

schelling's *naturphilosophie* and the removal of man from apocalyptic reason

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Abstract

In the background of this essay lays the nascent posthuman vision of F.W.J. Schelling (1775-1854) that he nonetheless reluctantly pursued, a great deal due to the centripetal movement of German Idealism whose central preoccupation kept nature at bay in favor of the practical and moral ends of human knowledge. The essay grounds Schelling's philosophy in his debate with the most representative thinkers of German Idealism, namely, Kant, Fichte and Hegel. It will then conclude with the positive core of Schelling's philosophy as it relates to the phenomenon of the anthropocene, a phenomenon that Schelling had very much anticipated.

Keywords

abyss, anthropocene, *naturphilosophie*, positive philosophy, productive intuition



The Fundamentals of *Naturphilosophie*

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel secretly criticized Schelling¹ whose overall philosophy of nature, containing an inclusive theory of the unconscious or nature as the unconscious,² is compared to the empty night of thought, the night when 'all cows turn black.'³ Schelling's philosophy was in many ways disjunctive with the enlightenment direction of transcendentalism that Kant initiated. Later, J.G. Fichte would transform Kant's project into a doctrine of knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*) founded on the absolute self-positing of the 'I',⁴ which would offer Hegel the impetus for a dialectical form of surveying the history of consciousness and how it leads to the Absolute Spirit.

Schelling, for his part, was isolating himself from the spirit of the age in terms of the rational cogency of the absolute.⁵ Instead, he preferred night over day, unconscious over conscious, obscurity over enlightenment. Several passages in Schelling can put this preference in context: a) "anything whose conditions simply cannot be given in nature

¹ Hegel never directly mentioned Schelling in the Preface. But scholars agree that it is a swipe against Hegel's former collaborator. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 9.

² One can say here with Schelling that the unconscious engenders time in the natural sense. Thus, contrary to Kant time is not *a priori*. In his study of Freud and Schelling, Matt Ffytche outlines the importance of the unconscious in understanding the 'categorical dimensions of time': "[For] Schelling it is not time that induces forgetting; rather, it is the structural inception of forgetting and repression itself which constitutes the categorical dimensions of time. The night of unconsciousness, the unfathomable depths, provoke the emergence of the past as a category distinct from the present, and these obscure depths in turn depend on the foundational self-withdrawing of the absolute" (Matt Ffytche, *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 140.).

³ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 9.

⁴ See J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁵ In contrast, Schelling's notion of the absolute is romantic to begin with. This is an agreeable treatment of Schelling, a propos the romantic's constitutive exploration of nature that, raised to its more formal declaration, would find strong resonance in today's contemporary reception of Schelling as a full-fledged naturephilosopher, such as in Iain Hamilton Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006). For an introductory discussion of Schelling's romantic roots see Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

must be absolutely impossible;⁶ b) 'Nature is 'the abyss of the past;'⁷ and, c) 'philosophy is nothing other than the natural history of the mind.'⁸ Across all these formulations, thought can simply construct a theory of how the past recapitulates in the present but is also always interrupted by Nature's original duplicity.⁹ In short, there is simply no way we can produce a philosophy of consciousness, much less a consciousness, if it is not always already *produced* by something that exceeds its determination. In all this, as nature undergoes self-construction, owing to its constant dynamism, we can simply gain an awareness, so to speak, of the apocalypse of reason, or the revelation of the future of consciousness. As Iain Hamilton Grant in his *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* argues, Schelling already had the intuition of a post-human future:

[Rather] than *resulting* in the formation of 'humanity' as nature's highest product, '*naturephilosophy* conceives matter as . . . unrestricted being', as 'the *material* of the universal' which, in its dynamic activity, will eventually bring about 'a new race equipped with new organs of thought.'¹⁰

From here, let us focus on three important notions of Schelling's *naturphilosophie*, namely, the abyss, aesthetics, and ecology.

Abyssal Condition of Thinking

The notion of the *abyss* represents Schelling's attempt to push the rational boundaries of thought into where it once sought to navigate but failed to accomplish. In the background of this attempt lays the enduring legacy of Kant.

We can speak of this legacy in terms of how Kant's ideas were then predominantly expressed in familiar Fichtean form. As Schelling argues, Fichte gave the principle of reason, developed by Kant, "a limited form," but this "limited form, nonetheless, was found the true starting point . . . for that *a priori* science that through Kant had become an

⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 186.

⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World (Fragment): From the handwritten remains, third version, (c. 1815)*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 31.

⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30.

⁹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 30.

¹⁰ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 13.

unavoidable demand."¹¹ Schelling adds that it was "[precisely] through Fichte's demand for an *absolute prius* that the way to continue beyond Kant was shown."¹²

In the wake of Kant's *Critiques* the engagement of thought with the absolute precedence (*absolute prius*) produced the self-positing I of Fichte's doctrine. The self-positing I is no longer reason as conceived by Kant through the *a priori*, even less the categories of understanding. Fichte's realization is that it is intuitional rather than discursive: the self-positing I is a pure act in contrast to understanding through the categories.¹³ As a response to Kant's question of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, its possibility through a special faculty that relates to the supersensible,¹⁴ Fichte proposed the primacy of the *act over reflection*.¹⁵ This act is the act of intellectual intuition that precedes reflection. Reflection requires experience in the sense of producing knowledge based on subject-object distinction. But in the pure act of intuition, which requires no object, reason appears entirely on its own, thereby 'stands in its simplicity' and immediacy, that which 'just is' in the language of Spinoza (I will return to Spinoza in a short while).¹⁶

In other words, the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgment is a possibility already affirmed by intellectual intuition, but rather as an act and not as reflection. In this context the noumenon loses its supersensible status in light of the self-positing 'I', but also takes the place of the Kantian noumenon as the "foundation for any particular forms of thought at all."¹⁷ Already in this sense there is no reality outside the pure act of the "*I am absolutely, because I am.*"¹⁸

In the context of Schelling's naturephilosophy, the Fichtean doctrine denies the existence of the thing itself as much as Kant does, except in Fichte the noumenon, which is

¹¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2007), 127.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Schelling agrees here with Fichte and follows the latter's emphasis on acts instead of concepts. See Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 36.

¹⁴ Schelling, *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 127.

¹⁵ In the *Science of Knowledge*, Fichte argues: "[The] primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge . . . is intended to express that Act which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness" (93).

¹⁶ Ibid., 202.

¹⁷ Translation from the German is from Dalia Nassar who cited the passages from Fichte. See Nassar, "The Early Schelling: Between Fichte and Spinoza," in *The Romantic Absolute*, 164. The German text is here cited as J.G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 1/2, ed. Reinhard Lauth, et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-2012), 57.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the not-I, exists only in terms of providing a propositional other to the self-identity of the I,¹⁹ which according to Schelling would constitute the elemental structure of what Hegel would call the "agony of the concept"²⁰ – this other is nature, or the other of the I that becomes a means to a techno(logical) end.²¹ The self-positing of the I would therefore culminate in the absolute idealism of Hegel with a common goal – to deny the other of identity, or real difference in identity beyond the calisthenics of self-agonizing thought, before ascending to the Idea, many times over deprived of existence, of its existential autonomy (SW I/1, 376).²² In Schelling, this real other of identity would be called the point of indifference of the absolute; in short, existence, in a more understandable sense.²³

Although Schelling would later launch a major criticism of Spinoza, the early influence of Spinoza produced for Schelling two crucial insights in his criticisms of Kant, Fichte and Hegel. These are: 1) Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, known as intellectual intuition,²⁴ and 2) a *pre-critical* standpoint regarding the notion of existence (pre-critical in the sense that Spinozism is considered dogmatic by *critical* reason). Overall, these Spinozian insights were ignored by Kant, especially *intellectual intuition*. Post-Kantianism in a sense sought to rehabilitate these insights, beginning with Fichte's negation of rational synthesis, which offered Hegel the momentum to surmount the limitations of Kant's transcendentalism that ignored the non-cognitive potency of intuitive intellect. At least for Hegel, intuition belonged to the empty night of philosophy that needed to be elevated into a higher form, through the *Aufhebung* of enlightened cognition. Rightly so, in the eyes of Schelling, as he would argue later, both Fichte and Hegel attempted an inverted

¹⁹ As a propositional other to the I, the not-I is posited either as "antecedent to any I" (in the case of pre-critical metaphysics or dogmatism) or "exclusive" of the I that is the *prius* of all that is (as the principle of criticism, started by Kant, can show). See F.W.J. Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794- 1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti (London: Associated University Press, 1980), 77.

²⁰ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 143.

²¹ See Matthews, "Introduction," in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 65.

²² Schelling describes elsewhere that this failure to transcend discursive or logical thinking can cause blindness to the immediacy of existence, which is an "immediacy that exists within spirit itself." See Matthews, "Translator's Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 221, n. 89. References to the German text are to F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämmlische Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling. 14 Vols. Stuttgart, Cotta: 1856: 1861. Unless otherwise cited, references to this German edition are henceforth cited by the initial SW followed by division number, then volume number, and pagination.

²³ Or, again, "the immediacy that exists within spirit" (ibid.).

²⁴ See Benedict de Spinoza, *The Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994). Spinoza mentioned the third kind of knowledge as intuitive knowledge in Book IV of *Ethics*.

form of Spinozism as a response to the critical project of reason.²⁵ But at this point, Schelling was already an enemy of Spinozism. The trajectory of Schelling's criticism of Kantianism would culminate in rehabilitating Spinoza's pre-critical thought against the critical Spinozism of Fichte and Hegel. But this rehabilitation would also mean setting the order of reason back to its natural arrangement, in which Spinoza would be deemed truly dogmatic, even beyond the terms Kant pronounced regarding the dogmatism of pre-critical metaphysics.²⁶

Productive Intuition as Access to Existence

For Spinoza, what *necessarily exists* is that which 'just is' (*das bloß Seyende*).²⁷ At the heart of Schelling's appropriation of Spinoza is the necessity of this thing in itself that for Kant is better consigned to the supersensible, "restraining reason's desire to expand its domain into the realm of existence."²⁸ Schelling returned to Spinoza not to rehabilitate pre-critical philosophy vis-à-vis Kant but rather to establish what both Spinoza and Kant ignored, namely, the *positive knowledge of existence*.

In Spinoza, necessary existence was brought to its resolution in the rather absurd idea of a necessary God as equal to and as effective as, according to its actuality, a posteriori God. Schelling summarizes his argument as follows: "While one must concede that Spinoza was correct *in that* the only thing positive from which one may begin is precisely that which just exists, his error lies in the fact that he posits this being immediately equal to = God, without having shown . . . how one can get from that which just exists as *prius* to God as *posterius*."²⁹ This formulation is already susceptible to the Kantian critique of employing the use of reason beyond the realm of experience. But as Schelling argues, "Spinoza had to this extent come to the most profound fundament of all positive philosophy, but his mistake is that he did not know how to proceed beyond it."³⁰ And so arguably, post-dogmatic philosophy was in no better shape to pursue this 'beyond' precisely because critical philosophy also rejected intellectual intuition (in Kant) that previously in Spinoza could have been expanded into the realm of existence without having to make a metaphysical recourse to God, thereby stripping it of its dogmatic stigma to begin with. With Kant's rejection of intellectual intuition, the opportunity, so to speak, was lost.

²⁵ See Matthews, "Translator's Introduction," *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 66;

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁷ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 202.

²⁸ See Matthews, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*,

29.

²⁹ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 199.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

In Fichte, intellectual intuition is understood as a pure act, but in effect rehabilitates Kant's critical reason through the backdoor. If the 'I' is always already presupposed by the unity of reason, as in Kant,³¹ then it is not far-fetched to advance the formulation further into affirming that reflection is made possible by a non-reflective act. Being non-reflective itself, intellectual intuition *conditions* reflection. Reflection therefore is 'conditioned' in contrast to the *unconditioned* nature of the pure act of self-positing which is itself its own cause.

Here, Fichte reverses Descartes if only to find the truth in the cogito. The 'I am' or the being that supervenes in thinking becomes in Fichte the *prius* of reflection. But this 'being' can only be intuited. It cannot be a substance in the Spinozian sense that can be understood in terms of the categories. It is in this context that one can now make sense of Kant's proposition that *being is not a real predicate* precisely because it is pre-predicative, a non-reflective act. If, however, one were to retrace the successive stages of this act, or series of intuitional acts, which constitute a real science of investigating *first* the pre-conscious history of consciousness, *instead* of an inventory of conscious reason as Kant did, one would be at fault to assume that it can be achieved within consciousness.

This is Schelling's later criticism of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. For Schelling, starting with his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, a real science of knowledge lies outside consciousness, in the realm of nature, which from the correct standpoint of reason, or positive knowledge, constitutes the pre-history of consciousness.³² Thus, philosophy, understood as critical or transcendental idealism, is complemented by naturephilosophy that grounds its history in nature. It suffices to say, the *coincidence of mind and nature*³³ as may be established by these so-called *grounding or foundational sciences*, namely, transcendental philosophy and naturephilosophy, produces positive knowledge.³⁴ But what is positive knowledge in its initial form?

³¹ Paul Guyer acutely remarks that the unity of apperception is not justified by Kant, but rests on a mere conflation of the concepts of consciousness and self-consciousness" (Paul Guyer, "Kant on Apperception and 'A Priori' Synthesis," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17, 3(1980): 206

³² Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 95.

³³ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 41.

³⁴ Compare this positive knowledge with Schelling's description of Socratic ignorance: "[One] can confess ignorance either in reference to a science that actually exists, of which one simply says that it in fact offers no real knowledge, or in reference to a science that one does not yet possess, and which, as it were, still stands before us. . . . For one is unknowing or ignorant due to a lack of science, whereas the other is an ignorance caused by the exuberant nature [*Ueberschwenglichkeit*] of what is to be known" (Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 158-59).

Positive knowledge is neither practical philosophy nor moral philosophy. The latter in Schellingian terms are negative philosophies that either acknowledge the power of interruption of that which falls outside consciousness, the abyssal condition of thinking, interpreted as the *mathematical x*, but ignore its potency in the final analysis,³⁵ or deny its presence for practical ends. The first is exemplified by Kant, the second by Fichte. Combined, they constitute a practical or techno-logical vision of the world in contrast to Schelling's naturephilosophy or *speculative physics*.³⁶ Later, this speculative physics would be eclipsed by Hegel's dialectical negativity offering an ethical vision of the world; in a sense, a regression to the practical-moral world instituted by the Fichtean-Kantian duo, but raised to the speculative power of historical dynamics. By then, it was clear for Schelling that the Hegelian historical dynamics as opposed to natural dynamics was about to transform the world, itself a natural product in Schellingian terms, into a magical world of immanence whose very possibility lies in what Schelling would call the *annihilation of nature*.³⁷

Aesthetic Consciousness

The *death of nature* is arguably the keystone of all negative philosophy, specifically inspired by the Cartesian invention of the modern subject. For Schelling, Descartes invented the 'economic-teleological principle' that is responsible for much of the projective or technological aims of modern philosophy.³⁸ Schelling, perhaps, was the first in modern Continental philosophy to discover this kernel in the way philosophy conducts itself since the Cartesian cogito that would establish the fundament of all enlightenment ideals.

³⁵ Ibid., 204.

³⁶ See F.W.J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith Peterson (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

³⁷ Schelling's exact words with regard to this aspect of his criticism of Fichte's idealism are as follows: "[In] the last analysis what is the essence of his whole opinion of nature? It is this: that nature should be used . . . and that it is there for nothing more than to be used; his principle, according to which he looks at nature, is the economic teleological principle" (SW I/3, 17). The English title of the German source cited is "*Exhibition of a True Relation of the Philosophy of Nature to an Improved Fichtean Doctrine (1806)*." English translation was provided in Bruce Matthews' book *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as A Schema of Freedom* (New York: State University of New York, Albany, 2011), 275, n. 16. The same passages were cited by Andrew Bowie in *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 58.

³⁸ Ibid.

In this light, Bruce Matthews, one of most dependable translators and scholars of Schelling to date, retraces Schelling's attempt in his positive philosophy to uncover the destructive *telos* of all negative systems that consider immanence to be the final arbiter of all truths:

Modernity's demand for quantifiable forms of knowledge called for the divorce of sensuous intuition from its reflective articulation in the universal concepts of natural sciences; a divorce that abandoned the needs of the human spirit for an integrative meaning and purpose of existence. . . . [For Schelling] philosophy devoid of anything positive can only be thetic, that is a formal system of definitions. . . . As an a priori science, it follows that such a system ultimately proves to be one extensively developed *petitio principii*, since as a purely immanent science it can begin and only end in itself. Following from its definition as logic, such a science cannot begin with actual existence but must rather 'withdraw into itself so as to presuppose nothing.'³⁹

The most crucial passage comes with Schelling's criticism of how Fichte's concept of the self-positing 'I' extends from the Cartesian subject to the instrumentalization of the categories of reason for practical-moral ends and whose technological vision of the world was first outlined in Hegel's logical system perfectible in actual historical struggles, not to mention the all-too human ethical complications that attend to these (as Nietzsche would expose decades later). Schelling argues that via "Descartes, who through the *cogito ergo sum* gave philosophy its orientation to subjectivity, [Fichte's] philosophy permitted the annihilation of nature" (SW I/3, 17).

This authorization to annihilate nature is achieved in thought. Lest this declaration may be wrongly interpreted as an endorsement of the *primacy of idea over matter*, a dogmatic tenet that has nothing to do with Schelling's own idealism, suffice it to say that the mind is a mind that has a natural history. Philosophy is nothing other than a conscious recapitulation of this history that goes back to the primary productivity of nature whose origin is unprethinkable [*unvordenkliche*], as Schelling states.⁴⁰ Schelling understands this recapitulation at first as an intellectual choice over the basic starting point of investigation – either nature as *natura naturans* or as *natura naturata* in the sense Spinoza conceived these terms; in short, between the constant productivity of nature (first nature) and the products of nature (second nature, including, spiritual products such as intelligence). Philosophy had always chosen the former as the point of departure, through speculative deductions that aim to explain the materiality of the idea as the first principle (*Grundsatz*). For its part, natural science had always preferred to understand the products of nature in

³⁹ See Matthews, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 7.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 48.

terms of materializing the speculative categories of reason through which these products can be made demonstrable. Schelling's naturephilosophy aims to unite these *two grounding sciences* of knowledge. In so doing, Schelling turns to art or aesthetic consciousness (which I will discuss in the next section in relation to the ecological paradigm).

Recall that Kant sought to unite the faculties through the third *Critique*, utilizing aesthetic judgment.⁴¹ In Fichte, the synthesis is achieved in intellectual intuition that Kant earlier rejected. In Hegel, the unity is achieved, so to speak, in ideally massive historical proportion. What is commonly taken for granted across these transformations is that philosophy recapitulates the past for humanity's ends and purposes. In short, the unity of reason and its actual manifestation in historical change gives primacy to the *practical-moral ends* of projective knowledge, which for Schelling amounts to the philosophical gospel that everything is thinkable. Everything is thinkable as long as everything can be subsumed under the technological vision of the world. This is achievable if the world has already been framed within the subject-object distinction that makes identity and its other, thinking and matter, idea and object, thinkable, that is, thinkable in terms of the economic-teleological principle. This principle has also defined modern humanity as a being that can repurpose itself to technological or practical and moral ends, hence, the "over-thinkability of the [critical] project" that continues to this day.⁴²

From the standpoint of positive knowledge, however, the products of nature in the present, meaning the spatiotemporal present as a product of natural dynamics, cannot be exhausted by the categories whose strength otherwise lies in projection, at most useless to be applied to what Schelling calls the unprethinkability of the past.⁴³ It is in this context that Schelling criticized Kant for remanding aesthetic consciousness to the jurisdiction of *second nature*, of intelligence and practical freedom, of humanity in general, instead of pursuing the radical direction of aesthetic treatment of phenomena towards a positive understanding of *first nature* as that which *no categories apply*. The following is Schelling's more understandable notion of the unprethinkability of real nature with regard to the limitation of Kant's aesthetic judgment that aims exactly the same thing – to ground nature:

That which just – that which only – exists is precisely that which crushes everything that may derive from thought, before which thought becomes silent, and before which reason

⁴¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

⁴² See Benjamin Woodard, "Schellingian Thought for Ecological Politics," *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 2 (2013):104.

⁴³ Schelling, *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 202.

itself bows down; for thought is only concerned with possibility and potency; thus, were these are excluded, thought has no authority.⁴⁴

What could have been a corrective to the limitation of the concept to extend to the thing itself (the equivalent of the unprethinkable for Schelling), aesthetic judgment however is advanced with the goal of overlaying the access to first nature. It blocks the access to the unprethinkable by conferring it purposive causality. This amounts to a denial that second nature is dependent on catastrophic events that *first nature* produces; that nature over time produces "abyssal" phenomena such as species-destruction and species-extinction; that nature itself has no clearly defined categorical purpose. Already in this sense, concepts are allergic to chaos and non-linear dynamics of transformation, much more if these abyssal phenomena are not in the power of concepts to tame. Rather what aesthetic consciousness could have achieved in critical philosophy is a kind of *productive intuition* of the real disjunction between nature and history, necessity and freedom, in short, to confront in a positive manner what Schelling calls the "indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved into understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground."⁴⁵

Ecological Paradigm

In his phenomenal contribution to recent Schelling studies, Grant relays the fundamental error of a negative understanding of nature as disjunctive to freedom or intelligence, beginning with Kant's critical project that culminates in the Hegelian war of worlds only to be synthesized in a unified world of the 'ought to be,' an ethico-teleological vision of the world whose basic premise is to correct the Fichtean absolute I into an ethic of recognizing the not-I:

The categorical imperative thus becomes [in due course] a practically disjunctive ontology: there are free beings, and mechanically determined ones. Only the former is self-determining and cannot be determined by the latter. Each inhabits a different world, and these worlds are unbridgeable. Between them is a struggle over reality, a war of the worlds. At stake is *unconditioned freedom*, on the one hand, and the *determinability of nature by freedom*, on the other.⁴⁶

In place of the ethical vision of the world that rationalizes the disjunctive ontology of the struggle of freedom over nature (and its equivalent in the not-I of the everyday),

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (New York: State University of New York, 2006), 29.

⁴⁶ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 83.

Schelling proposed a positive knowledge of the traumatic experience of the real dynamic disjunction between nature and freedom. In place of the practical or technological disjunction, Schelling advanced an aesthetic disjunctive awareness of the paradox of human freedom; that freedom is possible only if it is removed, in the manner of *productive imagination or intuition*, from natural history, that is, from the science or knowledge of reconstructing the past, so that freedom *there* becomes a proper object of any such science. In this imagined original position of nature, *sans* freedom, the investigator is confronted with the question how is history (in *the a posteriori* or proper sense) possible if there is only pure mechanism? Thus, the very existence of freedom would demonstrate that nature is not pure mechanism but is itself progressive in terms of "generating individual forms or products of nature,"⁴⁷ such as freedom that in due course would bring forth its own history. Therefore only in nature can freedom be possible.

The removal of freedom from natural history is equivalent to naturalizing its activity in contrast to the self-insertion of the ego in the immanence of the world that it fabricates through the negative disjunction between itself, the ego or the I, and its object which is only its mirror-image. Unsurprisingly, the only kind of reconstruction that negative reason can accomplish is a kind of circularity that takes itself as its own object, hence, incapable of producing actual knowledge, as Schelling argues.⁴⁸

It is in this context that nothing ever happens in history because nothing is ever freely produced in knowledge. In the same context, because there is too much freedom in knowledge humanity is incarcerated in its self-incurred immanence, to parody Kant. Because there is too much reflection in knowledge, Schelling argues that freedom cannot "discover that Nature speaks to [it] more intelligibly the less [it thinks] of her in a merely reflective way."⁴⁹

Here, Schelling turns to art or philosophy of art to advance his concept of positive knowledge or positive philosophy. Aesthetic consciousness is the key to understanding Schelling's formulation in his naturephilosophy that he sketched in *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* insofar as what Schelling declares hereafter can only be realized in productive intuition or imagination:

Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind invisible Nature. Here then, in the absolute identity of Mind *in us* and Nature *outside us*, the problem of the possibility of a Nature external to us must be resolved.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁸ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 196.

⁴⁹ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41-42.

But then, while the identity can be obtained, the “asymmetry between the two [nature and mind] remains”⁵¹ precisely because the obtaining of the Identity is realized beyond the immanent relation between subject and object, beyond reflective judgment. It would seem a closed circle – the identity of Mind and Nature, hence, a repeat of immanence – but as Grant clarifies this passage, the asymmetry maintains, or the non-obtainable Identity remains precisely because “neither nature is exhausted in visible mind, nor mind in visible nature.”⁵² It is in this sense that Nature and Mind can be indifferent to the immanentism of knowledge that examines nature through the free activity of reflection. Still, this force of indifference and resistance remains in the realm of productive imagination, the empty night of Schelling. This is important to underscore because this force is the only force that can challenge the dominance of negative reason.

The Removal of Man

We have to take note of the fact that negative knowledge has created a powerful historical force, human history itself, as opposed to natural dynamics, capable of de-realizing the inexhaustible nature of the identical relation between Nature and Mind in favor of the technological ends of negative reason. But seemingly, it has come to a boiling point. The apocalypse of negative thought reveals a trail of destruction, man-made catastrophes, induced by the negative spirit of wanting to have more.

Notice that in this unsteady relation between nature and freedom, freedom is repurposed to obtainable means of personal happiness, to objects of nature repurposed to human ends, or happiness as the artificial obtainable identity between subject and object, I and not-I, nature and freedom. Our thesis is that this apocalypse must be challenged with a better apocalypse: A counter-apocalypse in the midst of the evolving anthropocene, the scene of Man.⁵³

In a sense, the anthropocene lays bare the identity of the self as ‘Man’ as a willing self that has triumphed over Nature. At the same time, it reveals the extent to which this self is no less a mirror-play of the *existence* it reduces to non-activity, *nature*. To expose the negative immanence of Nature as subjectivity will thus unmask the death intrinsic to the scene, or the death of Nature that has been reduced to nonactivity in terms of the

⁵¹ Iain Hamilton Grant, “The Law of Insuperable Environment: What is Exhibited in ‘The Exhibition of the Process of Nature,’” in *Anacleta Hermeneutica* 5 (2013): 10; underscoring mine.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ For a popular reading of the anthropocene see Elizabeth Kolbert, “Enter the Anthropocene: The Age of Man,” in Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (eds.), *Making the Geologic: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 29. The term is popularized by Paul Crutzen. See Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, 23 (2002).

complementariness of the self and the thing in critical philosophy: *the greater the activity of the self, the greater the non-activity of existence.*⁵⁴

The anthropocene is promising to evidence a new species-destruction of which we had so many countless abyssal phenomena in the past.⁵⁵ Apropos the challenge we mentioned as a counter-apocalypse, we can thus describe a positive opposition to negative immanence in the name of Mind, *not of Man* for certainly Man, as a particular organism, is an exhaustible species. Mind, for its part, remains a non-obtainable identical *relatum* of nature. In the anthropocene, Man is revealed in the last instance as the self-positing I, yet it is the point at which Man is also removed from natural history. The very process of this removal is precisely the unfolding of His last scene, the scene of Man. If, as Schelling argued, Nature is Mind made invisible, and Mind visible Nature, we are exactly at the threshold of history when visible Nature is extracting Man, the mind-bearer, from the asymmetrical relation. Man appears to be the interruption in the natural obtainability of the asymmetry as He demands for Himself the artificial obtainability of the non-obtainable. The real asymmetry is therefore imposing itself in the manifest direction of climate change and a new cycle of mass extinction, as natural sciences have come to reveal of late.⁵⁶ But the anthropocene can also become the occasion for reconstructing the natural and spiritual processes of how Man, this particular organism at present, is being removed from natural history or natural dynamics. It is in this sense that a positive awareness of non-obtainability that goes by the name 'philosophy' may become, once and for all, a true organon of nature, or the non-obtainable asymmetry that comes to light in the removal of Man from the natural scene.⁵⁷

This, in complex Schellingian terms, is the meaning of the Anthropocene.

This paper is dedicated to K. Alarice.

⁵⁴ Schelling's exact words are as follows: "[What] limits the thing? The same boundary which also limits the self. The greater the amount of activity in the self, the greater the amount of nonactivity in the thing, and *vice versa*. Only through this communal limiting do they both engage in interaction" (Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 71).

⁵⁵ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, 70.

⁵⁶ The relation of the anthropocene to worsening climate crisis paved the way for the creation of a transdisciplinary journal to engage the Anthropocene and its implications to human survival. See Frank Oldfield, et al, "The Anthropocene Review: Its significance, implications and a rationale for a new transdisciplinary journal," in *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 3-7.

⁵⁷ Compare this to Ray Brassier's pronouncement that 'philosophy is the organon of extinction.' See Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 239.

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