
MASS EXTINCTION: SCHELLING AND NATURAL HISTORY

J a s o n W i r t h *

But this circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods—and “humans,” that is, those who expose sharing and circulation as such by saying “we,” by saying we to themselves in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for the totality of all being.

—Jean-Luc Nancy¹

One great ruin—In Schelling’s dialogue *Clara* (c. 1810), the doctor advises Clara that if one wants to witness ruins, one does not need to travel to the deserts of Persia or India because “the whole earth is one great ruin, where animals live as ghosts and humans as spirits and where many hidden powers and treasures are locked away, as if by an invisible strength or by a magician’s spell.”² Scientists now identify at least twenty mass extinction events, five of which are considered so cataclysmic that they are referred to collectively as the “Big Five” and during which time the conditions for life were cataclysmically altered. Although it is still a matter of some debate, the acceleration of global temperatures due to the increasingly industrial character of human life, the widespread destruction of non-human habitats, the alarming rate of rain forest devastation, and the general degradation of the earth and its resources, is precipitating a sixth. Indeed, the very character of life, given its ruinous history, leaves the earth scarred with fossilized vestiges of former ages of the world, a natural history of the wreckage of past life.

* Seattle University

¹ Nancy, J.-L. (2000), *Being Singular Plural*. (translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne). California: Stanford University Press, p. 3. Henceforth BSP.

² Schelling, F.W.J. (2002), *Clara*. (translated by Fiona Steinkamp). New York: State University of New York Press, p. 33.

Although Schelling could not have been aware of this current reading of the exuberantly profligate fossil record, nature's luxurious infidelity to its guests was not lost on him. As he mused in *The Ages of the World*: "If we take into consideration the many terrible things in nature and the spiritual world and the great many other things that a benevolent hand seems to cover up from us, then we could not doubt that the Godhead sits enthroned over a world of terrors. And God, in accordance with what is concealed in and by God, could be called the awful and the terrible, not in a derivative fashion, but in their original sense" (I/8, 268).³ There is something awful and terrible concealed within nature, and it haunts us through its remnants. Or to articulate it more precisely: what is haunting about the immense ruin of nature is not only that its remnants indicate what once was but is no longer, nor is it enough to say, as does the skeleton at the base of Masaccio's Trinitarian crucifixion (c. 1427) in Santa Maria Novella in Florence: "I once was what you are now and what I am you shall be."⁴ It is certainly true that the presence of the shell of past life speaks both to the past and to the past's capacity to speak to the future. Both of these moments, however, more fundamentally indicate something awful coming to presence concealed in each and every coming to presence, something awful in which all nature partakes as the paradoxical solitude of its coming to presence.

What all of nature shares, this awful and terrible concealment, is not a common and discernible essence or metaphysical property. Rather, it shares the paradox of coming to presence: each and every coming to presence, what each being shares in its own way, is therefore a solitary coming to presence. Each being is exposed as singular, or, as

³ Except where noted, all translations of Schelling are my own responsibility. Citations follow the standard pagination, which follows the original edition established after Schelling's death by his son, Karl. It lists the division, followed by the volume, followed by the page number. Hence, (I/I, 1) would read, division one, volume one, page one. It is preserved in Manfred Schröter's critical reorganization of this material. Schelling, F.W.J. (1856–1861) *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*. Stuttgart-Augsburg: J. G. Cotta; Schelling, F.W.J. (1927), *Schellings Werke: Nach der Originalausgabe in neuer Anordnung* (ed. Manfred Schröter). Munich: C. H. Beck. My translations of *Die Weltalter* originally appeared in: Schelling, F.W.J. (2000) *The Ages of the World*. (translated by Jason Wirth) New York: State University of New York Press. For citations of this work I also use the standard pagination and not the translation pagination, although the prior is embedded in the latter.

⁴ Io fui già quel che voi siete e quel ch'io sono voi anco sarete.

Schelling adapts Leibniz's *Monadology*, as a monad, as a "unity" or an "idea." "What we have here designated as unities is the same as what others have understood by *idea* or *monad*, although the true meanings of these concepts have long since been lost" (I/2, 64). The monad is the very figure of shared solitude, sharing the awful secret of the absolute as *natura naturans*, yet each in its unique fashion, each singularly. The monad is a particular that is not the instantiation of a higher generality, but rather each monad "is a particular that is as such absolute" (I/2, 64). The community that is nature, a terrible belonging together, is the strange *one* expressing itself as the irreducibly singular proliferation of the *many*, much in the way that Jean-Luc Nancy claims that the "world has no other origin than this singular multiplicity of origins" (BSP, 9).

This is not merely to mark the awful and terrible secret as a limit, as a threshold beyond which thinking dare not pass. As Nancy further reflects, "its negativity is neither that of an abyss, nor of the forbidden, nor of the veiled or the concealed, nor of the secret, nor that of the un-presentable" (BSP, 12). Merely to designate it as such is to designate it exclusively as the "capitalized Other" which marks it as "the exalted and overexalted mode of the propriety of what is proper," relegated to the "*punctum aeternum* outside the world" (BSP, 13). This is precisely what is denied in marking the terrible secret as *the terrible secret of nature*. It is everywhere and therefore everywhere different, the immense dynamic differentiation of the community of solitude that is nature. The "world of terrors" does not therefore merely mark abstractly a limit to thinking. It is the awful secret that expresses itself ceaselessly in and as the play of nature.

The plurality of the origin is not only the shared solitude of birth, but also the shared solitude of ruin. My essay takes as its prompt the phenomenon of mass extinction events, especially the seeming likelihood of the "sixth," but it does so in order to engage in a sustained reflection on Schelling's conception of *natural history*. As such, I will argue that for Schelling all history is ultimately natural history, all nature is radically historical, hence subverting the common bifurcation of history into human (or cultural) history and natural (or non-human) history.

The ascendancy of the Anthropocene Age⁵ is inadequately indicated as the triumph of culture over nature. In order to subvert this duality, I will consider carefully the difficult and prescient character of my two key terms: “nature” and “history.” For Schelling, the two terms are ultimately inseparable (that is, they belong together as a unity of antipodes). Already established in the early works of his *Naturphilosophie*, and dramatically developed in the 1809 *Freedom* essay and various drafts of *Die Weltalter*, nature is not a grand object, subsisting through time, and leaving behind it the residue of its past. Such a conception belongs to modern philosophy’s nature-cide by denigrating nature, reducing it to an object that can to some extent be pried open by scientific inquiry. Hence, nature stands *before* us as a vast conglomeration of objects and the laws that govern the manners of relation to each other. In contrast, as Merleau-Ponty later observed, Schelling “places us not in front of, but rather in the middle of the absolute.”⁶ Schelling’s retrieval of the question of nature is simultaneously the retrieval of the temporality of nature, including its cataclysmic dimensions, but also its transformative dimension for human thinking.

⁵ This is the now famous term coined by Paul Josef Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to describe the ascendant role of human manufacture in the prevalent geological character of the earth. The climate scientist William F. Ruddiman’s (2007) very provocative recent work, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), makes a case that the Anthropocene is not coterminous, as Crutzen and others have argued, with the Industrial Revolution but rather the interaction between human population numbers (their rise and fall, including the effect of pandemics on overall population numbers), cultural practices (starting with things like deforestation for agriculture, which increases when population numbers increase), and the climate. The implication of his argument is startling: there is not an independent, pure, healthy, ideal climate that would exist independent of industrialization (for the latter merely shifts the direction of the effect of the Anthropocene Age, namely, towards the widespread heating of the planet), but rather that whether the earth is heating (post 18th Century) or cooling (the enigmatic Little Ice Age that began in the mid-14th Century), the climate of the Anthropocene is inseparable from the widespread presence of human culture. That is nothing less than to say: already at a meteorological level it no longer makes sense to divorce “natural climate” from “human cultural activity.” The two are rather parts of a more complex whole emerging out of the interplay of these two sets of trajectories. We are not *in* the climate as if it were our mere surroundings (environment). In some very real sense it makes more sense to say that we *are* (of and towards) the climate. It is a feedback loop in which the *anthropos* is the leading indicator species.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003), *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. (ed. Dominique Séglaard, translated by Robert Vallier). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, p. 47.

After a preliminary and orienting reflection on the destructive element of time, I will turn to Schelling not by broadly canvassing the vast territory of his thinking, but rather by concentrating on a small number of texts. Although I will maintain an eye toward the explosive works of Schelling's transitional period, including the celebrated 1809 *Freedom* essay and the third draft of *The Ages of the World* (1815), I will also look into two early writings: "Is a Philosophy of History Possible?" (1798) as well as the beginning of the introduction to *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797, revised edition, 1803).

It is in the latter that Schelling makes the remarkable claim that "Philosophy is nothing but a natural accounting of our spirit [*eine Naturlehre unseres Geistes*]" and that, as such, philosophy now "becomes genetic, that is, it allows the whole necessary succession of representations to, so to speak, emerge and pass before our eyes" (I/2, 39). In moving from the being of our representations to their becoming, to the dynamism of their coming to presence, we become present to the coming to presence of nature itself. That is to say, the organic, non-mechanistic temporality of nature's coming to presence, that is, nature naturing (*natura naturans*), comes to the fore. This in part yields a mode of access to the vast, paradoxically discontinuous yet progressive history of nature. As Schelling articulates it in *The Ages of the World*: "Therefore that force of the beginning posited in the expressible and exterior is the primordial seed of visible nature, out of which nature was unfolded in the succession of ages. Nature is an abyss of the past. This is what is oldest in nature, the deepest of what remains if everything accidental and everything that has become is removed" (I/8, 244).

Amid the current, heartbreaking and agonizing explosion of ruin, an event that, while staggering, is hardly unprecedented, accreting the already enormous record of wreckage, I turn to what is "oldest in nature." At the conclusion of the *Freedom* essay, Schelling designates nature as an "older revelation than any scriptural one," claiming that now is not the time "to reawaken old conflicts" but rather to "seek that which lies beyond and above all conflicts" (I/7, 416). Now is not the time to reawaken the "sectarian spirit" (I/7, 335), to pose one position against another, but rather to allow to come to presence, to let reveal itself, that which haunts every possible position. It is time for the most ancient

revelation, what is oldest in nature, to come forth. That the sixth biotic crisis is not unprecedented does not make it any less of a crisis. What does what is oldest in nature enable us to see regarding what is currently the anguish of our earth?

Sifting through ruins—If one were to drive to a museum of natural history, one could become aware of two ways in which nature is coming to presence. Parking the car, one could enter the museum and, if it is at all comprehensive, one can find preliminary indications of the ruinous discontinuity of nature in the remnants of earlier ages of the world. Nowhere is it more dramatically evident than when contemplating the fossilized remains of the great reptiles. Their size and power are haunting relics from a scarcely imaginable age, ghosts that speak not only of themselves, but of a lost world, a vastly different ecology of life. Although such things remain issues of scientific debate, the decline of the dinosaurs and the rise of the mammals are generally attributed to the fifth great biotic crisis, occurring some 65 million years ago, perhaps as the result of a collision with a meteor or a dramatic increase in volcanic activity. In either scenario, the ecology was drastically altered and the rate of speciation of macroscopic life was overwhelmed by its rate of extinction.

It is the macroscopic grandeur of the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction event, with the disturbing and compelling specters of the rapacious Tyrannosaurus rex, the enormous Brontosaurus, and myriad other sublime creatures, that make the paleontology divisions of natural history museums the most gripping of haunted houses. The imagination reels all the more when it considers that the magnitude of this loss was greatly exceeded by the third great biotic crisis, which concluded the Permian age. This was the so-called “Great Dying,” which preceded the fall of the great reptiles by some 180 million years. If one then ponders the spectral record of the species that have died since the last great biotic crisis, the “fearful symmetry” of creatures like the saber tooth tiger or the woolly mammoth, or if one considers the plight of the beleaguered Florida panther or the Himalayan snow leopard, their endangered grasps on life symbolic of the immense pressure on so many different creatures, known and unknown, one then grasps the awful truth of what Bataille meant when he claimed that death “constantly leaves the necessary room

for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse *the one without whom we would not exist*.⁷ Death makes space for the progression of life, the awful secret of what is oldest in nature, haunting nature, progressing anew as *natura naturans*.

When one then, unsettled, leaves the museum of natural history, that repository “where animals live as ghosts and humans as spirits and where many hidden powers and treasures are locked away,” and gets back into one’s car, and navigates back into a great sea of automobiles, one could reflect that the car’s capacity for movement basically depends on fossil fuels. It profits from the very wreckage that had just been haunting one. Not only that, it partakes in a vast network of human industrial life that is exercising immense, even cataclysmic, pressure on biotic communities. Although the debates continue, there is a growing consensus among biologists that we are in the midst of the sixth great extinction event, with predictions running as high as the net loss of half of all macroscopic species by the end of the century. However, one’s automobile is not analogous to a comet or a volcano and catastrophic climate change cannot be attributed to an accident. We “are” the automobile and the wreckage of the earth is a symptom of our acquisitive wrath. *We are the natural disaster*.

Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin have bemoaned that we “suck our sustenance from the rest of nature in a way never before seen in the world, reducing its bounty as ours grows.”⁸ Not only is the rise of the human the diminishment of the earth, but the more we diminish the earth, for example, by clear-cutting rainforests for arable land, the more we increase our numbers, which means the more we need to diminish the earth, and so it continues in a deadly progression of self-destructive self assertion. “Dominant as no other species has been in the history of life on Earth, *Homo sapiens* is in the throes of causing a major biological crisis, a mass extinction, the sixth such event to have occurred in the past half billion years.”⁹

⁷ Bataille, G. (1991), *The Accursed Share*, volume 1. (translated by Robert Hurley). New York: Zone Books, p. 34.

⁸ Leakey, R. and Lewin, R. (1995), *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind*. New York: Doubleday, 233.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Is this self, exorbitantly sucking our “sustenance from the rest of nature,” that is, the self as the occasion of explosive ruin, clearly distinct from the self which gazes at the extravagant expenditure of life that haunts biotic relics? One might be tempted to say that in the first instance one finds oneself *against* nature and in the second instance awestruck, gazing *at* nature. Yet to stare *at* nature, as if it were simply *before* one, is to be no less opposed to nature than to be straightforwardly *against* it. In both instances one finds oneself *in* nature, that is to say, surrounded by nature, amid nature, as if nature were an environment. Nature appears as one’s environs when one measures one’s relationship to nature as an object distinct from oneself as a subject. Even when one is *in* nature, one is more fundamentally opposed to it, cut off from it, allowing one to gaze *at* it or act ruinously *against* it.

It is in this spirit of separation, of the Fall from the Garden of nature, so to speak, that the human gazes even at its own animality as something strange, distant, perhaps lost, and therefore looks at its community with non-human animals as somehow beneath the dignity of Aristotle’s “animal having *logos*.” The human knows itself as the *arche* of thinking only as the consequence of having risen *out of* or *above* nature. Such extrication or elevation, however, is not a clean escape, but a fundamental denial or obscuration of oneself, a turning away from oneself in order to elevate oneself above oneself. The vestigial self, left behind in the self’s movement toward self-presence, toward the pretence of autonomy, is not yet separated from nature. The “self” that one abandons in order to become distinctively and autonomously a self was not a self-standing self, extricating itself from nature in the act of cognizing itself. It was therefore a “self” at the depths not only of itself, but also of nature, something like what the Zen tradition has called the “original face”: “Before your parents were born, what was your original face?” This question, still studied in Rinzai kōan practice (*dokusan*, 独参), seeks to initiate the deconstruction of a self that has come to know itself as a self wholly in possession of itself.

The self-possessed subject, the self imminent to itself, has taken flight from the great life of nature. In the *Freedom* essay, this life on the periphery will be characterized, from the perspective of nature, as a sickness, and from the perspective of the human, as radical evil, the original sin

of human self-consciousness. This is the paradox of *Selbstbewußtsein* in post-Kantian thought: as soon as the self takes possession of itself, that is, as soon as it identifies with a phenomenal representation (*Vorstellung*) of itself, it loses itself. In direct contrast to the Cartesian position, the subjective self cannot take possession of itself as an object. Self-presentation leaves a trail of relics, without ever revealing what is being presented. How then does one think this ghostly subject haunting the relics of oneself? In some strange sense one can designate it as the ground of oneself, but then again, that is also to make this ground objective, to hypostasize it, even in calling it a thing in itself or some object = x. It is not a thing, neither of the noumenal nor the phenomenal sort.

In *The System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling argues that the pure self, the self haunting the subject position, “is an act that lies outside of all time” and hence the question “is the I a thing in itself or an appearance [*Erscheinung*]?” is “intrinsically absurd” because “it is not a thing in any way, neither a thing in itself nor an appearance” (I/3, 375). It is literally *unbedingt*, that which has not and cannot become a thing within each thing. Translating *das Unbedingte* as “absolute” always risks hypostasizing *das Unbedingte* or rendering it vague, a night when all cows are black.¹⁰ Schelling was clear about this in his earliest writings. In *On the I as Principle of Philosophy, or Concerning das Unbedingte in Human Knowing* (1795), published when Schelling was twenty years old, he considered this an “exquisite” German word that “contains the entire treasure of philosophical truth.” “*Bedingen* [to condition] names the operation in which something becomes a *Ding* [thing], *bedingt* [conditioned], that which is *made* into a thing, which at the same time illuminates that *nothing through itself* can be posited *as a thing*. An *unbedingtes Ding* is a contradiction. *Unbedingt* is that which in no way can be made into a thing, that in no way can become a thing” (I/1, 66). *Das Unbedingte* comes to presence as things, but without revealing itself as anything. Hence in the 1800 *System*, we can see that from the perspective of the objective, seen among things, this is philosophy resuscitated

¹⁰ Hence, Iain Hamilton Grant (2006), in his *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London and New York: Continuum), renders *unbedingt* literally as “unthined.” Despite its lexical exuberance, this is a watershed study of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* in the English-speaking world. Henceforth PON.

as genetic, as “eternal becoming” and from the perspective of the subjective, it “appears [*erscheint*],” itself a rather spectral verb, as “infinite producing” (I/3, 376), the free play of nature.

The pure self, the original face before your parents were born, is a non-subject haunting the subject (because the subject is in itself absolutely nothing). It “is” an *Ungrund*, to use Schelling’s deployment of Böhme’s phrase (I/7, 407), spectrally present, that is, present in its absence, within *Grund*. How does one face this all-consuming fire within oneself, and within all things, when it emerges, as did Krishna to the despondent Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as Vishnu, the mystery of mysteries, the royal secret, and finally as great Time, *mahā kāla*, the world destroyer? In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling will argue that *Angst* before the great matter of life, before what is oldest in nature, drives us from the center (I/7, 382). And as Schelling argued in *The Ages of the World*: “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 within one just as much as the present” (I/8, 207–208).

The face of modern philosophy came to presence in abdicating its original face. In a sense one might hazard to say that its very existence was its original sin (the self falling from nature in its flight toward itself). Schelling was a close yet worried reader of modern philosophy and a defender of a radicalized Spinoza, one might even say, using the designation carefully, a post-modern Spinoza in the sense of a Spinoza that has been extricated from the limitations of what was thinkable within modern philosophy’s estimation of its grounding possibilities.¹¹ Schelling’s Spinoza, unleashing the spectral force of *natura naturans*, with its implicit post-Enlightenment reconfiguration of the philosophy of science, certainly invited ridicule from the prevailing theological orthodoxy, but it also put him at odds with the enlightened scientific standpoint, with its commitment to an autonomous subject (one is

¹¹ For a discussion of Schelling’s relationship to Spinoza, see my (2003) *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time*. New York: State University of New York Press, chapters two and three.

tempted even to say, the liberal capitalist subject) as both researcher of nature and moral agent.

In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling provocatively characterized all of modern philosophy as the impossibility of the question of nature even emerging as a serious question. "The entirety of modern European philosophy has, since its inception (in Descartes) the shared deficiency that nature is not present to it and that it lacks nature's living ground" (I/7, 356–357). In resuscitating Spinoza, Schelling breathes life into his thinking, endeavoring to divorce the ground of nature in Spinoza's thinking from any dogmatism. It is the very freedom at the heart of things that, as *unbedingt*, is what is oldest in nature, always older than its ceaseless coming to presence. It is a life beyond the life and death of things. It expresses itself¹² pluralistically as the shared or "natural" monadic solitude of the life and death of those things. Not only does this deconstruct a Newtonian mechanistic universe, that is, a universe of sheer necessity, adhering to *a priori* laws of nature, but it also deconstructs the autonomous moral subject, adhering to the laws of freedom or to the divine command of a transcendent creator God. "The moralist desires to see nature not living, but dead, so that he may be able to tread upon it with his feet" (I/7, 17).

Time and nature—Long before he became president, Thomas Jefferson knew of the remarkable mastodon fossils from what was called the Big Bone Lick (formerly in Virginia, now in Kentucky).¹³ Yet when he sent Lewis and Clark on their famous trip to the Pacific Northwest, he wanted them to find living mastodons. "Such is the economy of nature that no instance can be produced, of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken."¹⁴ The laws of nature, whether or

¹² On the problem of expressionism in Schelling, see my (2004), "Animalization: Schelling and the Problem of Expressivity," in: *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings of Schelling*, (ed. Jason M. Wirth). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 84–98.

¹³ Jefferson bequeathed the fossilized jawbone of a mastodon to the University of Virginia.

¹⁴ Both the anecdote about Lewis and Clark and the Jefferson quotation are from Elizabeth Kolbert's (2009) essay, "The Sixth Extinction?" *The New Yorker*, May 25, 2009, p. 53. Henceforth SE. In her eloquent and eye-opening essay, Kolbert also speaks with the Harvard paleontologist Andrew Knoll who reflects on the nature of the sixth extinction event: When the asteroid collided with the Yucatan Peninsula, "it was one terrible afternoon . . . But it was a short-term

not God is the legislator, form a closed and recursive system. All surprises, all happenstance, are manifestations of our ignorance and lack of mastery of the fundamental rules governing the movement of nature. Catastrophic ruin suggests that God does not know what He is doing, or at least that the rules of nature are not ironclad. It has been the Western disposition to err on the side of an omniscient and omnibenevolent God or to have an equally optimistic faith in reductionist materialism.

Georges Cuvier, the French naturalist, did not buy any of this and in 1812 concluded that the fossil record not only indicated that some species were “lost,” but that the rate of loss was not exclusively a matter of what is now called background extinction (it is the way of species to become *espèces perdues*). He discovered evidence of cataclysmic loss, like the floods that drove Noah to his Ark.¹⁵ Even Darwin, who unsettled the traditional account, according to which divine final causality was incompatible with an account of speciation that included, even to a limited extent, the play of chance, opposed the idea that chance was capable of such profligacy.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the remnants of sublime squandering, as well as the role of chance mutation in species survival, cast doubt on the unbroken recursivity (“mechanism”) of nature. As Grant observed, “the reassuring certainty of a mechanical eternity is removed by the fossil remains

event, and then things started getting better. Today, it’s not as if you have a stress and the stress is relieved and recovery starts. It gets bad and then it keeps being bad, because the stress doesn’t go away. Because the stress is us” (63).

¹⁵ See SE, p. 53–54.

¹⁶ SE, p. 54. Deleuze and Guattari argue in “10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals” that Cuvier and this kind of approach nonetheless is too tied to forms, not the unfolding of the earth: “There are irreducible axes, types, branches. There are resemblances between organs and analogies between forms, nothing more.” Deleuze, J. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus* (translated by Brian Massumi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 46. For a more complicated account of Cuvier, see Grant, PON, p. 124–125. It is also, however, clear that Cuvier had a poor understanding of Schelling and *Naturphilosophie*, dismissing it as illogical. See: Outram, D. (1984), *Georges Cuvier: Vocation, Science, and Authority in Post-Revolutionary France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 135–138. Cuvier concluded that Schelling’s tendency to regard nature as a “living organism” was experimentally unverifiable and that such metaphysics could only discredit the natural sciences (136). In this sense, Cuvier’s allergic reaction to *Naturphilosophie* was nothing unusual, but rather ultimately emblematic of modern science’s inclusion within modern philosophy in general and that, as such, “natural” science was oblivious to the *natural*.

of vanished creatures" (53). Is this not freedom in its permutation as contingency?

Schelling's efforts to think through the problem of the relationship between freedom and nature, of course, had first to move through the Kantian critical project. In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, the very appearance of nature excludes the possibility that freedom operates in any way in nature. Rather, the laws of nature manifest the forms of intuition that gather the manifold into experience. We are the legislators of nature. "The intellect [*Verstand*] is itself the legislation [*Gesetzgebung*] of nature, that is, without the intellect there simply would not be any nature, that is, the synthetic unity of the manifold according to rules."¹⁷

The impossibility of an experience of freedom, of freedom in nature, governs the famous third antinomy, the antinomy of pure reason in its third conflict of transcendental ideas. The antithesis holds, given the very conditions for the possibility of experience, that "there is no freedom but rather everything in the world happens merely according to the laws of nature." If this were the last word, of course, there could be no ethical autonomy and no capacity to obey the moral law. Hence the thesis holds that "causality according to the laws of nature is not the only cause from which the appearances of the world could be collectively derived."¹⁸ The antinomy clearly disallows recourse to an experience of freedom. Nature, in order to appear to reason at all, follows the rules legislated by the intellect. Everything appears as it must appear, in accordance with the rules that gather the manifold into appearance. Freedom, the *sine qua non* for practical philosophy, does not and cannot appear in nature. Instead, it commands from the noumenal kingdom of ends, from beyond the rule of nature. This, of course, is Kant's famous bifurcation: human life simultaneously dwelling under the laws of nature and the deontological citizenship in the autonomous kingdom of ends.

With this account, it makes little sense to speak of natural history as anything other than the chronology of rule-bound happenings. There can be no real sense of history in the sense of what happened. What

¹⁷ Kant, I. (1976), *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (A edition 1781, B edition 1787). Hamburg: Felix Meiner, p. 186. The citation appears in the A edition, p. 126–27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 462 (A 444/B 472 – A 445/B 473).

happened did not happen by happenstance. It had to happen. But the fossil record!

The possibility of anything like a living natural history (rather than the mechanical natural chronology) opens up in the third *Kritik*, which Schelling regarded as “Kant’s deepest work, which, if he could have begun with it in the way that he finished with it, would have probably given his whole philosophy another direction.”¹⁹ Its project is nothing less than to try to reflect from the space that opens in the “incalculable chasm [*die unübersehbare Kluft*]” between nature and freedom, the laws of appearance and the non-appearance of freedom. In aesthetic judgment (that is, in the exercise of taste), one reflects on the pleasure that one senses operating at the ground of and at odds with the laws of nature, its “reference to the *free lawfulness* of the imagination [*die freie Gesetzmäßigkeit der Einbildungskraft*].”²⁰ For example, Kant objects to William Marsden’s claim in his *History of Sumatra* that when, amid the overwhelming prodigality of “free beauties” in the Sumatran forests, he discovered the beauty of a nice and tidy pepper patch, he had found real beauty, as opposed to the chaos of the jungle. For Kant, what made Marsden judge the pepper patch as beautiful was that it was unexpected, a surprise in the jungle. If he were to gaze exclusively at the pepper patch, he would soon grow bored, as the free play of nature that unexpectedly came to presence became the rule that pepper patches are the only beautiful things in the Sumatran jungle. Soon Marsden’s attention would turn to the “luxuriance of prodigal nature, which is not subjected to the coercions of any artificial rules” (KU, §22, 86). When one finds oneself taking pleasure in the aqueous undulations of a waterfall, or the dancing flames of a campfire, or the quietly dynamic flow of a babbling brook, does one not delight in one’s incapacity to comprehend the principle at play in their intuition (KU, §22, 85–86)? It is the unbidden pleasure taken in the free play of nature’s rule.

It is as if nature presented itself in the element of water, capable of taking any form, but having no form of its own. In the water-con-

¹⁹ Schelling, F.W.J. (1994), *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (1827) (translated by Andrew Bowie). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 173. Henceforth HMP.

²⁰ Kant, I. (1990), *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Hamburg: Felix Meiner, §22, p. 82.

sciousness of aesthetic judgment, one does not seek to explain nature, but rather one becomes aware of the wonder of nature, of the miracle of its coming to presence. In the sublime, of course, this dynamic is intensified as the immeasurability [*Unangemessenheit*] and boundlessness [*Unbegrenztheit*] of this freedom, which “makes the mind tremble,” filling one with a feeling of astonishment, respect, the shudder of the holy, and a quickening of life. One could say that the possibility of a living natural history, itself only possible with the shattering of the paradigm that dictates that nature’s temporality, is recursive, like a clock, begins to suggest itself in the dawning of the sense of a whole that holds together the antipodes of nature and freedom. For Kant, however, this whole does not come entirely to the fore. Freedom is but the feeling of the moral law within, projected upon the starry heavens above. He does not yet know Alyosha Karamazov’s more difficult joy: “The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars. . . . Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages.”²¹ For this to happen, Kant needed to remember his original face and therefore that the pleasure and shudders of nature are not found within ourselves but within the original face that always already shares and touches the original face of nature.

For Schelling, operating in the unity of the “incalculable chasm” articulated by Kant, natural history speaks from nature as the progression of freedom and necessity. As Grant articulates it: “Natural history, then, does not consist solely in empirical accounts of the development of organizations on the earth’s surface, nor in any synchronic cataloguing of these. Its philosophical foundations make it a science that attempts to straddle the gulf between history, as the product of freedom, and nature, as the product of necessity” (18). In a small essay from 1798, “Is a Phi-

²¹ Dostoevsky, F. (2002), *The Brothers Karamazov* (translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky). New York: FSG, p. 362.

losophy of History Possible?”, Schelling defines history according to its etymology as “knowledge of what happened” (I/I, 466). Hence, “what is *a priori* calculable, what happens according to necessary laws, is not an object of history; and vice versa, what is an object of history must not be calculated *a priori*” (I/7, 467). History in relationship to nature, then, is the play or chance occurrence of freedom in nature, not in the sense that nature becomes a chaotic free-for-all and collapses into mere “unruliness [*Gesetzlosigkeit*],” but rather that it is not merely subject to rules. There is also variance and deviation [*Abweichung*] (I/I, 469), instances where the rule did not hold. In this sense, “history overall only exists where an ideal and where infinitely-manifold deviations from the ideal take place in individuals, which nonetheless remain congruent with the ideal as a whole” (I/7, 469). In other words, progression assumes deviation from the ideal and, as such, is the expression of the course of a free activity that cannot be determined *a priori*. “What is not progressive is not an object of history” (I/I, 470).

Schelling, perhaps not to his credit, did not regard animals as having history “because each particular individual consummately expressed the concept of its species” and there was therefore no “overstepping of its boundaries” and no “further construction on the foundation of earlier” individuals (I/I, 471). An individual bear acts in accordance with how bears as such generally behave. Of course, animals do not need to act freely because they are not subject to the original sin of self-consciousness. Since an animal is not tempted to remain faithful to its *imago*, it does not experience its freedom in overstepping its *imago*. What is freedom from the perspective of *natura naturans* is tacit necessity from the experience of animals because they are not self-consciously free. That being said, the non-human animal community is full of surprises, and it is wise not to speak too confidently about them. Nonetheless, Schelling’s sensitivity to the general problem, beyond the complex and vexing problem with non-human animals, remains acute: “where there is mechanism, there is no history, and vice versa, where there is history, there is no mechanism” (I/I, 471).

Even if one granted that animals do not have a history, that is to say, a history that belongs to animals as animals, *it does not follow that nature does not have a history of animals*. There is not a history of animals,

but there is a natural history of animals, just as there is a natural history of everything, from subatomic particles to black holes. Just as deviation from oneself is the possibility of humans having history, that is, of acting freely, nature's progressivity is its capacity not to be held hostage to its manifold appearances, to deviate from itself ever anew. As Schelling articulated it in his introduction to *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, written around the same time as the small piece on history, "Nature should be visible spirit, spirit should be invisible nature" (I/2, 56).

The very idea of *Naturphilosophie* is not to define nature as a philosophical object, but rather to recover nature as "the *infinite* subject, i.e. the subject which can *never* stop being a subject, can never be lost in the object, become mere object, as it does for Spinoza" (HMP, 114). As such, its translation as "the philosophy of nature" is potentially misleading. *Naturphilosophie* in Schelling's sense is more like doing philosophy in accordance with nature (not as an elective activity originating at the whim and command of the *res cogitans*). It is not therefore a kind of philosophy, or a topic within philosophy, but rather a gateway into the originating experience of philosophizing.

In his startling and exceptionally lucid thought experiment at the beginning of his introduction to *Ideas*, we see Schelling orchestrating the "originating [*Entstehen*]" of this subject "before the eyes of the reader" (I/2, 11). This origination and "coming to the fore" happens in simply reflecting on the nature of philosophy itself. Is philosophy any particular philosophy? If philosophy is not a philosophy, what is philosophy which includes the remnants of all philosophies heretofore, but which is exhausted by none of them? Philosophy, one could say, is the free, historical act of philosophizing, not any particular philosophy. Or: the subject of philosophy is reducible to no philosophical objects. Hence, Schelling claimed in the first (1797) version of this introduction that "the idea of philosophy is merely the result of philosophy itself, but a universally valid philosophy is an inglorious pipedream [*ein ruhmloses Hirngespinnst*]" (I/2, 11). One might say that the very desire to make a philosophy out of philosophy is itself undignified illness, recoiling in anxiety from the freedom of philosophizing.

This origination of the subject also comes to the fore when one extends the subject of philosophy to nature. It begins with reflecting on

being able to ask simple questions like: What is nature? How is nature possible? If nature were merely mechanistic, one could not ask this question. Reflection by its very nature is what David Wood has called “the step back, the promulgation of negative capability” which resists “unthinking identifications.”²² In reflection we divorce ourselves from nature, separating ourselves from an absorption in nature. We ask if what we see of nature and what we already think of nature is sufficient to appreciate nature. As if one were in Plato’s cave, reflection, the eruption of the radically interrogative mode, “strives to wrench oneself away from the shackles of nature and her provisions” (I/2, 12).

However, one does not tear oneself away from nature as an end in itself. One rejects the grip of nature as a means to grasp nature itself more fully. Mere reflection, that is, reflection for the sake of reflection, is accordingly, and in anticipation of the *Freedom* essay, *eine Geisteskrankheit des Menschen* (I/2, 13). A *Geisteskrankheit* is a psychopathology or mental disease, literally, a sickness of the spirit. One pulls away from the center of nature and its stubborn hold and retreats to the periphery of reflection. If, however, one remains on the periphery, separated, alone in the delusion of one’s ipseity, this is the experience of sickness and radical evil. In the language of the introduction, when reflection reaches “dominion over the whole person,” it “kills” her “spiritual life at its root” (I/2, 13). Reflection has no positive value in itself. It has “negative value,” enabling the divorce from nature that is the original experience of philosophy, but it should endeavor to reunite with that which it first knows only as necessity. Reflection is “merely a necessary evil [*ein notwendiges Übel*]” that, left to itself, attaches to the root, aggressing against the very root of nature that prompted the original divorce from the chains of nature. Philosophy, born of the abdication of nature, is the art of the return to nature. In such a return, the self of nature, so to speak, comes to fore as the eternal beginning of nature. Just as the root of philosophy is exhausted in no exercise of philosophy, the root of nature is exhausted by none of its expressions. The history of nature is the unfolding legacy of what is always already gone in all that originates and comes to pres-

²² Wood, D. (2005), *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction*. New York: State University of New York Press, p. 7.

ence. Since it expresses everything in its coming to presence, as well as the mortality of all presence, its origination and points of access are as multiple as things themselves.

In the temporality of nature, what is oldest in nature, whose remnants are its history, but which in itself remains always still to come, promises fatality as the truth of natality. The “eternal beginning [*ewiger Anfang*]” begins ever anew because of the generativity of finitude. Bereft of the radical interruption that is both finitude and the incessant natality of the future, nature is populated by angels, perfect beings, wholly obedient to their forms. Angels do not partake in history; Klee’s and Benjamin’s angel of history is the murderous face of history that falsely and ruinously imagines that it has become immanent to itself, as it does in Hegel. Already in 1798 history essay Schelling dismissed angels as “the most boring beings of all” (I/1, 473) and almost thirty years later said of Hegel’s God that “He is the God who only ever does what He has always done, and who therefore cannot create anything new” (HMP, 160). One might say, then, that Hegel’s great Angel is not merely boring, but rather *the wrath of the boring*.

The time of nature is its abyssal past returning as the *Unvordenklichkeit* (unprethinkability) of the future. As such, the past is not therefore the record of the continuous history of some grand object= x . It is rather the evidence of the at times catastrophic record of discontinuity, and the history of the ruptures of time that persist, for example, in the intersection of different ages. In *The Ages of the World*, Schelling offered the example of comets, those mysterious emissaries from another age:

We still now see those enigmatic members of the planetary whole, comets, in this state of fiery electrical dissolution. Comets are, as I expressed myself earlier but would now like to say, celestial bodies in becoming and which are still unreconciled. They are, so to speak, living witnesses of that primordial time, since nothing prevents the earlier time from migrating through later time via particular phenomena. Or, conversely, nothing prevents a later time from having emerged earlier in some parts of the universe than in others. In all ages, human feeling has only regarded comets with a shudder as, so to speak, harbingers of the recurrence of a past age, of universal destruction, of the dissolution of things again into chaos. Evidently, the individual center of gravity (the separate life) in a comet is not reconciled with the universal center of gravity.

This is demonstrated by the directions and positions of their paths that deviate from those of the settled planets. (I/8, 329–330)

Nature is bizarre—Comets are strange, as strange as the mastodons that Jefferson hoped that Lewis and Clark would find in their travels. That they did not find mastodons was no less strange than that they did find grizzly bears. Nancy, in his beautiful way, reflected that “‘Nature’ is also ‘strange [*bizarre*],’ and we exist there; we exist *in* it in the mode of a constantly renewed singularity” (BSP, 9). The term *bizarre* is of uncertain origin, perhaps originating from the Basque word for beard, perhaps in so doing recording the strangeness of the appearance of bearded Spanish warriors. In addition to the element of wonder and surprise, it also speaks to the dignity and grandeur of that surprise. This “‘strangeness’ refers to the fact that each singularity is another access to the world” (BSP, 14).

The sudden reemergence of the dignity of nature’s strangeness reunites (without dissolving singularity into identification) thinking with the nature that it had forsaken. In the famous 1797 *System* fragment, written by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, the dignity of nature’s strangeness, something that Hegel would in an important respect later renounce, was designated the practice of *natural religion*, and Schelling, even in the late Berlin lectures on mythology and revelation, never loses sight of it.

What Schelling calls for in this origination of the strangeness of nature, in the cultivation of natural religion, is a *practice of the wild*. I take this term, of course, from Gary Snyder. In the final chapter, called “Grace”, of his duly celebrated *Practice of the Wild*, he explains that at his house they say a Buddhist grace, which begins, “We venerate the Three Treasures [teachers, the wild, and friends].”²³ The three treasures are universally acknowledged by all negotiators of the Buddha Dharma to be the Buddha, which Snyder, using his own *upaya* or skillful means, renders as “teachers,” the Sangha, the community of practitioners, whom Snyder renders as “friends,” and finally, and most strikingly, the Dharma, which Snyder renders as “the wild.”

²³ Snyder, G. (1990), *The Practice of the Wild*. California: North Point Press, p.185. Henceforth PW.

In what manner can the Dharma, the very matter that is transmitted from Buddha Dharma to Buddhist negotiator, be translated as *the wild*? It all depends on how one hears the word “wild.” Typically “wild” and “feral” (*ferus*) are “largely defined in our dictionaries by what—from a human standpoint—it is not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it *is*” (PW, 9). Hence, a wild animal is an animal that has not been trained to live in our house (undomesticated) and has not been successfully subjected to our rule (unruly).

But what happens if we “turn it the other way”? What is the wild *to the wild*? Animals become “free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems” (PW, 9). As Snyder begins to explore this turn, he indicates the ways in which the wild “comes very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao*, the *way* of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated . . .” (PW, 10). And the *Dao*, as we know from the rich interpenetration of Mahāyāna and Daoist traditions in East Asia, is “not far from the Buddhist term Dharma with its original senses of forming and firming” (PW, 10). The early Daoists spoke of *Dao* as “the great mother” and Schelling emphasized that the etymology of *natura* is that which has been born, and that *natura* thereby speaks of prodigal natality.

What are we to make of ourselves as the occasion of the sixth great extinction? This question is inseparable from the management of our cities, the cultivation of our bodies, the way that we read books—everything depends on the recuperation of the wildness that we share with all of being, the wildness (beyond the ruinous dichotomy of wild and civilized) that is our abdicated being together with and as nature.