordingly, for Schelling, “life is the criterion of truth.”² Though his critics often dismissed his thought as fragmentary and protean, C. S. Peirce, in a letter to William James, remarked that it was precisely Schelling’s “freedom from the trammels of system” and willingness to approach philosophical ideas experimentally rather than dogmatically that he admired most: “In that, he is like a scientific man.”³

In the essay to follow, undertaken in the context of “a burgeoning Schelling renaissance”⁴ in the English-speaking world, as well as a planetary ecological emergency and geo-political crisis, I return to Schelling’s written corpus to draw upon the deep well of his thought in the hope that it can aid human civilization’s attempt to re-imagine itself. I believe his philosophy provides many of the anthropological, theological, and cosmological resources necessary for bringing forth an alternative form of modernity no longer bent on the destruction of earth and the disintegration of human communities.

I explore Schelling’s corpus for traces of the spirit that lived in his thoughts, being careful not to mistake the letter for the life. “When this element of life is withdrawn,” wrote Schelling, “propositions die like fruit removed from the tree of life.”⁵ He continues:

...the person is the world writ small...One who could write completely the history of their own life would also have, in small epitome, concurrently grasped the history of the cosmos.⁶

¹ Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, “The Work of Experience,” *Schelling Now*, 74.

² Mason Richey and Markus Zisselberger, “Introduction,” *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, xvi.

³ Peirce to James, 28 January 1894; Joseph Esposito, *Schelling’s Idealism and Philosophy of Nature* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 203.

⁴ Jason Wirth, “Introduction,” *Schelling Now*, 9.

⁵ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, ed. Wirth, 4.

⁶ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, ed. Wirth, 3.

Philosophy, for Schelling, though generated by the physical dynamics of the universe itself, is “throughout a work of freedom” and so “for each only what he has himself made it.”⁷ In philosophizing, the individual discovers within his or her own originality the creative life of the whole universe. Schelling’s personal biography, then, is not extraneous but essential to understanding his philosophical project.

⁷ *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, I/2, 11; Bruce Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy*, p. 199.

Ch. 1: Philosophical Biography

Schelling was born in 1775 near Stuttgart, a descendent of preachers and church officials on both sides of his family as far back as records can be found.⁸ His father, Joseph Friedrich Schelling (1732-1812) was a well-known scholar of theology and ancient languages. There is no doubt that the young Schelling benefited from his father's extensive library and tutelage.⁹ At age 8, Schelling was sent to live with his uncle Nathanael Köstlin (1711-1790), the dean of a school in Nürtingen where Schelling was to study the classics. It was here that Schelling first met Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), later his roommate at seminary in Tübingen, as well as the Pietist mystics Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1782) and Philipp Matthäus Hahn (1739-1790), both regular visitors to his uncle's home.¹⁰ Hahn in particular had a profound personal and spiritual influence upon Schelling's philosophical outlook.

Only two years after enrolling at Nürtingen, Schelling was sent home because he had outgrown the knowledge of his instructors, "[spending] most of his time in the company of books and adults."¹¹ By age 11, his father began letting him sit in on his seminary courses at Bebenhausen. He thrived alongside 18-year-olds, learning four ancient languages and reading Plato and Aristotle in Greek and Leibniz in Latin before reaching 14-years-old.

In the spring of 1790, when Schelling was 15, his friend and spiritual mentor Hahn passed away. Schelling wrote a eulogy on the occasion of his death, which would become his first publication when it was printed in a Stuttgart newspaper.¹² According to Schelling, the eulogy for Hahn was "the first poem [he] ever wrote in [his] life."¹³ The fourth stanza, foreshadowing Schelling's own commitment to *Naturphilosophie*,¹⁴ reads:

⁸ Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 116; Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 44.

⁹ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 41.

¹⁰ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 233n4.

¹¹ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 47.

¹² Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 238n55.

¹³ 4 April 1811 to G. H. Schubert; Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 62.

¹⁴ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 58.

Did he not dare to speak, with astute demeanor
Still mortal, the forces of nature?
Did his eyes not plunge through the cosmos and earth's dale
Searching and finding the purest trace of the deity?¹⁵

Later in the year, Schelling was granted special permission to enroll in seminary at the Tübinger Stift. There he reunited with Hölderlin and met Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) for the first time, both five years older than him. As wind of the philosophical revolution instigated by Immanuel Kant in Königsberg and the political revolution occurring across the Rhine in France drifted into the Stift, the three friends became increasingly intoxicated by new ideas,—ideas their seminary professors struggled to domesticate by rendering them compatible with traditional theology.¹⁶ Hahn's lasting theosophical influence kept Schelling from ever completely accepting the premises of the Enlightenment, but there is no doubt that the newly quickened powers of reason, science, and freedom were extremely attractive to him.

Instead of succumbing to the mechanistic trends of the natural science of his age, Schelling was from the beginning committed to the alchemical vision of Hahn's *Naturphilosophie*, wherein nature was understood to be the revealed body of a living God. Schelling realized that traditional literalist belief had no place in the modern world, but rather than rejecting religion entirely, he betrays his Pietist upbringing in seeking to replace belief with direct experiential knowledge of the divine life. Hahn called the experience of this knowledge the *Zentralschua* ("Central Vision"); Schelling, upon assimilating the philosophy of Fichte, would come to call it the *intellectual intuition*.¹⁷

The impact of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) on the teenage Schelling was powerful, as indeed was the impact of Schelling on Fichte, 13-years his senior. Schelling's first philosophical publication in the fall of 1794, aged 19, was *Über die Möglichkeit einer Form der Philosophie überhaupt* (*On the possibility of a form of*

¹⁵ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 223.

¹⁶ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 118.

¹⁷ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 36-37, 66.

philosophy in general). The essay engages directly with Fichte's defense of the Kantian system in *Begriff de Wissenschaftslehre* (*Concept of the science of knowledge*), published only months earlier.¹⁸ Schelling sent the *Form* essay along with an admiring letter to Fichte, to which the latter replied encouragingly. Fichte also sent a new and improved version of his science of knowledge entitled *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, 1795) to Schelling. Almost immediately, on Easter of 1795, Schelling published his *Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen* (*On the ego as the principle of philosophy or on the unconditioned in human knowledge*).

The received academic opinion has it that Schelling was Fichte's disciple during the early years of their collaboration (~1794-1799).¹⁹ More recent scholarship suggests not only that most of Schelling's major philosophical commitments had already been formed prior to his encounter with Fichte's subjective idealism,²⁰ but that Schelling's early essays substantially improved Fichte's understanding of his own project.²¹ Hölderlin, who had graduated from the Stift two years earlier, visited Schelling shortly after the publication of *On the ego* in 1795. Having just attended Fichte's lectures at the University of Jena, he reportedly told Schelling: "Take it easy. You've gotten as far as Fichte. I've heard him."²²

For the next several years, Schelling published essays on critical philosophy in the *Philosophisches Journal* co-edited by Fichte, despite his growing dissatisfaction with the latter's subjectivist approach.²³ In 1796, the famed handwritten document, later titled "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" ("Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism"), emerged out of conversations between Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel.²⁴ The document begins by affirming the Fichtean position on

¹⁸ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 120-121.

¹⁹ Norbert Guterman, "Introduction," Schelling, *On University Studies*, ix.

²⁰ Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 138-139.

²¹ Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 42-43.

²² Gustav Leopold Plitt, *Aus Schelling Leben*, I:71; Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 122.

²³ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 123.

²⁴ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 124.

the absolute freedom of the ego, but balances this one-sided idealism by calling for a new kind of physics compatible with our nature as moral creatures and a “sensuous religion” capable of delivering this physics to the people. Hegel would eventually come to abandon the more radical positions of the “Systematic Program” to become the official philosopher of the Prussian state, while Hölderlin began showing signs of insanity by 1800. Schelling, it seems, was the only one of his friends to remain consistently committed to the document’s major outlines.

Stemming from discontent both with Hegel’s mechanically formulaic epistemological fundament and the poet’s [Hölderlin’s] surrender to madness, the vitality in Schelling’s thinking is the search to hold these opposites together in their many permutations.²⁵

Also in 1796, Schelling published *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus* (*Philosophical Letters on Criticism and Dogmatism*), wherein he argues explicitly that transcendental idealism and Spinozist realism should be understood to be *coordinate* systems: the former tackles the absolute from a subjectivist perspective, leading to the annihilation of the object, while the latter attains the absolute objectively through the dissolution of the subject.²⁶ Beginning in 1797 with his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (*Ideas for a philosophy of nature*), Schelling published a series of groundbreaking and influential tracts on *Naturphilosophie*. These essays were the children of a marriage between Schelling’s theosophical convictions regarding nature as the self-externalization of God (*Geistlichkeit*²⁷) and his intense study of recent advances in the natural scientific study of astrophysics, electricity, magnetism, chemistry, physiology, and medicine.²⁸ “What we want,” writes Schelling in *Ideas*,

²⁵ Richey and Zisselberger, “Introduction,” *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, xvii.

²⁶ Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism*, 476-477.

²⁷ Glenn Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 81.

²⁸ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 125.

is not that nature should coincide with the laws of our mind *by chance*...but that *she herself*, necessarily and originally, should not only *express*, but *even realize* the laws of our mind.²⁹

In 1798, after Goethe had met the 23-year-old Schelling and read an advanced copy of his latest treatise *Von der Weltseele, eine Hypothese der höheren Physik zur Erklärung des allgemeinen Organismus* (*On the world soul, a hypothesis of the higher physics for the clarification of universal organicity*),³⁰ he interceded on Schelling's behalf to have him appointed extraordinary professor of philosophy at the University of Jena.³¹

Fichte was not impressed. He sought to distinguish his own position from what he perceived to be Schelling's new turn toward realism, publishing thinly veiled criticisms of Schelling in subsequent issues of *Philosophisches Journal*.³² Shortly after the last of Schelling's tracts on *Naturphilosophie*, the *Einleitung zu dem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (*Introduction to the sketch of a system of nature philosophy*), had appeared in 1799, the rift between Fichte and Schelling had risen fully to the surface. The two began quarreling about a philosophical journal they'd been planning to co-edit.³³ Soon after, Fichte was forced to leave Jena due to the charge of atheism.³⁴ Over the next few years, Fichte became increasingly dismissive of Schelling's philosophical project, condescendingly writing to Schelling in 1801 that if only he would consider his own science of knowledge more deeply "[he] would in time enough correct [his] mistakes."³⁵ By the fall of 1801, Schelling had decided to start the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (*The Critical Journal of Philosophy*) with Hegel instead of Fichte as co-editor, cementing their personal and

²⁹ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*. Trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, 41.

³⁰ Selections of which have recently been translated into English by Iain Hamilton Grant in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, Vol. VI (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2010), 58-95.

³¹ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 148.

³² Beiser, *German Idealism*, 479.

³³ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 177-178.

³⁴ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 166.

³⁵ Fichte to Schelling, 31 May 1801, Schelling, *Briefe und Dokumente*, 2:339; Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 178.

professional split.³⁶ The two never met or spoke again after 1802.³⁷ Fichte died in Berlin on January 27th, 1814, Schelling's 39th birthday.

Schelling's circle of friends in Jena at the turn of the century included Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and Novalis. During this time he became very close to Wilhelm's wife, Caroline Schlegel (1763-1809).³⁸ When she fell ill in May of 1800, she traveled with Schelling and her 15-year-old daughter Auguste to Bamberg to consult with doctors and soak in the nearby natural spas.³⁹ By July, Caroline had recovered, but her daughter Auguste had fallen ill with dysentery. On July 12th, she died.

Auguste's sudden death was devastating for the entire circle. Schelling fell into a depression, while Caroline became more enamored with him than ever. By early 1801, she had expressed her affection for him in a letter: "I love you, I revere you, no hour passes that I do not think of you."⁴⁰ Soon after, she revealed to her husband of five years that Schelling was "the first and only love of my life."⁴¹ Wilhelm Schlegel handled the end of his marriage with grace and forbearance, even risking his own reputation to deflect and refute criticisms made against Schelling in a popular literary magazine claiming that his meddling in Auguste's medical treatment had been the reason for her premature death.⁴² With the help of Goethe, Wilhelm and Caroline obtained a divorce in May of 1803.⁴³ Caroline married Schelling in June.

It was back in 1801, during his period of collaboration with Schelling (~1800-1807), that Hegel published his first book, entitled *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie* (*The difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian systems of philosophy*). The work shows how highly Hegel thought

³⁶ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 178.

³⁷ Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood, eds., *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling*, 282.

³⁸ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 166.

³⁹ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 169-170.

⁴⁰ Caroline Böhmer Schlegel to Schelling, February 1801, *Caroline: Brief aus der Frühromantik*, 2:42; Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 168.

⁴¹ Caroline Böhmer Schlegel to Wilhelm Schlegel, 6 March 1801, *Caroline: Brief aus der Frühromantik*, 2:65; Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 168.

⁴² Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 174-175.

⁴³ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 176n159.

of Schelling's so-called "identity philosophy" at the time.⁴⁴ He argues in the preface that Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* can "recompense nature for the mishandling that it suffered in Kant and Fichte's systems" by

...[setting] Reason itself in harmony with nature, not by having Reason renounce itself or become an insipid imitator of nature, but by Reason recasting itself into nature out of its own inner strength.⁴⁵

Only six years later, Hegel would publish his most famous book, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807), wherein he appears to dismiss the creative act of intellectual intuition he defended in the *Differenz* essay, claiming it produces only an abstract absolute akin to "the night in which all cows are black." The nature of the disagreement and eventual falling out between Schelling and Hegel is taken up in a subsequent section.⁴⁶

Schelling worked with Hegel on the *Kritisches Journal* in Jena for two years before leaving for Würzburg in 1803.⁴⁷ After a 3-year stint at the Catholic university there, where Schelling was initially popular but ended up making few friends among the members of the school's conservative administration,⁴⁸ he was appointed to the Academy of Sciences in Munich in 1806. In 1808, he was named the Secretary General of the Academy of Fine Arts, a position Schelling held until 1821.

In 1809, while Schelling was working on *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* (*Philosophical investigations into the essence of human freedom*), Caroline contracted dysentery. In September, Caroline died "with an expression of cheerfulness and the most wonderfully peaceful look on her face," according to Schelling.⁴⁹ Schelling remarried 3-years later, but the shock of Caroline's death darkened his philosophical outlook, making him fully conscious of the contingency

⁴⁴ Christopher Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 71-82.

⁴⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf, 83.

⁴⁶ See chapter titled "The difference between Hegel's and Schelling's systems of philosophy."

⁴⁷ The two even roomed together for a time when Hegel first moved to Jena in 1801 (Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 79).

⁴⁸ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 197.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Schelling to Luise Gotter, 24 September 1809, *Caroline: Briefe aus der Frühromantik*, 2:570; Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 198.

and “deep indestructible melancholy of all life,” as he wrote in the *Freedom* essay.⁵⁰ Less than a month after Caroline died, Schelling wrote in a letter:

I now need friends who are not strangers to the real seriousness of pain and who feel that the single right and happy state of the soul is the divine mourning in which all earthly pain is immersed.⁵¹

He would publish only once more in his lifetime, but Schelling nonetheless worked tirelessly on a number of significant projects. In the months following Caroline’s death, he composed several drafts of a dialogue entitled *Clara oder Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geisterwelt* (*Clara, or on nature’s connection to the spirit world*).⁵² In this work, a physician, whose “bottom up”⁵³ approach to the science of healing is derived from Schelling’s own *Naturphilosophie*, attempts to coax Clara, who is mourning the death of a dear friend, back down to earthly life from the ethereal bliss her soul longs to dissolve into. A priest offers a different but complementary approach, describing the interdependent “living rotation” of body, soul, and spirit that prevents the dead from soaring entirely beyond earth:

For only a few pass over so pure and free of any love for earthly life that they can be absolved immediately...[to disappear] in God like a drop in the ocean.”⁵⁴

Caroline’s ghost haunts the pages of this dialogue, as Schelling struggles to account for the ultimate destiny of her once-occurrent personality within the infinite current of the one cosmic life. Unlike the philosophical propositions of philosophers past which, as described by Hegel in his *Phenomenology*, dialectically survive death to be sublated in the course of the Idea’s self-unfolding, Caroline’s spirit cannot be abstractly reduced to “a few short, uncompleted propositions on a piece of paper.”⁵⁵ Her death was for Schelling “a singular and absolute loss.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, 63.

⁵¹ *Brief über den Tod Carolines vom 2. Oktober, 1809*, ed. Johann Ludwig Döderlein; Wirth, “Introduction,” *Ages of the World*, x.

⁵² Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 29.

⁵³ Schelling, *Clara*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp, 15.

⁵⁴ Schelling, *Clara*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp, 35, 52, 59.

⁵⁵ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, ed. Wirth, 4.

⁵⁶ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 216.

In December of 1810, with the damp air still abuzz after a violent thunderstorm, Schelling wrote in his journal that work on *Die Weltalter* (*The Ages of the World*) was “begun in earnest.”⁵⁷ *The Ages of the World* has been described as his magnum opus, a “self-composing cosmic poem”⁵⁸ that dives head first into the darkness of the cosmotheandric mystery that would consume Schelling’s thought for the rest of his life. Despite several announcements of its imminent publication during the course of the next two decades, the unfinished drafts were ultimately withheld until Schelling’s *Sämtliche Werke* was published by his son Karl in 1856, two years after his death. His late philosophies of mythology and of revelation should be considered the fruits of insights developed in the course of the *Weltalter* project, which itself remains in many respects continuous with his early *Naturphilosophie*. In his lectures on the philosophy of mythology, delivered in Berlin beginning in 1841, Schelling says of myth that it “indisputably has the closest link with nature,” and that modern explanations suffered due to “a lack of natural philosophical ideas.” He goes on to argue that we must learn to

see mythology as a nature elevated into the spiritual realm through an enhancing refraction. Only the means [have been] missing to make the enhancement conceivable.⁵⁹

In other words, in these lectures, Schelling attempts to articulate the way myths “arise from the human soul’s prereflective immersion in the divine substance of the cosmos.”⁶⁰ Rather than reducing myths to allegorical inventions of the human mind, Schelling argues that, in fact, it is the human mind that has been invented by myth.

Though these lectures were initially “a kind of celebrity event”⁶¹ attended by the likes of Kierkegaard, Engels, and Bakunin, their message, though influential in

⁵⁷ Schelling, *Die Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810), ed. Miklos Veto, 216; Wirth, “Introduction,” *Ages of the World*, vii.

⁵⁸ Wirth, “Introduction,” *Ages of the World*, x.

⁵⁹ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Wirth, 155-156.

⁶⁰ Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, 72.

⁶¹ Wirth, “Introduction,” *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, viii.

some respects,⁶² fell largely upon deaf ears. Those in attendance had been lead to expect Schelling would sharply rebuke the now deceased Hegel (quelling the radical Hegelians had been the intention of the state and university officials who called him to Berlin⁶³), but to their disappointment, Schelling sought healing, rather than polemic.⁶⁴ The lukewarm reception of the lectures is a reflection of a change in the *Zeitgeist*. The philosophical quickening which had inspired so many German minds around the turn of the century had by the 1840s all but dried up as Europe's intelligentsia began to sink into the scientistic positivism that would dominate for the remainder of the century and beyond.

Schelling retired into obscurity in 1846. In the summer of 1854, poor in health, he traveled to Bad Ragaz, Switzerland to take the cure. His spirit left its 79-year-old body on August 20—a spirit, it seems, who was born too early.⁶⁵ “Perhaps the one is still coming,” writes Schelling in the introduction to the third draft of *The Ages of the World*,

who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, what will be. But that time has not yet come. We must not misjudge our time.⁶⁶

⁶² Kierkegaard's debt to Schelling's characterization of Hegel's philosophy is well known. Emerson translated and published the first of Schelling's Berlin lectures in an issue of *The Dial* in January of 1843, writing in a letter to a friend at time: “To hear Schelling might well tempt the firmest rooted philosopher from his home, and I confess to more curiosity in respect to his opinions than to those of any living psychologist” (Norbert Guterman, “Introduction,” *On University Studies*, xix).

⁶³ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 198.

⁶⁴ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Wirth, viii.

⁶⁵ Wirth, “Introduction,” *Schelling Now*, 5.

⁶⁶ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, xl.

Ch. 2: Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence

This chapter assesses the reasons for the contemporary resurgence of scholarly interest in Schelling's philosophy. At least since the 1990s, after more than a century and a half on the shelf, Schelling's corpus has been re-emerging "with increasing intensity" in the English speaking world.⁶⁷ There are many reasons to reconsider Schelling's philosophical *oeuvre*, but the current resurgence in interest seems to orbit primarily around his unique approach to the *problem of nature*, whether the nature of the cosmos, of the human, or of the divine.

In his prized 1809 essay *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Schelling writes:

The entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes) has the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground.⁶⁸

The non-existence of nature for thought in the modern period has had terrible consequences for human history and the natural world alike. From Descartes through to Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, reason and science became increasingly self-castrating and solipsistic: "like the priests of the Phrygian goddess," modern thought detached itself from the living forces of its natural ground.⁶⁹

In his *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (2005), Iain Hamilton Grant articulates the scientific and metaphysical consequences of ignoring nature, arguing that

deep geological time defeats *a priori* the prospect of [nature's] appearance for any finite phenomenologizing consciousness.⁷⁰

In other words, while the Kantian turn in the philosophy of science drained nature of ontological significance by defining it phenomenologically as "the sum total of appearing bodies," the empirico-mathematical study of nature nonetheless came to reveal world-ages prior to the emergence of any consciousness for whom material

⁶⁷ Wirth, "Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence," 585.

⁶⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, 26.

⁶⁹ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 26.

⁷⁰ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 6.

nature could have made an appearance. Further, contemporary physics has de-corporealized (and so de-phenomenalized) matter in favor of a dynamic, field-theoretic understanding of natural forces. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* not only foresaw and helped to initiate these discoveries,⁷¹ it provides the new sciences of self-organizing systems with a more coherent and adequate metaphysical foundation than the old mechanistic atomism.⁷² *Naturphilosophie*'s principle aim is to articulate, in a systematic but non-reductive way, how it is possible that natural productivity (*natura naturans*), and not representational consciousness (*cogito cogitans*), is *a priori*. Grant suggests that Schelling was able to overturn the Kantian Revolution, not by dismissing outright the primacy of practical reason, but by literally grounding it in a "geology of morals" that transforms ethics into physics.⁷³ The relevance of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* to the metaphysical foundations of contemporary natural science will be taken up again in a subsequent section.⁷⁴

Some contemporary scholars, like Andrew Bowie in his *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (1993), dismiss Schelling's later mythopoeic and theogonic speculations into the divinity of nature and the nature of divinity as "evidently dead,"⁷⁵ while others, like Grant, simply ignore it. In *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (2012), S. J. McGrath pays very close attention to Schelling's alchemical musings, but interprets them largely in a depth psychological, rather than cosmological or philosophical context. While I agree with McGrath that Schelling deserves credit for initiating a mode of inquiry into the unconscious that would later be developed by Freud and Jung, the ontological agnosticism of the depth psychological approach prevents it from appreciating the scope of Schelling's philosophical project. Bruce Matthews, in his *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy* (2011), documents the influence of the theosophists Philipp Matthäus Hahn and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger on Schelling, but his analysis leaves

⁷¹ Consider, for example, Schelling's influence on Hans Christian Ørsted's discovery of electromagnetism in 1820.

⁷² Marie-Luise Heuser-Kessler, *Die Produktivität der Natur: Schellings Naturphilosophie und das neue Paradigma der Selbstorganization in den Naturwissenschaften*.

⁷³ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 6, 199.

⁷⁴ See chapter titled "Metaphysically (un)grounding the natural sciences."

⁷⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 5.

Schelling's writing after 1804 unconsidered. Of the scholars who do engage with the later spiritual dimension of Schelling's thought on its own terms, Joseph Lawrence does so with the most forceful and direct voice by highlighting the socioeconomic and ecological consequences of the secular erasure of God from human and cosmic nature. All that remains to guide humanity's hopes and aspirations once the public sphere has been inoculated against authentic religiosity is the capitalist myth of the market, which according to Lawrence,

[eliminates] from view any acceptable alternative to the world of money and power, to which science itself has been subordinated.⁷⁶

Lawrence admits that if the worldview of scientific materialism is deemed "the last rational, and so discussable option," then Schelling's mythopoeic and cosmotheandric project "can indeed be declared dead."⁷⁷ Contra positivism, just because natural science has epistemic limits doesn't mean the questions it leaves unanswered are not worth asking:

...the inability to answer a question within the framework of demonstrative science does not mean that the question cannot be answered but rather than it must always be answered anew.⁷⁸

Lawrence defends Schelling's prophetic call for a philosophical religion not because it offers some conclusive explanation for the nature and existence of reality, but because it allows us once again to ask ultimate questions, seeking not certainty about or mastery over nature, but redemptive participation in her creative powers of becoming.⁷⁹

Instead of relenting to the deification of the market, which "leaves us with nothing to live for beyond personal desire,"⁸⁰ Lawrence strives to realize Schelling's demand that we transform ourselves "beyond the confines of self-interest [to] the possibility of a future in which what is right takes the place of what is right 'for

⁷⁶ Joseph Lawrence, "Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity," *Schelling Now*, 14.

⁷⁷ Lawrence, "Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity," *Schelling Now*, 15.

⁷⁸ Lawrence, "Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity," *Schelling Now*, 17.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, "Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity," *Schelling Now*, 15-16.

⁸⁰ Lawrence, "Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity," *Schelling Now*, 18.

me.”⁸¹ Without such transformation, the market will continue to reign, with dire consequences for humanity and the planet: “The Earth does not have the carrying capacity for a universalized suburbia.”⁸² Lawrence’s concern for the social and ecological consequences of the commodification of nature is not uncommon among Schelling scholars.

Matthews (2012) begins his study of Schelling by dwelling on the ecological consequences of nature’s non-existence for human thought, arguing that Schelling’s analysis of how subjectivism sets the theoretical stage for the actual destruction of our natural environment

is the most important reason for returning to his work.⁸³ Indeed, many of Schelling’s recent commentators agree that the ecological emergency is directly related to the failure of modernity’s Kantian, positivistic understanding of nature and the “economic-teleological” exploitation of earth that it supports.⁸⁴ Bowie, despite his discomfort with theology, is in agreement with Matthews and Lawrence that Schelling’s thought has become increasingly relevant precisely because it speaks to the contemporary suspicion...that Western rationality has proven to be a narcissistic illusion...the root of nihilism [and] the ecological crisis.⁸⁵

In *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (1996), Slavoj Žižek looks to Schelling’s insights into the nature of human freedom in order to grasp how the possibility of an ecological crisis is

opened up by man’s split nature—by the fact that man is simultaneously a living organism (and, as such, part of nature) and a spiritual entity (and, as such, elevated above nature).⁸⁶

If humanity were completely spiritual, we would be utterly free of material needs and so have no reason to exploit nature, while if we were simply animal, we would symbiotically co-exist within the circle of life like any other predator. But because of

⁸¹ Lawrence, “Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity,” *Schelling Now*, 21.

⁸² Lawrence, “Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity,” *Schelling Now*, 16.

⁸³ Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy*, 3.

⁸⁴ Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy*, 3.

⁸⁵ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 10.

⁸⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 63.

our split nature, and our spiritual propensity for evil, “normal animal egotism” has become “self-illuminated,...raised to the power of Spirit,” leading to an absolute domination of nature “which no longer serves the end of survival but turns into an end-in-itself.”⁸⁷ This is the “economic-teleological” principle: exploitation of earth purely for monetary profit. The detachment of humanity’s spiritual nature from the living reality of its earthly ground has led to the decimation of that ground. Many contemporary eco-philosophers blame anthropocentrism—the perceived superiority of humanity over any other species—for the ecological crisis, but Schelling’s position is subtler:

For Schelling, it is the very fact that man is ‘the being of the Center’ which confers upon him the proper responsibility and humility—it is the ordinary materialist attitude of reducing man to an insignificant species on a small planet in a distant galaxy which effectively involves the subjective attitude of domination over nature and its ruthless exploitation.⁸⁸

The essence of human spirituality, according to Schelling, is *freedom*, the decision between good and evil. Humanity’s *fall* into hubris is caused by the *elevation* of our animal nature over all other living creatures. The fall is not a fall into *animality*, but an *inversion* of the spiritual principle of freedom leading to the elevation of the periphery (our creatureliness) above the Center (our divine likeness). Further discussion of Schelling’s understanding of human freedom will be taken up in a subsequent chapter.⁸⁹

Given that Schelling’s insights into the essence of human freedom are genuine, it would appear that more anthrodecentric nihilism can only exacerbate the ecological crisis. We must take responsibility for our knowledge and power. Healing human-earth relations will require that humanity actualize its spiritual potential as the burgeoning wisdom and compassion of cosmogenesis: “Created out of the source of

⁸⁷ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 63.

⁸⁸ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 88n70.

⁸⁹ See chapter titled “The nature of human freedom.”

things and the same as it,” writes Schelling in *The Ages of the World*, “the human soul is conscientious (*Mitwissenschaft*) of creation.”⁹⁰

Also among those commentators coming to Schelling in the context of ecological emergency is Arran Gare, who argues that Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* provides a way to

overcome the nihilism of European civilization...a nihilism that is reaching its apogee in the deification of the global market, postmodern fragmentation, and the specter of global ecocide.⁹¹

Gare goes on to argue that Schelling should be interpreted, not as an idealist, but as a *Naturphilosoph* responsible for producing “the first coherent system of process metaphysics.”⁹² Gare cites the third draft of Schelling’s *die Weltalter* (1815), where Schelling explicitly condemns idealism not only on philosophical, but on religious and scientific grounds, since it had reduced in turn both God and the natural world to

an image, nay, an image of an image, a nothing of a nothing, a shadow of a shadow...[arriving] at the dissolution of everything in itself into thoughts.⁹³

Grant similarly challenges the mistaken assumption, popular since Hegel’s quip regarding “the night in which all cows are black,” that Schelling’s philosophy culminates in undifferentiated identity, arguing instead that he remained primarily a *Naturphilosoph* attentive to the contingent materiality of the actual world through every phase of his philosophical career.⁹⁴ Frederick Beiser also claims in his *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (2002) that Schelling, even in his writings during the so-called *Identitätssystem* phase, never wavered in his allegiance to *Naturephilosophie*:

⁹⁰ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, xxxvi.

⁹¹ Arran Gare. “From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal and Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 7: 2011, 26, 68; <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/263> (accessed 8/7/2012).

⁹² Gare, “From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics,” 28.

⁹³ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, 106.

⁹⁴ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 3-4.

Schelling says that the philosopher can proceed in either of two directions: from nature to us, or from us to nature; but he makes his own preferences all too clear: the true direction for he who prizes knowledge above everything is the path of nature itself, which is that followed by the *Naturphilosoph*.⁹⁵

In his retrospective lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy* in 1834, Schelling himself expressed his dismay that the phrase “identity system,” used only once in the preface of his 1801 text *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, was interpreted as signaling a break with *Naturphilosophie*:

this designation was...used by those who never penetrated to the interior of the system to infer, or to make the uneducated part of the public believe, that in this system all differences, namely every difference of matter and spirit, of good and evil, even of truth and falsity, were annulled, that according to this system it was, in the everyday sense, all the same.⁹⁶

It is not unlikely that Schelling is here referring at least in part to Hegel’s infamous quip in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) about the “night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black.”⁹⁷ In a letter to Schelling dated May 1, 1807, Hegel claimed to have been aiming his critique at the shallowest of Schelling’s followers, rather than Schelling himself. Earlier, in his history of philosophy lectures at the University of Jena in 1805, Hegel is careful to distinguish Schelling from his poor imitators.⁹⁸ Schelling asked that Hegel clarify his real position in a second edition, but the next printing contained no such addition. It was the last letter ever exchanged between the two former friends.⁹⁹

Schelling’s emergence from the shadow of Hegel is due in no small part to the re-evaluation of this exchange by contemporary scholars. In his *Schelling and the End*

⁹⁵ Beiser, *German Idealism*, 489.

⁹⁶ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Bowie, 120.

⁹⁷ Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Stephen Houlgate, 52.

⁹⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1805-1806), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpschell.htm>, D:3 (accessed 7/27/2012).

⁹⁹ Wirth, “Schelling’s Contemporary Resurgence,” 587.

of *Idealism* (1996), Dale Snow notes that Schelling had already addressed Hegel's criticisms of the *Identitätssystem* in texts published as early as 1802.¹⁰⁰ In his *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy* (1803), Schelling himself criticized those who

see in the being of the absolute nothing but a pure night [and] a mere negation of multiplicity.¹⁰¹

Snow is lead to conclude that, despite never amending the preface, Hegel was probably sincere in his letter to Schelling in 1807.¹⁰² According to Jason Wirth, the two did meet again by chance twenty-two years later at a bath house in Karlsbad. Hegel wrote to his wife after the encounter that the two hit it off instantly “like cordial friends of old” as though nothing had happened.¹⁰³ Schelling became increasingly critical of Hegel's system after his death in 1831—or at least critical of what Hegel asserted his purely “negative” system was capable of deducing. Despite their differences (or perhaps because of them), Schelling probably wouldn't have hesitated to apply his historical statement about the apparently opposed philosophies of Descartes and Bacon to Hegel and himself:

In this history of the human spirit it is easy to see a certain simultaneity among great minds, who from differing sides nevertheless are finally working towards the same goal.¹⁰⁴

Whether Hegel's polemical comment was directed at Schelling or not, its effect was that most histories of philosophy have come to place Hegel's system at the pinnacle of the German Idealist project, with Schelling's work seen as a mere stepping stone if it is mentioned at all. The difference between the philosophical approaches of Schelling and Hegel will be explored in a subsequent chapter.¹⁰⁵

Rounding out the notable commentaries on Schelling's philosophy are Bernard Freydberg's *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay: Provocative Philosophy Then*

¹⁰⁰ Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 187.

¹⁰¹ Wirth, “Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence,” 586.

¹⁰² Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 187.

¹⁰³ Wirth, “Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence,” 587.

¹⁰⁴ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Bowie, 61.

¹⁰⁵ See chapter titled “The difference between Hegel's and Schelling's system of philosophy.”

and Now (2008) and Jason Wirth's *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time* (2011). Freydborg proposes that Schelling's thought is receiving more attention today "due precisely to its *untimeliness*."¹⁰⁶ Schelling had a unique ability to integrate aspects of ancient and modern thought, producing a strange hybrid philosophy that offers a fresh way forward for a generation of thinkers tired of the postmodern ban on metaphysics.¹⁰⁷ Freydborg also draws out the significance of Schelling's dialogical method, a method first announced in a footnote in the *Freedom* essay:

In the future, [I] will...maintain the course...taken in the present treatise where, even if the external shape of a dialogue is lacking, everything arises as a sort of dialogue.¹⁰⁸

Freydborg describes Schelling's literary style in the *Freedom* essay, and in the later drafts of *The Ages of the World*, as *participatory*, more akin to "a map for a journey" than "a series of philosophical claims."¹⁰⁹

Wirth also argues that, with Schelling, "the question of style is not frivolous."¹¹⁰ Schelling's presentation of philosophy as a work of freedom makes it "*as much art as science*."¹¹¹ Schelling's scientific art of dialogue begins always *in media res*, according to Wirth, such that in order to engage in philosophical composition, Schelling must first give up total authority over the course of a work's self-development to the darkness of the Other.¹¹² Wirth offers Schelling's dialogical style as an example of the "deep difference" between his own and Hegel's abstract dialectical approach.¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ Bernard Freydborg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay: Provocative Philosophy Then and Now*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ See especially Graham Harman's *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*: "The term 'guerrilla metaphysics' is meant to signal...my full awareness that the traditional cathedrals of metaphysics lie in ruins. Let the rubble sleep—or kick it a bit longer, if you must. But new towers or monuments are still possible, more solid and perhaps more startling than those that came before" (256).

¹⁰⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Freydborg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay: Provocative Philosophy Then and Now*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 158.

¹¹¹ Schelling, *On Construction in Philosophy*, trans. Andrew David and Alexi Kukuljevic, 269.

¹¹² Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 159.

¹¹³ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 216.

In a chapter bringing Schelling into conversation with Sri Aurobindo, Wirth points to their treatment of the Indian spiritual traditions to further distinguish Schelling from Hegel.¹¹⁴ Unlike Hegel, who declared that India was “sunk in the most frightful and scandalous superstition,”¹¹⁵ Schelling cherished the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and even believed, according to Wirth, that “Greek philosophy should be considered a flower of South Asia.”¹¹⁶ In his introduction to *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings* (2005), Wirth further suggests that Schelling’s “ecological sensitivity” and “receptivity to the call of the earth” represent philosophical possibilities “left largely unexplored by Hegel.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 223.

¹¹⁵ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (1820), Sec. 247, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prcivils.htm#PR248> (accessed 7/28/2012).

¹¹⁶ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 223.

¹¹⁷ Wirth, “Introduction,” *Schelling Now*, 5.

Ch. 3: The difference between Hegel's and Schelling's systems of philosophy

Early in his philosophical career while still a high school teacher in Nuremberg,¹¹⁸ Hegel suggested that, as a schoolmaster of philosophy, he is committed to the belief

that philosophy like geometry is teachable, and must no less than geometry have a regular structure.¹¹⁹

Many commentators on the philosophical dispute between Hegel and Schelling cite this statement to illustrate the nature of their disagreement: while Hegel was bent on the formalization of the system into a deductive science, Schelling all but transformed science into art in order to prevent the blind necessity of the system from subsuming the creative freedom and personality of its author.¹²⁰ If the very next sentences of Hegel's statement are included, however, it becomes apparent that he was not as unaware of the important role of individual creativity as the previous sentence lets on:

Philosophy...no less than geometry must have a regular structure. But again, a knowledge of the facts in geometry and philosophy is one thing, and the mathematical or philosophical talent which procreates and discovers is another: my province is to discover that scientific form, or to aid in the formation of it.¹²¹

The differences between Schelling and Hegel are important and should not be overlooked, but nor should they be overplayed. Despite either man's public criticism of the other's ideas, their positions are often difficult to clearly distinguish without lapsing into caricature.¹²² Their personal lives from beginning to end took shape in the dialogical alembic of an intense and tumultuous friendship.¹²³ They were both close students, perhaps the closest, of each others' published texts. Hegel

¹¹⁸ Hegel was headmaster from 1808-1816.

¹¹⁹ Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel Bd I*, trans. Matthews, 138.

¹²⁰ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 57-58.

¹²¹ Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel Bd. I*, trans. Matthews, 138.

¹²² Christopher Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 174.

¹²³ Wirth, "Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence," 587.

appropriated the historical-dialectical method brilliantly displayed in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) largely from what he learned in Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800).¹²⁴ Indeed, the *Phenomenology*, a literary work of art, can be read as an attempt to make good on Schelling's absolutization of aesthetics (=the study of appearance, i.e., phenomenology) and his prophesy of the coming of a poet who would sing society the new mythology of reason. On the other hand, the *Phenomenology*'s disingenuous dismissal of intellectual intuition, the keystone of Schelling's early philosophy, had a pernicious effect on the public perception of his system, an effect that has lasted to this day.¹²⁵

As Hegel's own philosophical project developed and took form over the next few decades, the identification of the method of philosophy (=the science of logic) with that of geometry became increasingly important to him, backgrounding his earlier Schellingian acknowledgement of the irreducible role of the the creative discoverer in the eternally beginning life of the system. By 1831, Hegel's creative genius, once capable of the revelatory poetry of the *Phenomenology*, had calcified into the formulaic certainty of the *Encyclopedia*.¹²⁶

"Knowledge in geometry," says Schelling,

is of a totally different nature than that in philosophy...Everyone who has reflected on the field of mathematics knows that geometry is a science of a logical character, that between the presupposition itself and its consequences there lies nothing else in the middle save mere thought.¹²⁷

For Schelling, it is *freedom* that distinguishes the philosophical from the geometrical method. His discomfort with Hegel's purely logical approach, however, was not a rejection of systematic coherence. On the contrary, Schelling praised Hegel for his attention to detail and steadfast adherence to the necessary movement of the dialectic as it worked its way to a genuinely completed system.¹²⁸ Schelling eventually

¹²⁴ Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 78, 95.

¹²⁵ Wirth, "Schelling's Contemporary Resurgence," 586.

¹²⁶ *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1831).

¹²⁷ Schelling, *Grundlegung der Positiven Philosophie: Münchener Vorlesung WS 1832/33 and SS 1833*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans, trans. Matthews, 97.

¹²⁸ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 150.

realized that such a purely rational philosophy, concerned as it was with the *essence* of things rather than their *existence*, was precisely only the *negative* part of the whole of philosophy. The other part, *positive* philosophy, does not begin already caught in the conceptual net of self-reflexive reason; it begins, instead, with the ecstatic experience of wonder, an experience that compels thought to acknowledge its dependence on what Schelling referred to as the *unprethinkable* (*das Unvordenkliche*):

that which just exists is precisely that which crushes everything that may derive from thought, before which thought becomes silent, and before which reason itself bows down.¹²⁹

Schelling's opposition to Hegel's system is not the result of its negative method, which if properly restricted to the sphere of logical possibility remains entirely valid. Schelling rejects only Hegel's claim to have comprehended the fact of nature (=the existence of the actual world) solely through the purely logical and plainly demonstrable labor of reflective thought. Hegel's ambitious philosophical project stumbles into error, according to Schelling, as a result of his reliance on two fundamental "fictions" to be considered in turn below: (1) *the animism of the Concept*, and (2) *the transition, or release (Entlassens), of logic into nature*.¹³⁰ To be clear, these fictions are in a different way crucial components of Schelling's own philosophical project. While Schelling is explicit about the aesthetic and speculative status of the "likely stories" (*eikota muthon*) he tells in the course of philosophizing beyond the edges of conceptual reality, Hegel tends to, as it were, *fake* his fictions. In his *Philosophy of Religion* (1827), for example, Hegel mimes the conceptual skeleton of Jakob Böhme's magnificent vision of the Trinity, pretending to have digested the fruits of mystical intoxication, all the while really remaining bound to "the purest prose and a sobriety totally devoid of intuition."¹³¹

¹²⁹ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Matthews, II/3, 161.

¹³⁰ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 59; *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, I/10, 212-213.

¹³¹ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 176; Schelling goes on: "One forgives the individual who staggers when he is actually drunk with intuition, but not one who by nature is actually sober and only wishes to appear as if he too is staggering."

Schelling's fictions represent a sincere attempt to give voice to the silent mythos of nature, thereby raising her unconscious poetry to the power of awakened spirit. To the extent that Hegel claims to have grasped the Absolute once and for all through the purely logical exercise of clear and distinct ideas, his "fictions" lack deep feeling for the ancient darkness of nature and an aesthetic sensitivity to the irony of the mythopoeic discourse required to become acquainted with that darkness.¹³² It is as if Hegel, as the saying goes, enlisted the floodlight of reason to go in search of darkness, while Schelling patiently waited for his eyes to adjust to the night of nature's abyssal past. As Schelling writes in *The Ages of the World*,

Since the beginning, many have desired to penetrate this silent realm of the past prior to the world in order to get, in actual comprehension, behind the great process...[I]f anything whatsoever checks the...entrance into this prehistoric time, it is precisely that rash being that wants rather to dazzle right from the beginning with spiritual concepts and expressions rather than descend to the natural beginnings of that life.¹³³

1st Fiction: The animism of the Concept

In his *Science of Logic* (1812), Hegel attempts to pick up where the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) left off with the revelation of "Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit."¹³⁴ Having progressed through the entire historical series of Spirit's self-negating forms of consciousness, Hegel no longer claimed the title of philosopher, or *lover of wisdom*, since he had now gained possession of wisdom itself.¹³⁵ As a result of his self-initiation into Absolute Spirit, Hegel claimed to have stripped himself bare of the biological, psychological, and linguistic conditions of normal human subjectivity. Only after overcoming these prejudices did he believe it was possible to enter the domain of the pure science of logic, a domain

¹³² See Grant, "Philosophy Become Genetic," *The New Schelling*, 139-142 for a discussion of the role of mythic discourse in Plato's *Timaeus* (a text studied closely by Schelling), wherein likely stories allow him to approach topics unreachable by dialectical logic, like the "difficult and dark idea of matter" and the "fabrication" of the World Soul.

¹³³ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, 63.

¹³⁴ Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 122.

¹³⁵ Hegel, *Hegel Selections*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg, trans. J.B. Baillie, 5.

wherein the certainty of the knower and the truth of what is known immediately coincide in the unity of the Concept:¹³⁶

...the method which I follow in this system of logic—or rather which this system in its own self follows...is the only true method. This is self-evident simply from the fact that it is not something distinct from its object and content; for it is the inwardness of the content, the dialectic which it possesses within itself, which is the mainspring of its advance.¹³⁷

Contrary to Hegel's claim to have articulated (or rather to have been the instrument for the articulation of) "the only true method," for Schelling, there can be no final and universally valid philosophy, since if such a system were to exist, it would effectively nullify the significance of free and irreducibly unique individuals, and thereby also render the possibility of moral action and genuine history meaningless.¹³⁸ Schelling never denies the need for systematicity, but for him, the Absolute is not only a system, but also a life.¹³⁹ The Concept is not self-grounding or independent of its existential conditions: "the concept 'exists' only in the individual personalities of human beings."¹⁴⁰ Schelling was forced in the course of his philosophical development to admit "how infinitely far everything that is personal reaches," so far that the inner dialectic of knowledge is nearly reduced to the silence of its own impossibility.¹⁴¹

Hegel's claim to have no subjective influence upon the dialectical method "which this system in its own self follows" is the main object of Schelling's first criticism. Schelling's commitment to a philosophy of freedom ("for true philosophy can start only from free actions"¹⁴²) lead him to reject the notion of an impersonally

¹³⁶ Lauer, *Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 102.

¹³⁷ Hegel, "Science of Logic," *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 176.

¹³⁸ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 57.

¹³⁹ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, 7/403.

¹⁴⁰ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 49.

¹⁴¹ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, trans. Manfred Schröter, 103.

¹⁴² Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Matthews, I/1, 243.

animated Concept as a mere fiction. “The first presupposition of the philosophy that allegedly presupposes nothing,” says Schelling,

was thus that the pure logical concept has the property or nature, *of itself* (since the subjectivity of the philosopher should be totally excluded), to change into its opposite (to, so to speak, overthrow itself), in order to again change back into itself; a deed that one can think of a real, living being, but of a mere concept one can neither think nor imagine, but can really only assert.¹⁴³

In order to get the gears of his logical system turning without any presuppositions, Hegel must attempt to perform a magic trick, a “logical *creatio ex nihilo*.”¹⁴⁴ Hegel begins his trick with what at first seems to be immediate being. This simple being, in its indeterminateness, turns out in fact to be empty and so is equivalent to nothing. Upon further reflection, what at first seemed to be immediate being-nothing is understood to have all along been “the result of reflection’s negation of its own self-relation.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, the negation of immediate being by non-being, in its truth, is always already mediated, an expression of the self-reflexivity of the Concept. Immediate being’s negation into non-being is itself *doubly* negated, revealing that the self-negating activity of the Concept had been at work behind the scenes all along.¹⁴⁶ The logic is supposedly able to animate itself as a result of the unstable tension generated through the negation of a negation. Hegel’s trick is an attempt to prove that mediation is in the end the truth of immediacy.

Schelling is quite willing to commend Hegel for patiently following the logic of double negation to its objective conclusion,¹⁴⁷ but he remains unconvinced of the status of its origin in so-called “immediate being.” From Schelling’s perspective, there is no way to comprehend such an immediate being but through an act of intuition. Such an intuition would grasp that which genuinely comes before reflection

¹⁴³ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Matthews, I/10, 212.

¹⁴⁴ Matthews, “Introduction,” *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 60.

¹⁴⁵ Matthews, “Introduction,” *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 61.

¹⁴⁶ Matthews, “Introduction,” *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Matthews, II/3, 173.

and serves as its ground. For the first moment of his logic to have any content, Hegel must presuppose outside the Concept what he thinks he has derived from within its process of self-negation.¹⁴⁸

Even if Hegel could pull off this magic trick by getting his logic into its self-animating progression without the presupposition of intuited being, Schelling maintains that the completed system could only pronounce upon the *essence* or *whatness* of things, without for that reason having anything definite to say about the contingent existence of actual things. Hegel's logic, according to Schelling,

was only about the *content* of what is real, but regarding this content, the fact *that* it exists is something purely contingent: the circumstance of whether it exists or not does not change my concept in the least.¹⁴⁹

Just as Kant showed concerning the ontological argument for the existence of God, Hegel's logic of essences leaves actual existence underdetermined. Even if, as Leibniz argued, from God's essence as the highest being existence necessarily follows, this formula can tell us only that *if* God exists, God's existence would be necessary *a priori*. Whether God, or the purely logical content of any concept, actually exists cannot be known but through experience.¹⁵⁰ The underdetermination of Hegel's logic *vis-à-vis* existence leads us into his next fiction.

2nd Fiction: The release (Entlassen) of logic into nature

Hegel describes his Absolute system, which includes the spheres of logic, nature, and spirit, as "a circle of circles" wherein each sphere holographically contains the others as parts of the Whole within itself.¹⁵¹ Accordingly, the links between each of these spheres are said not to be the result of any real process of transition, since taken separately, the true content of any one sphere is nothing more than the result of its antecedent and an indication of its successor.¹⁵² Despite his ideal

¹⁴⁸ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 61.

¹⁴⁹ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 130.

¹⁵⁰ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 199-201.

¹⁵¹ Hegel, "Encyclopedia Logic," Sec. 15, *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 138.

¹⁵² Hegel, "Science of Logic," Ch. 3, *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 249.

desire for the holographic circulation of the spheres of the Absolute system, Hegel must begin his actual exposition within the circumference of a singular sphere. The paradigmatic idealist, Hegel of course decides to begin with the science of logic, which he describes as

the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and a finite mind.¹⁵³

Schelling's *die Weltalter* project was also an attempt to peer into the nature of God before creation. But unlike Hegel, he is concerned to account not only for the structure of God's internal necessity, but for God's willingness to *risk* his eternal essence in the creation of a physical universe endowed with genuine freedom. Strictly speaking, there can be no *reason* for such a risk, since this would immediately draw it back into the sphere of necessary logical determinations.¹⁵⁴ Schelling's claim is that God is not only a logic, but a life—not just a rule-bound system, but a loving personality.¹⁵⁵ The difficulty of philosophically grounding such a claim is borne out by Schelling's repeated failure to compose a definitive and complete version of *The Ages of the World*. On the other hand, the very incompleteness of this project could be read as a justification of its core insight into the inscrutability of God's eternally beginning nature, a nature before which

there would remain only the growing silent that the helplessness and faint audibility of language really seeks to approach.¹⁵⁶

For Hegel, the link between God and creation, or between logic and nature, should be "perfectly transparent"; all that needs to be said about it is that God "*freely releases* [himself] in [his] absolute self-assurance and inner poise."¹⁵⁷ For Schelling, this depiction amounts to a non-answer that shirks the difficulty of narrating the awesomeness and sheer facticity of God's coming-into-existence as nature.¹⁵⁸ The

¹⁵³ Hegel, "Science of Logic," Intro., *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 176.

¹⁵⁴ Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 163.

¹⁵⁵ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, 5-6.

¹⁵⁶ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Wirth, II/1, 312.

¹⁵⁷ Hegel, "Science of Logic," Ch. 3, *The Hegel Reader*, trans. Houlgate, 250; That the personal pronoun here is masculine is purely a convention; the essential point is that it be *personal*, rather than the impersonal "it."

¹⁵⁸ Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, 164.

profundity of the link between divinity and nature cannot be so easily “released.” The *link*—Plato’s “secret band”¹⁵⁹—holding One and All in communion with the Whole is precisely that which can never be released but only ever *re-bound*.¹⁶⁰ Schelling says of secular modern philosophy, including Hegel’s, that its “main weakness” is its lack of appreciation for the supreme importance of *intermediate concepts* between such extremes as spirit v. matter, morality v. mechanics, creator v. cosmos, etc.. Intermediate concepts, such as *life* between mind and matter, or *human* between universe and divinity, are “the only concepts that actually explain anything in all of science.”¹⁶¹

Though Hegel claims that the free release of nature from the Mind of God is only a figurative expression, his science of logic depends upon this release being a conceptual category, since otherwise the real which was released would no longer be the rational. Schelling calls his bluff by asking what “the astounding category of the release (*Entlassen*)” actually explains.¹⁶² The question remains: is there, or is there not a truly extralogical realm of nature that is not always already swallowed back up by spirit into the Mind of God? If something has been *released* from God, *what is it*? Hegel offers too little in response to such questions.

Schelling’s positive philosophy

In the theosophy of Jakob Böhme, fantastic expressions concerning the emergence of creation from God are at least the result of genuine intuitions and “the predilection for nature as opposed to art,” while in the dry systems of the Hegelian type, “there is but unnatural and conceited art.”¹⁶³ Hegel’s dialectical logic makes itself the beginning of everything, the source even of nature.

In *The Ages of the World*, Schelling attempts (whether successful or not) to pass through and beyond (*über etwas hinaus*) the dialectical science of logic into a

¹⁵⁹ Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy*, 23.

¹⁶⁰ From *religare*— “to bind fast.”

¹⁶¹ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, 64.

¹⁶² Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 175.

¹⁶³ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, xxxix.

way of knowing nature no longer forgetful of her status as the primordial beginning of all things.¹⁶⁴ While Hegel claims his science of logic explains the essence of God and the existence of nature, Schelling's argues that the nature of the link between Creator and creation cannot be explained according to a geometrical method of demonstration. To know nature as she comes-into-being, the philosopher must come to know his own self-generation through her. The proper form of expression for such generative philosophy is mythpoeia, or imaginative narration, since it transforms what would otherwise remain ideal reflection upon an abstract copy of the eternal beginning of nature into *autophusis philosophia*, or "nature itself philosophizing."¹⁶⁵

As long as this age restricts itself to the interior and to the Ideal, it lacks the natural means of an external presentation. Now, after having long gone astray, it has again developed the recollection of nature and of nature's former oneness with science. Yet it did not abide by this. Hardly had the first steps in reuniting philosophy with nature occurred when the old age of the physical had to be acknowledged and how it, very far from being the last, is, rather, the first from which everything begins, even the development of divine life. Since then, science no longer begins from the remoteness of abstract thoughts in order to descend from them to the natural. Rather, it is the reverse...Soon the contempt with which only the ignorant still look down on everything physical will cease and once again the following saying will be true: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.¹⁶⁶

Schelling's pursuit of a *physics of divinity* is a result of his attendance to the non-rational dimensions of existence. Though he admitted that a negative philosophy like Hegel's, bound to circle within the necessary and demonstrable proofs of logic, should remain the philosophy of the Academy, he also called for a positive philosophy to complement the negative by making it adequate to actual life. Positive philosophy is an *emphatic knowing* that overcomes doubt, not through the certainty

¹⁶⁴ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, xxxvii.

¹⁶⁵ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 188.

¹⁶⁶ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, xl.

of science, but through the free decision to love the world.¹⁶⁷ Schelling's emphatic way of knowing re-unifies the powers of feeling and thinking torn asunder by the dualism inherent to modern epistemology, revealing in the soul an instinctual moral connection to the physical ground of God.¹⁶⁸

As the Eleusinian mysteries were divided between a minor and a major rite, so too must philosophy be divided into the negative and the positive, where the latter presupposes initiation into the former.¹⁶⁹ It is precisely through the recognition of the limits of negative philosophy—of its inability to account for a living God or for the actual creation of the world—that the need for a positive philosophy is realized. Such a positive account would no longer be simply mythic, since unlike myth, it would not be oriented exclusively to the past, but would open up into an unprethinkable (*Unvordenklichkeit*) future intimated only by the activity of free individuals and the loving communities to which they belong.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 79.

¹⁶⁸ Freydberg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay*, 82-83.

¹⁶⁹ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 198.

¹⁷⁰ Matthews, "Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 66-67.

Ch. 4: Metaphysically (un)grounding the natural sciences

Schelling's almost complete absence in Anglophone natural philosophy for more than 150 years (aside from his powerful effects on Coleridge,¹⁷¹ Peirce,¹⁷² and Emerson,¹⁷³ and through the intermediary of *Naturphilosoph* Alexander von Humboldt, his influence on Darwin¹⁷⁴) cannot be accounted for based solely on the popular reception of Hegel's philosophical caricature of intellectual intuition as "the night in which all cows are black." The more probable reason for his absence, as Bowie suggests, is that Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* "was effectively killed off...as part of the overt praxis of the natural sciences" beginning in the 1840s as these sciences "[began] to fall under the spell of materialism and positivism."¹⁷⁵ Prior to the current resurgence in interest, historians of science tended to dismiss *Naturphilosophie* as a "strange and nearly impenetrable offshoot of the Romantic movement," an offshoot that is "safely ignored."¹⁷⁶ So long as post-Kantian positivism (of the sort that refuses to make organism rather than mechanism constitutive of nature) holds sway over the scientific imagination, Schelling's thought will continue to languish on the fringes of philosophical activity. Fortunately, "the dangers of a scientistic approach to nature" are becoming increasingly well recognized,¹⁷⁷ and alternative histories are being told that challenge the standard Enlightenment account of the dominance of mechanistic physics and biology.¹⁷⁸ The fundamental incoherence of the post-Kantian positivist approach is such that, despite itself resting upon an implicitly postulated speculative dualism between mind and

¹⁷¹ According to Owen Barfield, "...as the law now stands, Schelling could have sued Coleridge in respect of one or two pages in the *Biographia Literaria*." Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 6.

¹⁷² When asked about his influences by William James, Peirce pointed to "all stages of Schelling, but especially his *Naturphilosophie*." See 2n2 above.

¹⁷³ Emerson referred to Schelling as a "hero." See 14n58 above.

¹⁷⁴ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 134, 514.

¹⁷⁵ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Timothy Lenoir, "Generational Factors in the Origin of Romantische Naturphilosophie," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 57; Barry Gower, "Speculation in Physics: The History and Practice of Naturphilosophie," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 320; Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism*, 67.

¹⁷⁷ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 30.

¹⁷⁸ See especially Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

matter, it at the same time denies that there can be any scientific validity to philosophical speculation. “It is only then,” says Arran Gare,

when the original practical engagement as an active force within the world is forgotten, that the illusions of dualism...appear.¹⁷⁹

Many natural scientists unpracticed in the methods of philosophy are quick to dismiss Schelling’s speculative physics for what they perceive to be a lack of respect for the empirical facts. Other scholars, including Gare,¹⁸⁰ Robert Richards,¹⁸¹ Joseph Esposito,¹⁸² Frederick Beiser,¹⁸³ and Iain Hamilton Grant¹⁸⁴ have convincingly showed that, in fact, Schelling painstakingly studied and significantly contributed to the natural sciences of his day. Richards characterizes Schelling’s natural philosophical works not as the wild frenzy of mystical analogizing that its positivist critics saw, but as “[groaning] with the weight of citations of the most recent, up-to-date experimental work in the sciences.”¹⁸⁵

Grant, while he acknowledges Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* as a precursor of the new natural sciences of self-organization and complexity, warns us not to

positivistically reduce [Schelling’s] philosophical interventions into nature to a theoretical resource to be raided as and when the natural sciences deem it necessary.¹⁸⁶

Keeping Grant’s desire to protect *Naturphilosophie* from such a positivistic reduction in mind, it is nonetheless interesting to note that Schelling shared the “aether hypothesis” with most of his scientific contemporaries.¹⁸⁷ The aether remained the foundation of science’s understanding of electromagnetism until Einstein dismissed it

¹⁷⁹ Gare, “From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics,” 58.

¹⁸⁰ Gare, “From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics.”

¹⁸¹ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

¹⁸² Esposito, *Schelling’s Idealism and Philosophy of Nature*.

¹⁸³ Beiser, *German Idealism*.

¹⁸⁴ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*.

¹⁸⁵ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 128.

¹⁸⁶ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 11.

¹⁸⁷ Grant, “Introduction to Schelling’s *On the World Soul*,” *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, VI, 65.

as “an unnecessary burden on space” in 1905.¹⁸⁸ The quantum revolution of the early 20th century, with its hypothesis of a non-local field or immaterial quantum vacuum underlying the extended universe, began to raise doubts about Einstein’s dismissal.¹⁸⁹ After the recent tentative discovery of the related notion of a Higgs field, it would appear that “a new aether” is front and center again in physical science.¹⁹⁰ Where this discovery will lead contemporary physicists remains to be seen, but for Schelling, the elastic properties of the aether were identified with the original duplicity of forces animating the common soul of nature, or World-Soul:¹⁹¹

The two conflicting forces conceived at the same time in conflict and unity, lead to the idea of an *organizing principle*, forming the world into a system. Perhaps the ancients wished to intimate this with the *world-soul*.¹⁹²

In the context of the aether hypothesis, it is important to remember that the main intent of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* was not merely the “application of abstract principles to an already existing empirical science”:

My object, rather, is first to allow natural science itself to arise philosophically, and my philosophy is itself nothing else than natural science. It is true that chemistry teaches us to read the letters, physics the syllables, mathematics Nature; but it ought not to be forgotten that it remains for philosophy to interpret what is read.¹⁹³

In other words, Schelling’s aim was never to produce hypothetical models of how the hidden mechanisms of phenomenal nature may or may not work. His philosophy of nature is an attempt to re-imagine the metaphysical foundations of natural science, such that the theorizing subject, as part of nature, is understood to be an active factor in the organic construction of the objective facts. For Schelling, the aether was less a scientific hypothesis than it was an organizational principle

¹⁸⁸ Leon Lederman, *The God Particle*, 101, 375.

¹⁸⁹ Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint*, 176.

¹⁹⁰ Lederman, *The God Particle*, 375.

¹⁹¹ Miklós Vassányi, *Anima Mundi: The Rise of the World Soul Theory in Modern German Philosophy*, 143, 384.

¹⁹² Schelling, *On the World Soul*, trans. Grant, *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development VI*, 74.

¹⁹³ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, 5.

justifying scientific activity in the first place, since, following the ancient epistemic principle that “like is known by like” (Plato’s “syggeneity”), it granted the human soul participatory knowledge of the invisible substructure of the universe.¹⁹⁴ Or, as Schelling put it, “What in us *knows* is the same as what *is* known.”¹⁹⁵

When Schelling says that “to philosophize about nature means *to create* nature,”¹⁹⁶ it should not be collapsed into the *prima facie* quite similar statement by Kant, that “He who would know the world must first manufacture it—in his own self, indeed.”¹⁹⁷ Kant’s approach to the study of nature is grounded in subjective voluntarism, wherein the philosopher fabricates “nature” as his own object according to the transcendently deduced categories delimiting his experience.¹⁹⁸ Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, on the contrary, re-interprets the epistemic position of the natural scientist: where the post-Kantian scientist can only grasp himself as thinking about nature from beyond nature, Schelling’s scientific method involves awakening to oneself as “*nature itself philosophizing (autophusis philosophia)*”¹⁹⁹ As Grant describes it, “What thinks in me is what is outside me.”²⁰⁰ If the *Naturphilosoph* is able to *think as nature*, she becomes “a new species equipped with new organs of thought.”²⁰¹

Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* is an attempt to know nature unconditionally, i.e., not as the sum total of its created products, but as the creative activity giving rise to them.²⁰² The question is no longer, as it was for Kant, “how do I make finite nature appear?”, but “what is the essence of nature’s infinite activity?” Schelling’s philosophy of unthinned (*Unbedingten*) nature is the necessary counter postulate to Fichte’s absolutely free ego, the next logical turn on the dialectical wheel that makes

¹⁹⁴ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 126–127, 169.

¹⁹⁵ Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Bowie, 130.

¹⁹⁶ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith Peterson, 14.

¹⁹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, trans. Eckhart Förster, 240.

¹⁹⁸ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 2.

¹⁹⁹ Schelling, *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, trans. Grant, 11:258.

²⁰⁰ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 158.

²⁰¹ Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie (1830)*, trans. Grant, 57.

²⁰² Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 14.

known the presence of an unthought background, a dark abyss (*Ungrund*) before which the conscious ego can at first only mumble as it meets its long forgotten maker. Schelling's discovery is that absolute spirit and absolute nature dependently co-arise as the polarized personalities of a natural divinity. The finite human ego is not *a priori*; rather, Absolute nature is prioritized,²⁰³ since

Everything that surrounds us refers back to an incredibly deep past. The Earth itself and its mass of images must be ascribed an indeterminably greater age than the species of plants and animals, and these in turn greater than the race of men.²⁰⁴

"Philosophy," according to Schelling, "is nothing other than a natural history of our mind."²⁰⁵ The philosopher of nature "treats nature as the transcendental philosopher treats the self"²⁰⁶ by coming to see how

the activity whereby the objective world is produced is originally identical with that which is expressed in volition.²⁰⁷

Schelling's is akin to an *enactive*, rather than representational account of scientific cognition. According to Evan Thompson, from an enactive perspective, a natural cognitive agent—an organism, animal, or person—does not...operate on the basis of internal representations in the subjectivist/objectivist sense. Instead of internally representing an external world in some Cartesian sense, [it] enact[s] an environment inseparable from [its] own structure and actions.²⁰⁸

Schelling's enactive account of natural science thereby recursively grounds the production of scientific knowledge in the living bodies, funded laboratories, invented technologies, and specialized communities through which it emerges. What science knows is not a passively reflected copy of objective nature as it appears before an

²⁰³ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 198.

²⁰⁴ Schelling, *Die Weltalter: Fragmente, in den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed. Manfred Schröter, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, 11-12.

²⁰⁵ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Harris and Heath, 30.

²⁰⁶ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 14.

²⁰⁷ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath, 11-12.

²⁰⁸ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, 59.

aloof subject. Rather, the scientist's experiential facts co-emerge with his experimental acts:

Every experiment is a question put to Nature, to which it is compelled to give a reply. But every question contains an implicit *a priori* judgment; every experiment that is an experiment is a prophecy.²⁰⁹

That every experimental design contains implicit *a priori* synthetic judgments (e.g., “every event has a cause,” “nature is an organized system”) is not to say that Schelling believed the natural scientist should try to deduce the structure of nature from *a priori* principles alone. He maintained that we know nothing except through and by means of experience,²¹⁰ and therefore that synthetic *a priori* knowledge, though dialectically constructed, is subject to experimental falsification, theoretical revision, and replacement.²¹¹ Whereas for Kant, there exists an unreconcilable opposition between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, for Schelling, acts of cognition and facts of experience recursively condition one another in the endlessly spiraling pursuit of the unconditioned.²¹²

Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is more relevant to contemporary natural science's vision of a creative cosmos than ever before. The classical mechanistic, entropic paradigm is being replaced by the new sciences of self-organization, which depict the universe as a progressive unfolding of kaleidoscopic activity. Given this new context, Schelling's dynamic evolutionary philosophy of nature can go a long way toward philosophically generating the underlying organizing principles “needed to supplement the laws of physics.”²¹³ Contemporary natural science demands a firmer foundation for its theoretical and empirical discoveries than that given it by 17th century Cartesian metaphysics. Paradoxically, Schelling's contribution to a more adequate metaphysical foundation for science involves destroying the long held

²⁰⁹ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 197.

²¹⁰ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 198.

²¹¹ Gare, “From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics,” 45.

²¹² Matthews, “Introduction,” *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 20-21.

²¹³ Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint*, 2-5, 203.

belief that reality has any necessary foundation at all. Schelling's is a *process* metaphysics that grounds the visible universe in infinite freedom and creativity.²¹⁴

Unlike the mechanistic paradigm, which assumes the necessary existence of inert corporeal matter and so cannot explain how creative activity and the emergence of organized form are possible,²¹⁵ for Schelling, such creative organization is the driving force of nature, inert matter being one of its later products. The source and common medium of nature's creative activity according to Schelling is universal "sensibility," making his *Naturphilosophie* a variety of *panexperientialism*.²¹⁶ The ability to feel is what makes all apparently mechanical motion possible, since without such a universal experiential aether, no force could be felt and so exchanged between or across material bodies.²¹⁷

By making sensibility the ultimate condition of nature's dynamic organization, Schelling reverses the Kantian and Newtonian prioritization of external relations (i.e., linear mechanism, where causes are always external to effects) and instead understands nature as a holistic system of internal relations (i.e., reciprocal organism, where cause and effect are circular).²¹⁸ The former externalist approach is unable to account for the origin of motion and activity in nature, since it deals only with secondary mechanical effects.²¹⁹ Schelling's dynamical approach does not assume the existence of corporeal bodies that exchange mechanical forces, but describes the construction of these bodies as a side-effect of the originally infinite activity of nature's fundamental forces of organization.²²⁰ Viewed from the height of nature's fundamental organization, according to Schelling,

the particular successions of causes and effects (that delude us with the appearance of mechanism) disappear as infinitely small straight lines in

²¹⁴ Gare, "From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics," 28.

²¹⁵ Usually, the emergence of life and consciousness are explained by mechanists as random chance occurrences—the opposite of a theoretical explanation, since they are said to emerge *for no reason*.

²¹⁶ "Panexperientialism" is a term coined by Whiteheadian philosopher David Ray Griffin to refer to any philosophy of nature that affirms that every actual occasion in the universe enjoys some level of experience. See Griffin, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration*, 99.

²¹⁷ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 137.

²¹⁸ Gare, "From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics," 52.

²¹⁹ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 195-196.

²²⁰ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 196.

the universal curvature of the organism in which the world itself persists.²²¹

What needs explaining from the perspective of Schelling's self-organizing aether is not creative activity, but the appearance of inhibition, habit, and permanence.²²² Schelling accounts for inhibitions in the cosmic flow by positing an "original duplicity in nature" as two infinitely active forces striving in opposition to one another.²²³ Nature is, in itself, infinite, and so only it can inhibit itself. Were there no such polarized self-inhibition in nature, space would have immediately expanded into emptiness and all time would have passed in the flash of an instantaneous point.²²⁴ The natural products of gradual cosmic evolution—whether atoms, molecules, stars, galaxies, cells, animals, or humans—are the visible expressions of a determinate proportion of these polarized forces, each one a temporary configuration of nature's infinite process of formation.²²⁵ That is, each product is really a recapitulation of one and the same archetypal organism, only inhibited at a different stage of development and made to appear as a finite approximation of the infinite original.²²⁶ Nature's rich variety of organic products only *appear* to be finite entities, when in reality, they contain within themselves, as though in a mirror image, the infinite whole of living nature's creative activity:

...a stream flows in a straight line forward as long as it encounters no resistance. Where there is resistance—a whirlpool forms. Every original product of nature is such a whirlpool, every organism. The whirlpool is not something immobilized, it is rather something constantly transforming—but reproduced anew at each moment. Thus no product in nature is fixed, but it is reproduced at each instant through the force of nature entire.²²⁷

²²¹ Schelling, *On the World Soul*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development VI*, 70.

²²² Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 17.

²²³ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 11.

²²⁴ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 17, 187.

²²⁵ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 35, 159.

²²⁶ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 48-50.

²²⁷ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 18.

Schelling's attempt to ground the emergence of the physical universe in an unstable abyss (*Abgrund*) of dynamic forces and to re-conceive nature in terms of becoming rather than being makes it a philosophical precursor to Ilya Prigogine's work on the physics of non-equilibrium processes.²²⁸ Prigogine's Nobel Prize winning discoveries lead him to announce the birth of a new science,

a science that views us and our creativity as part of a fundamental trend present at all levels of nature.²²⁹

Like Prigogine, who called for "the end of certainty" and of the Cartesian/Newtonian mechanistic paradigm, Schelling sought to give an account of the physical universe that does not irrevocably separate the human observer from the nature observed. Scientific objectivity, as a merely reflective method, can prove useful; but there is no coherent metaphysical justification for treating the subject-object split as a fundamental reality. "I absolutely do not acknowledge two different worlds," says Schelling,

but rather insist on only one and the same, in which everything, even what common consciousness opposes as nature and mind, is comprehended.²³⁰

The natural scientific consequence of insisting on a polarized unity between subject and object is that nature can no longer be conceived of as a heap of objects or a giant machine, but becomes rather a *universal organism* in whose life all finite creatures participate.²³¹ Cartesian science, which searched for objective matters of fact independent of the values of life and society, comes to be replaced by cosmopolitical science, which foregrounds what the Whiteheadian philosopher Bruno Latour has called "matters of concern."²³² Such a replacement re-knits the frayed edges of cosmos and anthropos back together, allowing for the composition of a new planetary

²²⁸ See Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint*, 175; Late in his life, Prigogine collaborated with the Whiteheadian philosopher Isabel Stengers regarding the philosophical implications of his work.

²²⁹ Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*, 7.

²³⁰ Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, trans. Grant, 4/102.

²³¹ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 138.

²³² Adrian Wilding, "Naturphilosophie Redivivus: on Bruno Latour's 'Political Ecology,'" *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 6: 2010, 19.; <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/148/278> (retrieved 8/7/2012). Wilding argues that many of Latour's contributions were prefigured in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*.

constitution more inclusive of the diverse community of species that call earth home. In the next chapter, the anthropological and political consequences of re-situating the human being within such a universe are unpacked.

Ch. 5: The Nature of Human Freedom

The *Naturphilosoph* comes to understand “*Nature as subject*.”²³³ This is not the Kantian position that nature necessarily conforms to the transcendental structure of the human mind, but rather the inverse proposition that human consciousness is itself a recapitulation of the uncanny subjectivity of nature. Where Kant says we can't know nature in itself, and Fichte says nature is my own projection, Schelling turns us back upon the strangeness of our own humanity to ask "do we really know who and what we are, or where we came from?"

Most people turn away from what is concealed within themselves just as they turn away from the depths of the great life and shy away from the glance into the abysses of that past which are still in one just as much as the present.²³⁴

In his celebrated 1809 treatise, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Schelling begins by exploring traditional theological, cosmological, and anthropological answers to the question of human nature. He re-emerges, not with more answers, but with surprising new questions. Schelling discovers that the freedom of human reason, rather than being above or outside nature, bottoms out into the sublime tension inherent to cosmogenesis. Freedom is found to be grounded in the eternal struggle between gravity and light, the polarity originally constitutive of nature herself.

The human freedom to decide to be good or evil, despite being grounded in nature's primordial scission of forces, nonetheless irrevocably sets us apart from the animal kingdom. Human beings are conscious of their enactment of original sin, making it impossible to explain sin merely as a regression to brute instincts, since this would imply a lack of consciousness and freedom. For Schelling, evil is unmistakably *spiritual* in origin, meaning it is a possibility only for absolutely free

²³³ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, 202.

²³⁴ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Wirth, 207-208.

beings. Schelling draws approvingly upon the work of his theosophical calibrator Fr. Baader:

it would be desirable that the corruption in man were only to go so far as his becoming animal; unfortunately, however, man can stand only below or above animals.²³⁵

The spiritual freedom of the human being should not be confused with a "capacity" for freedom, e.g., the ability of a consumer to choose Corn Flakes or Cheerios for breakfast, as this characterization entirely conceals the literally *decisive* importance of the originating act of freedom. Freedom is not a capacity or ability, as this would imply the pre-existence of some more foundational subject who could employ freedom as a means to its own ends. Freedom is *the very ground* of subjectivity, the *abyss* from which subjectivity first emerges. As a human spirit, I am essentially nothing more and nothing less than the freedom to decide for good or evil. This *de-cision* is the essence of my freedom—which in fact is not *mine* at all. It is more correct to say that *I belong to freedom*.²³⁶ There is no *me* behind or before the spiritual crisis of this originally free deed. My personality just is the decision between good and evil, a decision made eternally time and time again. Original sin—the natural human propensity to do evil—is a necessary side-effect of our independent free will. The divine freedom of which we partake forces us to live in conflict, caught between the desire to secure the particularity of our own organism and the general will of God toward universal love. For this reason, according to Schelling,

the will reacts necessarily against freedom as that which is above the creaturely and awakes in freedom the appetite for what is creaturely just as he who is seized by dizziness on a high and steep summit seems to be beckoned to plunge downward by a hidden voice.²³⁷

²³⁵ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 40.

²³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809)*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, 9.

²³⁷ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 47.

Such dizzying spiritual freedom, though unique, is not best understood as a special human difference, some distinct capacity present only in our species. As Jason Wirth puts it:

the kind or species that marks the human marks the place where the discrete nature of natural kinds itself returns to its originary crisis. The human kind is the kind that can complicate the discourse of natural kinds.²³⁸

Our uniqueness as humans is that we recapitulate the very essence of nature itself. Further, because nature remains our ground, the reflection of our consciousness upon this ground generates *self-consciousness*: *humanity is nature become conscious of itself as subject*. While other organisms remain submerged in the unity of natural becoming, the human, like the divine, is eternally beginning, always deciding anew to re-create itself in an attempt to overcome the irreducible otherness within itself (i.e., evil). Unlike the divine, however, for the human there is no necessary assurance that love will overcome evil, that the otherness will be dynamically re-engaged in the eternal circulation of sacred marriage. Hence the fall into history, the rise of the state, and the suffering and confusion of earthly human life wherein evil is constantly externalized and projected.

Schelling saw no hope in nationalistic politics or state bureaucracies. He believed the state was ultimately an affront to free human beings and would eventually wither away as the human spirit awakened to its true potential. Schelling characterized secular modernity by its tendency to “[push] its philanthropism all the way to the denial of evil,”²³⁹ thereby reducing the complex theological significance of sin to the more easily manageable problems of techno-science.²⁴⁰ The present military-industrial techno-capitalist empire can thus be said to be predicated upon the pretense that the total rationalization of human life can eliminate evil.²⁴¹ After all,

²³⁸ Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, 197.

²³⁹ Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, trans. Lawrence, 7:371.

²⁴⁰ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 169.

²⁴¹ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 167.

evil doers can quickly be destroyed by laser guided missiles launched from remote-controlled drones, depression and anxiety can be cured with mood-enhancing psychiatric chemicals, and climate change can be reversed through a bit of simple geo-engineering.

Joseph Lawrence follows Schelling in calling for a renewed inquiry into the nature of good and evil, an inquiry now even more *untimely* than it was in Schelling's day—*untimely* because such theologically-laden concerns run counter to the self-understanding of the secular Enlightenment, whose founding myth involves the throwing off of traditional religion in favor of the supposedly self-grounding power of instrumental rationality. Lawrence asks how we are to understand modernity's hubristic elevation of rationality to a secular religion at the same time that it prohibits genuine metaphysical or theological investigation:

If reality were recognized as truly rational, we would encourage the attempt to understand its inner meaning...we would also place our trust in it, instead of relying as heavily as we do on politics and technology to hold the world at bay. Metaphysical irrationalism is thus the deep premise of modern rationality. It alone provides the explanation for why practical and instrumental reason have achieved such dominance over theoretical reason.²⁴²

It is modernity's repressed fear of chaos and meaninglessness, in other words, that leads it to turn away from "the big questions" in favor of the instrumental solutions and superficial palliatives of modern life. Inquiring into the essence of human freedom is especially terrifying for the narcissistic ego used to the pampering of consumer capitalism. The willing soul must learn, according to Schelling,

to stand alone before the infinite: a gigantic step, which Plato likened to death. What Dante saw inscribed on the door to hell must (in a different sense) adorn the entrance to philosophy: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Whoever wants truly to philosophize must be stripped of all

²⁴² Lawrence, "Schelling's Metaphysics of Evil," *The New Schelling*, 170.

hope, all desire, all longing. He must want nothing, know nothing, feel his naked impoverishment, and be capable of surrendering everything for the sake of winning its return...one will have to be taken quite simply into the beginning, to be born anew.²⁴³

Even the divine has to pass through the purifying fire of the abyss and overcome the fear of existence in order to realize its creative freedom.²⁴⁴ Unlike human beings, who have the ethical community to console them, for God, the primal being, there is no one else to come to its aid: “in its stultifying solitude...[God] must fight its way through chaos for itself, utterly alone.”²⁴⁵ Human beings can take refuge in the social mores of the day, which, in the consumer capitalist context, offer an untold number of options for temporary escapist diversion from the soul’s inevitable encounter with the purifying fires of eternity. When radical evil does break through the thin veneer of bourgeois social order, it is always neatly localized in a deranged criminal who can be impersonally (and so guiltlessly) executed by the state.²⁴⁶

Unlike Hegel, who deified the state as an end in itself, Schelling understood it as a means made necessary by the fall, nature’s way of maintaining some semblance of social order given the sinfulness of individuals.²⁴⁷ Schelling realized the paradoxical results of any attempt to justify the existence of the state, since if a just state were able to establish the conditions necessary for the genuine moral freedom of its citizens, this would imply that it no longer reserved the right to exercise coercive force to uphold its laws, and to that extent, that it no longer served a social function and so could be dissolved.²⁴⁸ Though an aging Schelling was dismissed as a reactionary apologist for the conservative Christianity of the Prussian state by Engels,²⁴⁹ Lawrence argues for a revolutionary Schelling who consistently sought

²⁴³ Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, trans. Lawrence, 9:217-218.

²⁴⁴ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, ed. Schröter, trans. Lawrence, 40; “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 181.

²⁴⁵ Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, ed. Schröter, trans. Lawrence, 43; “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 181

²⁴⁶ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 172.

²⁴⁷ Lawrence, “Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity,” *Schelling Now*, 25.

²⁴⁸ Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, 7:461-462; Devin Lane Shaw, *Freedom and Nature in Schelling’s Philosophy of Art*, 140-141.

²⁴⁹ Alberto Toscano, “Philosophy and the Experience of Construction,” *The New Schelling*, 106-107.

liberation for humanity through ethical renewal and authentic religiosity, rather than state politics.²⁵⁰ The true but greatly misunderstood task of the modern age, according to Schelling, “is to shrink the state itself...in every form.”²⁵¹ Even if the state cannot be abolished outright, a redeemed humanity would at least

ensure that the state...progressively [divested] itself of the blind force that governs it, [transfiguring] this force into intelligence.²⁵²

Far from an apologist for state power, while still in Munich Schelling had openly defied the Bavarian government by lecturing on theological issues, and when he was called to Berlin by the Prussian king in 1841, he agreed only on the condition that he be granted complete academic freedom.²⁵³

From Schelling’s perspective, true human salvation does not lie in the false gods of the market and the state, which in their attempt to repress and deny the chaotic abyss at the root of nature only further empower it. Evil becomes real precisely when a human being or society denies the evil in itself to wage war against it in others. It is precisely in order to avoid feeding this “dialectic of revenge”²⁵⁴ that Jesus tells his disciples, “resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”²⁵⁵ Love can only exist along side the possibility of evil, since both are grounded in freedom. To eliminate the possibility of evil would be to eliminate freedom and therefore love.

By metaphysically rooting evil in the darkness of divine nature, Schelling transforms the traditional moral obsession with theodicy into the aesthetics of theogonic tragedy.²⁵⁶ Instead of interpreting suffering as the punishment of a vengeful God, as in traditional theodicies, Schelling repeatedly emphasizes the extent to which

²⁵⁰ Lawrence, “Philosophical Religion and the Quest for Authenticity,” *Schelling Now*, 26.

²⁵¹ Schelling, *Grundlegung der Positiven Philosophie: Münchener Vorlesung WS 1832/33 and SS 1833*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans, trans. Matthews, 235.

²⁵² Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, trans. Shaw, 7:464-465.

²⁵³ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Matthews, 10.

²⁵⁴ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 172.

²⁵⁵ Matthew 5:39.

²⁵⁶ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 174.

suffering is inherent to the creative process itself, even for God. It was God who, in an eternally past act of absolute love, provided “the prototype of all suffering innocents.”²⁵⁷ Schelling calls us to live up to the nature of our complicated human kind by reconciling our sense of fallenness with our divine likeness, thereby finding the endurance necessary to pass through the spirit-forging fire of God’s eternal beginning to be born again, now not only of water but also of spirit.²⁵⁸

Devin Zane Shaw critiques what he calls Schelling’s “mythologization of politics” from a Marxist perspective, arguing that he mystifies the material conditions of social relations by emphasizing spiritual cultivation (*Bildung*) over democratic political engagement.²⁵⁹ Shaw seems to misunderstand Schelling’s call for the mythopoeic revitalization of the public sphere by conflating it with totalitarianism:

the *a priori* conception of universality as *organic totality* ignores or disregards the fact that the political space itself is the domain of the struggle over what the definition of universality (and political inclusion) is.²⁶⁰

While it is not misleading to refer to Schelling’s conception of the ideal relationship between individuals and their community as “organic,” this relationship need not be “totalizing” in the sense that Shaw suggests. From his time as a young professor in Jena through to his role as Secretary General of the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (a position he held from 1808 to 1821), Schelling sought the transformation of society by way of philosophical education.²⁶¹ The highest form of social organization could not be imposed externally by state magistrates pretending to some *a priori* knowledge of true universality; rather, Schelling saw this form emerging freely from the citizenry itself as a result of their artistic, scientific, and religious cultivation.

²⁵⁷ Lawrence, “Schelling’s Metaphysics of Evil,” *The New Schelling*, 181.

²⁵⁸ John 3:5.

²⁵⁹ Shaw, *Freedom and Nature in Schelling’s Philosophy of Art*, 116.

²⁶⁰ Shaw, *Freedom and Nature in Schelling’s Philosophy of Art*, 117.

²⁶¹ Schelling, *On University Studies*, 22.

This rigor of enculturation, like the rigor of the life in nature, is the kernel out of which the first true grace and divinity pour forth like blood.²⁶²

Contrary to Shaw's claim that Schelling disregards the importance of the democratic struggle for political inclusion, Schelling recognized that genuine democracy is only possible given a citizenry aware of the cosmological, anthropological, and theological grounds of authentic freedom. Without a philosophical culture capable of sustaining inquiry into the cosmic and spiritual depths of human nature, the equality rightly demanded by members of democratic societies can only devolve into the leveling homogenization of consumer capitalism, where freedom is reduced to the ability to identify with the corporate brand of one's choice. The trivialization and inversion of freedom inherent to techno-capitalism makes human beings forgetful of their divine-cosmic ground, functioning not only to alienate individuals from their communities, but humanity from earth.²⁶³

²⁶² Schelling, *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, trans. Wirth, I/7, 393.

²⁶³ Such freedom is "inverted" because it elevates the periphery (our animal egotism) over the Center (our spiritual potential for love); Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 34-36.

Postface: The Personal Relevance of Schelling's Philosophy of Evil

The following postface was composed about a year after the completion of the above essay as a result of my continued rumination upon Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Schelling's obscurity regarding the essence of human freedom does not seem to be an accident of his presentation. It has become apparent to me that obscurity is in fact constitutive of his topic. Indeed, you might say Schelling's task in this text is the impossible one of bringing darkness itself to light.

All birth is birth from darkness into light; the seed kernel must be sunk into the earth and die in darkness so that the more beautiful shape of light may lift it and unfold itself in the radiance of the sun.²⁶⁴

I will continue to read Schelling's text again and again in search of its deeper, occult meanings, but it has already had a major impact on my conscious worldview. One of the reasons I feel so compelled to reach to the very bottom of Schelling's inquiry into good and evil is that his text as much as any other has allowed me to come to philosophical terms with one of the most transformative experiences of my

²⁶⁴ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 29.

life. It happened when I visited Jerusalem in the spring of 2005 as part of a “birthright” trip organized by the Hillel Foundation at my university. The trip was an all expenses paid 16-day adventure across the entire nation of Israel. Upon its conclusion, they offered each of the college aged American Jews in my group Israeli citizenship right then and there. They even offered to pay for our wedding if we happened to meet our sweetheart on the trip. That is, if only we were also willing to be conscripted by the Israeli Defense Force. I was 19 years old at the time, immersed in (and inflated by) the California Buddhism of Alan Watts, the depth psychology of Carl Jung, and the anarchist politics of Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. I lived in suburban Orlando at the time, a city almost entirely engulfed by the most frightening aspects of post-WWII America: theme parks like Disney World and Universal Studios on one side of town, defense contractors like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman on the other. In between there were endless subdivisions of prefab houses all linked together by shopping plaza parking lots. Which is just to say that Israel felt like a dangerously mystical desert island that I might escape to, thereby saving myself from the nihilistic void at the core of suburban life. My desire for a spiritual home (a god, a people, and a land to call my own, *and to belong to*) made living in Israel all too appealing to my meaning-seeking survival instincts. I thought of finding a kibbutz, though it seems they aren’t what they used to be. In part it was the geopolitical situation, and the Israeli state’s role in it, that kept me from accepting citizenship there. Mostly though it was my spiritually formative experience at Yod Vashem, the Jewish Holocaust memorial on the outskirts of Jerusalem, that made taking sides in any nationalist war impossible for me.

The trigger for the experience was the children’s memorial. I descended by stairway into a dark space, within which I first encountered a dozen or so photographs of children who had been killed in camps, followed by a wall of candles fitted with mirrors that reflected each flame’s image a hundred times as it receded into the infinite darkness. The name and place of birth of murdered child after murdered child was read over a speaker.

As I climbed the stairs at the other end of the long, dark hall, my mind was racing, desperately questioning *How? How is such evil possible? How could human*

beings do this to one another?! My initial question was not why? mind you, it was how? I wanted to know the metaphysical conditions of evil; that is, I wanted to know the nature of the structural flaw in creation that clearly must exist in order for something so heinous to be permitted to take place. It wasn't long before I realized there was no answer to my question. I saw that my sailing off into the abstractions of theory was only a thinly veiled attempt to avoid and repress the swelling emotional turmoil that had been stirred up within me as a result of being confronted with the systematic murder of 1.5 million children. My question changed to why?—a question of immanent meaning rather than metaphysical possibility. I quickly found myself shamanically merging with the soul of a Nazi guard at Auschwitz, experiencing his wavering degrees of self-justification and self-doubt, realizing that he was just as human as I, just as capable of love and friendship, of deceit and jealousy, just as flawed and complex... But this can't be!, I thought. Nazis must be evil, how else could they murder so many children, how else could they send so many tiny faces to their deaths?

As I left the memorial and returned again to the sunlight, I found that I could not help but sob, not only because of my feelings of overwhelming remorse for so many murdered children, but because I couldn't find a suitable scapegoat to hold accountable for such evil. I inhabited as many Nazi souls as I could manage, searching for someone who might take responsibility for the Holocaust. I found no one. Only other fragile human souls like me, most of whom were already dead. Tears welled up in my eyes. *Why? why did humanity do this?... or, was it God's fault?*

Just then, the gaze of another person caught my own, immediately tearing me out of my inward struggle with theodicy. I took in the life of the human faces all around me. That each could be so externally unique and yet also hide something so universal just beneath the surface—that each could be so individual and yet also so God-like²⁶⁵—overwhelmed me even more than the photographs of the murdered children had.

I became somewhat embarrassed when I remembered I was still crying, so I turned away from my fellow humans and looked down at the grass below my feet. I

²⁶⁵ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 47.

couldn't help but notice the individuality of every blade, each one's infinite difference from that next to it. I realized how much beauty was being destroyed every time I took a step. I was overwhelmed again. The unending originality of reality swallowed me in that moment. I like to think that it was then and there that I first became responsible for myself, for my freedom, for my goodness and for my wretchedness. I saw immediately (perhaps through a kind of intellectual intuition) that evil is in all of us, that it is a necessary by-product of our creative freedom as individuals. Without the possibility of evil, there would be no opportunity for love, for the *free decision* to love. Schelling writes that "whoever has neither the material nor the force in himself to do evil is also not fit for good."²⁶⁶ The creative struggle between individuals and communities, between me and we, is the engine of evolution. It's as true for humans as it is for any other living being. But for the human, the creature who "stands on the threshold" between good and evil, the stakes of the struggle are infinitely higher. "It would be desirable " writes Schelling, summarizing Franz Baader,

that the corruption in man were only to go as far as his becoming animal; unfortunately, however, man can stand only below or above animals.²⁶⁷

Life itself, as Schelling understands it, depends upon struggle and opposition. "Where there is no struggle, there is no life."²⁶⁸ Without continual crisis to disrupt the very ground of our existence, all creative activity would cease, all the whirling worlds would slow and sink into the silent ocean of indifference (a dark night, yes, but without cows of any definite shade).

The whole of nature tells us that it in no way exists by virtue of a merely geometrical necessity; in it there is not simply pure reason but personality and spirit...God himself is not a system, but rather a life.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 64.

²⁶⁷ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 40.

²⁶⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 63.

²⁶⁹ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 59-62.

Kant was right after all about the singular blade of grass.²⁷⁰ Its life exceeds finite understanding. How much more so the life of God. For Schelling, the divine life reveals itself in the evolution of the universe, both through its cosmic phase (the primordial struggle between gravity and light) and its anthropic phase (the spiritual battle between good and evil): “The birth of spirit is the realm of history as the birth of light is the realm of nature.”²⁷¹ Our humanity depends for its existence on the abyssal depths of nature, the same groundlessness that first called God itself to consciousness. But unlike God, the human being “never gains control over his condition, since it is only lent to him.”²⁷²

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²⁷⁰ See section 75 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

²⁷¹ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love and Schmidt, 44.

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