SCHELLING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: A NEW MYTHOLOGY OF NATURE

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I explore how the “synthesis of history and nature” that defines the Anthropocene might signal the advent of the “new mythology” Schelling hoped would emerge from his Naturphilosophie. The epistemological dimension of this new mythology is to be understood through Schelling’s idea of Mitwissenschaft, in which humanity is the essential active agent in the reflexive system of the world. Such an inquiry derives not from a sentimental longing for an enchanted world, but from the impending “annihilation of nature” Schelling foresaw in 1804. The resulting organic episteme introduces a new realism in which nature, because absolute, becomes normative.

Schelling only mentions a “new mythology” twice, in Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus (The Oldest System Program of German Idealism [1797])¹ and in System des Transcendentalen Idealismus (System of Transcendental Idealism [1800]).² In both, myth serves as the “middle link” required to integrate logos and bios in a productive unity whose balance would correct philosophy’s exclusionary attachment to the intellect of Idealism. While he is clear that the genesis of such a mythology lies in the future creativity of a more developed time, he does claim that his Naturphilosophie aims directly at this goal, claiming philosophy’s “eternal relation to nature” as warranting such a correction. (SW I.I.7, 145, §27) Here, in the sensuous life and productivity of nature, Schelling locates the origin of what he terms a “future symbolism and myth of nature” that would restore the relation modern philosophy has excluded, resulting in the denigration of nature to the status of dead matter whose

¹ “The So-Called ‘Oldest System Programme of German Idealism’ (1796),” (tr.) A. Bowie, in Aesthetics and Subjectivity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 266f.
only value is one of commodity exchange—a valuation of nature that Schelling claims sets the trajectory for the eventual “annihilation of nature.” (SW I.5, 275) Some two hundred years later, we find ourselves in the Anthropocene, a new geological age of the world that fits all too well into Schelling's prophecy, since it is precisely humanity's exploitation of nature to serve its economic interest that has led to our species becoming the most active determiner of the earth's present and future condition, a fact that includes the increasingly real possibility of our causing the mass extinction of species, including our own. This perilous intercourse of human action with the fate of the world also aligns with the “synthesis of history and nature” (SW I.5, 449) Schelling thought would herald the birth of the “mythological circle” of symbols formed from the “specific material and content” of his Naturphilosophie.

In advancing this arrangement of Schelling's words my goal is not to support the claim that Schelling saw all this coming and connected these concepts in the way I just briefly did. Rather, my objective in what follows is to tease out how we might construct a coherent reading of these ideas, testing as we go along Schelling's own claim that in his philosophy he has sought to do nothing other than “furnish material for endlessly possible Bildung (endlos möglichen Bildung).” (SW I.7, 145, §27) The key to the insights I hope to generate is the fundamental epistemological starting point for all of Schelling's thought, best captured in general by his repeated insistence that we must start our systematic work on the presupposed unity of our endeavors. Although determined by the binary structure of logic, philosophy must begin from a unity that is the very condition of those binary structures, be they Kant's Sinn and Verstand or Fichte's Ich and Nicht-Ich. Indifference, identity, the unprethinkable: all these uniquely Schellingian concepts follow from the deviant epistemology of Mitwissenschaft that marks him a heretic of modernity, and it is Mitwissenschaft (conscientia) that illuminates both his account of myth as middle link between logos and bios, as well as that element of his philosophy routinely confused with Idealism. Both insights prove decisive to grasping the defining normativity of nature in the Anthropocene as meeting Schelling's demand that “sooner or later” it “will become necessary” to create a “different way of seeing all of philosophy and idealism itself.” (SW I.4, 89) A different way of seeing, I would suggest, in which we juxtapose the reality of the Anthropocene with Schelling's idea of Mitwissenschaft to present humanity as the essential active agent in a larger organic and thus reflexive system. In the Anthropocene humanity is an environmental force of nature equal in its powers to the natural warming cycle of the Holo-
cene, and will accordingly generate developments now and in the near future as significant as the move then from hunters and gatherers to urbanized living. The dynamic at work in this development defines the episteme of *Mittwissenschaft*, in which humanity is an organ of nature, perhaps even its eye, whereby nature comes to know itself, thereby initiating a new phase of development in the self-organizing feedback loop of the world we humans find ourselves in. What emerges with this organic episteme is an inclusive relational dynamic whose global reach denies it the luxury of excluding recalcitrant elements such as sensuous nature, the aesthetics of intuition, myth or the sublime power of the numinous. Such an epistemology of the whole, at this point in time, is not driven by the luxury of sentimental longing to re-enchant a disenchanted nature, but is rather more an act of desperation seeking to awaken ourselves to the reality of the sacred and therefore normative status of nature. The challenge is to accept Schelling’s threat of the annihilation of nature as collateral to leverage a rather speculative reading of his work that may offer ways out of our current dilemma.

In his *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturphilosophie* (*Aphorisms as Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature* [1805]) Schelling claims that his “cause” is “not only a concern of our time” but rather reflects philosophy’s “eternal relation to nature”—a relation to nature and existence that modern philosophy has expunged from its purview “by means of the one-sided abstraction of the intelligent world.” (SW I.7, 145, §27; cf. SW I.5, 275) Clues to what Schelling might mean with these suggestive yet cryptic words are found in the all-important but too-little-read essay *Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie* (*On the True Concept of the Philosophy of Nature*, 1801), published just months before the appearance of the infamous *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* (*Presentation of My System* [1801]). In laying bare the true concept of *Naturphilosophie* Schelling emphatically states that his philosophy is not an Idealism in the Bishop Berkeley sense of *esse est percipi*. Conceding that one could “translate” his Idealism “into the idealist potenz,” he insists that such a reduction could only succeed by ignoring the other two potencies of his system, which, consistent with his earliest outline in of 1797, consists of a “pure theoretical or realistic element” and a “practical or idealistic element,” which are both united through a “system of art.” (SW I.4, 89) Only with all three potencies acting in harmony does his system assume its full form and dynamism. He writes: “do not understand by this that each one of these three system elements could each be separated as I have done here. – In every one of them there is absolute continuity, it is one uninterrupt-
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ed series, that reaches from the most simple configuration in nature to the most elevated and complex, the work of art." (Ibid.) He then advances yet another case for why his philosophy cannot be reduced to the one potency of Idealism—a self-defense that both illuminates the specific reason for his split with Fichte as well as demonstrates the degree to which we have really failed to comprehend his soon to be published Darstellung meines Systems. Addressing his system in general, as well as his Naturphilosophie, he writes:

It is not about the natural sciences – it is about a different way of seeing all of philosophy and idealism itself, and which idealism, sooner or later, will be forced to accept. Idealism will remain; it will only be further back and derived in its first beginnings from nature itself, which till now has appeared to be its strongest contradiction. (SW I.4, 89)

This new way of seeing philosophy and Idealism requires a beginning in a unity beyond the subjective idealism of the reflective self; a requirement which necessitates that “the object of all philosophizing, which in its highest potency is = self, be depotenzirt.” (SW I.4, 85) In this provocative turn of phrase Schelling lays bare the fundamental difference between himself and Fichte: whereas the latter begins in the “unavoidable circle” of the reflective self, and thus can “in principle” never break out of “the circle of consciousness” (ibid.), Schelling claims to overcome the “standpoint of consciousness” through this act of depotencification. Thus while from Fichte’s standpoint of consciousness “nature appears as the objective, the self in contrast as the subjective” (SW I.4, 86), Schelling claims access to nature as it is before our anthropomorphic reflections dissect it, to a nature as "pure subject-object" in which it is both “real and ideal at once; both are never separated but are rather originally together.” (SW I.4, 87) What is originally pure subject-object, equally ideal and real, becomes real and objective only through “the emerging consciousness, in which the subjective raises itself to the highest (theoretical) potency.” (Ibid.) The act of depotencifying the self Schelling locates in the intellectual intuition of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, but with the proviso that demands the “abstraction from the intuitant in this intuition, an abstraction which leaves for me what is purely objective in this act, which is the pure subject-object, but which in no way is = self.” (Ibid.) From the standpoint of the conscious self, the depotencified result of this abstraction is the actively producing yet unconscious strata of the self Schelling constructs in the theoretical epoch of his System des Transcendentalen Idealismus. As he writes in Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie, he had “to posit it as uncon-
scious (bewußtlos)" to provide both an isomorphic relational structure shared by all of us, as well as supplying a unifying basis in nature for our reflective self. (Ibid.) Thus does “the idealism of the self” in its highest potency become in its depontificed strata of the theoretical epoch what Schelling calls “the idealism of nature.” (SW I.4, 84) Well aware of how language forces traditional ways of seeing on us, and frustrated by his inability to find words fit to communicate his new way of seeing Idealism, Schelling anticipates resistance from those who would object to using old terms in new ways, seeing nothing but nonsense in an unconscious idealism or an idealism of nature, and asks:

But then why should this [Naturphilosophie] not be idealistic? And is there any way to philosophize other than the idealistic? I wish above all that this expression would become more precise than it has been thus far. There is an idealism of nature, and an idealism of the self. The former is for me the more original, the later the derivative. (Ibid.)

A problem to this day, the more precise definition of Idealism Schelling asks for begs the question of not only the scope and limits of philosophy, but whether one can construct a coherent and meaningful system given such a truncated field of play as supplied by Idealism. There is no better example of this than Kant and his absolute separation of the sensual from intelligible worlds as the condition of all philosophy. Not only does this render his radical dualism axiomatic, as well as deliver a universal framework incapable of interacting with, and thus having a real effect on, real existing beings, but it also creates insoluble inconsistencies within his noetic construct, due to his insistence that discursive concepts alone are permitted to constitute this universal framework. In contrast, Schelling’s response clearly rejects such global claims of the Idealism of the self as the ultimate source of order and knowing, advancing instead a relational model of both nature and the self, embedded in and dependent on the dynamic process of nature articulated in his Idealism of nature. Humanity’s epistemic limits thus extend as far as that very process itself, since “what was in nature still electricity has in intelligence advanced to sensation.” (SW I.4, 76) It follows then that the order of nature is the very same order that shapes the self, albeit in some instances at a higher level of complexity or potency. Schelling can therefore conclude that the subjective idealist is correct to the extent that the cogito is the creator of its world, but this is the case only because “this is grounded in nature itself,” since it is “the intention of nature” that this occur. (SW I.4, 77)
With this the relational dynamic of *Mitwissenschaft* emerges as the means that makes possible humanity’s direct access to the full spectrum of nature, from sensuous immediacy to abstract reflection, thereby creating the possibility to not only rethink the atomized *cogito* as actually rooted in a more basal empathetic feeling, but also of providing for an intellectual intuition which, as “the substrate that supports and carries [discursive] thinking,” opens the door to the direct contact with the noetic ideas that, as we will soon see, are the generative sources of transformation in both physical systems and the lives of humans. Such epistemic events, be they of the panoramic sublime of nature or the *henosis* of intellectual intuition, demonstrate in their soteriological power the awe-inspiring force of a real normativity, such as Kant sought for his moral law.

But whereas the orthodox Idealist rests her faith in her doctrine’s ability to clearly articulate the scope and order of her virtual world, Schelling faces the daunting task not only of constructing a convincing account of the order of his expanded Idealisms, but also of advancing a coherent and compelling account of how these two potencies of past and present interact with the most important normative tense of the future. While his transcendental philosophy grounds itself in the development of the “transcendental memory” of “the condition in which we were one with nature” (SW I.4, 77), this grounding only has purpose if it can support the creation of a future worth striving for. This demands much more than a critical and diagnostic philosophy, requiring instead one that also betrays the “robust complexion” of nature (SW I.7, 144, §22), capable of transforming not only the future into a reality more worthy than the present, but of actually transforming lives. Thus are we led again to reconsider, particularly in light of the Anthropocene, Schelling’s charge to “see philosophy differently,” to accept no longer the still dominant mode of a one-sided intellectual activity desperately trying to live up to the model of the natural sciences, and to aim instead for the integration of all our faculties, while taking seriously the demand to reestablish philosophy’s “eternal relation to nature.”

As unwelcome as it may sound, I would argue that Schelling’s demand to see philosophy differently harmonizes more with our discipline’s historical roots rather than its modern branches. To wit: seeing philosophy differently requires expanding our playing field by addressing questions institutional religion coopted in the early centuries of the Christian era and has monopolized ever since. As we saw above, this emerges most clearly in Schelling’s lectures on the philosophy of art (1802), where he explicitly connects the program of his *Naturphilosophie* with a new mythology, claiming that a “future
symbolism and mythology" will emerge from the foundations established by his speculative physics:

Neither do I hide my conviction that in the philosophy of nature, as it has been developed from the idealistic principle, the first, distant foundation has been laid for that future symbolism and mythology that will be created not by an individual but rather by an entire age. (SW I.5, 449)

This same year sees the publication of his dialogue Bruno, which as we learn in his Philosophy und Religion (Philosophy and Religion [1804]) was the first of a planned series of dialogues, all of which were aimed at the goal of reclaiming for philosophy "those sublime teachings" of philosophia sacra (SW I.6, 16), which religion had allowed to wither and die, while philosophy stooped so low "as to treat the origins of reason and ideas as concepts." (SW I.6, 17) For Schelling, the origin of reason and ideas can never be found as Kant had found them, namely in ready-made scholastic terms and concepts. Rather the ideas of reason are, in their origins and eternal birth, nature's generative Urbilder (archetypes), which for Schelling are of a sacred status. These Urbilder are the stuff of which art is made, in that art's absolute and universal material is nothing less than the ideas intuited objectively. Consequently, at this level of creation, all art is sacred. Real and objective, these ideas are to be considered as living and existing ideas, at times even as gods, and thus the only universal symbolism of these idea-gods is to be found in mythology. "Indeed, the gods of any mythology are nothing other than the ideas of philosophy intuited objectively or concretely." (SW I.5, 371) This emerges most clearly in his creation account in Philosophy und Religion, in which he focuses on the crucial moment of god's doubling, whereby the Absolute becomes objectified in its Gegenbild (counter-image) of a second absolute. In this act the absolute imparts its power to make the ideal real, thereby generating through an imaginative forming and beholding of itself its being in the real. For the absolute to become real, it must turn ideality into reality, and objectify itself into particular forms. These forms are the ideas and they are as productive as the absolute itself: like Kant's dreaded Dei intellectus, to think a form is to make it real.3 And it is this dimension of creation, that of the idea's creative power, that

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provides what Schelling calls the “true transcendental theogony” of the ideas effecting the “imaginative formation (Einbildung) of the infinite into the finite.” (SW I.6, 34, 36)

By transferring the medium of reconciliation from philosophia sacra to art, Schelling opens the possibility of his system’s restoring the sought after efficacious unity by calling for these ideas to be made more accessible and attractive to the masses by their being made mythological. In doing this Schelling advances the approach of Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus, in which the ideas are again the prime generative forces that must somehow be made aesthetic (versinnlicht), by being symbolized and then made communicable through myth.

Before we make the ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythological, they are of no interest to the people, and on the other hand, before mythology is reasonable, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus enlightened and unenlightened must finally shake hands, mythology must become philosophical and the people reasonable, while philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensuous. Then eternal unity will reign among us. Never the despising gaze, never the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then do we expect equal development of all powers, of the individual as well as the individuals. No power will be suppressed any more, and general freedom and equality of spirits will reign! A higher spirit sent from heaven must found this new religion among us, it will be the last, greatest work of humanity.4

As has been noted by many, these words resonate with Schelling’s prophecy in his Philosophy der Kunst (Philosophy of Art [1802]) of a “future symbolism and mythology” that will emerge from the foundations established by his speculative physics. (SW I.5, 449) Elsewhere in these same lectures, Schelling engages and employs similar claims to provide an opening for his own individual activities, writing that, even faced with the limitation of not being able to consciously create a universal myth, the “truly creative individual” must nonetheless be true to his genius and work to “create his own mythology, and this can occur using virtually any material or content, thus also that of a higher physics” of the sort found in his Naturphilosophie. (SW I.5, 446) Yet he qualifies this slightly, adding that such a future symbolism and mythology will not allow itself to be

4 “The So-Called ‘Oldest System,’” 266f.
“designed simply according to the instructions of certain ideas of philosophy.” (Ibid.) Rather, this new culture “await[s] its gods,” leaving it to the “füging der zeit” to determine the ultimate “synthesis of history and nature” (SW, 1/5, 449), of necessity and freedom, that will usher in the post-Christian era of the spirit, in which the “rebirth of nature” will be recognized as “the symbol of eternal unity”:

Whether this moment of time, which for all developments in science and works of humanity has become such a strange turning point, whether it will not also be so for religion, in which the true gospel of reconciliation of the world in its relationship to God will draw near, in which the temporal and merely external forms of Christianity collapse and disappear, – this is a question which must be left for every individual, who understands the signs of the future, to answer for themselves.

The new religion, which already announces itself in singular revelations, which is the return to the first mystery of Christianity and its completion, will be recognized in the rebirth of nature as the symbol of eternal unity; the first reconciliation and dissolution of the primordial strife will have to be celebrated in philosophy, whose sense and meaning only that person will grasp, who recognizes in nature the life of the newly arisen deity. (SW 1.5, 120; emphasis mine)

The trope of creation as the body of Christ is well established, but what resonates in these words read today in 2015 is the idea of a rebirth of nature and its implicit message that, since to be reborn something must first have died, then nature’s rebirth can only be bought at the price of its death. This archetype is also well established in the figures of Osiris and Dionysius, who like Jesus, suggest with their myths that the current iteration of nature must sacrifice itself in order to give birth to a new more developed nature, which Schelling believed would give birth to a new spirit of reconciliation beyond the primordial strife of our current, more primitive phase of development.

The opening for a discussion of the Anthropocene is open wide here, but I don’t want to go through it yet, because I would like to tighten the focus just a bit more on us, on we philosophers, now, in our immediate situation. A state of affairs I would characterize as one more Kantian than Schellingian when it comes to our understanding the origin of our ideas—most of us are more at ease dissecting Kantian concepts than mythic gods, and less at ease when claiming that art in its most powerful potence is sacred and derives its
power from the divine; or, finally, most of us would not agree with Schelling in his *Philosophie und Religion* that we philosophers need to recoup certain sublime teachings of an ancient *philosophia sacra*. Success and advancement in our industry requires a skepticism that comes all too naturally to us, such that we don’t need an absolute—divine or otherwise—to provide our work with what Schelling would consider its necessary horizon. The divine, the sacred, is peripheral at best, and corrosive at worst, to the serious rational discourse of philosophy—a rational discourse that is essentially driven by negation and criticism, and thus a discourse far more diagnostic than transformative.

At the close to the *Freiheitsschrift (Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* [1809]), Schelling returns to these heretical themes of modernity, and makes a rather pointed remark regarding the possibility of philosophy, one that due to its lack of an animating inner principle, anticipates a hollowed out academic scholasticism engaged only in the history of philosophy, whose only horizon looks backwards to tradition:

If the dialectical principle (that is the differentiating understanding which, precisely because of this, organically orders and forms), as well as the archetype towards which it is directed, are both simultaneously withdrawn from philosophy, so that it no longer has either measure or rule in itself, then there remains nothing else for philosophy to do save attempt to orientate itself historically, and to take as its source and guiding principle tradition. (SW 1.7, 307)

If we remove the telos of philosophy, the “archetype,” by which Schelling clearly means the divine unity “towards which it is directed,” we then deprive it of real normative power to attract, to generate hope, and thereby to transform the present as well as provide an opening for a changed future. The resulting form of negative philosophy becomes a historical subject, since its truth lies not in the present or possible future, but rather only in the past of tradition. Having lost all connection to the immediacy of truth, the philosopher then becomes a scholar of the history of ideas, his role devolving from creator of new meanings and insights to that of a curator of the historical truths of tradition. In his *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums (Lectures on the Method of Academic Studies* [1802]) he elaborates on this possibility when he claims that those engaged in a philosophy that no longer pursues its archetype as an end in itself are actually engaged “not in philosophy, but merely theory.” (SW 1.5, 350)
Schelling, however, finds this possible future of philosophy, although a very real threat in his own day, to be overshadowed by a very different possible future in which philosophy rediscovers the immediacy and living force of truth as revealed in nature. The decisive tension emerges between the immediate knowledge of truth as revealed in nature, and a faith in the truths of the past as mediated by texts. His strategy to overcome this tension casts this estrangement in the subject-object terms of our relation to nature: the Entzweigung is between the illusive asymmetrical relationship we have posited to exist between the human subject and the object of nature. This is the context in which his critique of modern philosophy since Descartes occurs: that making the subject absolute will lead to the annihilation of nature. The estrangement requiring resolution, however, is not within the human self per se, but rather between the human subject and the object of nature. In the closing paragraph of the Freiheitsschrift Schelling expresses this eloquently, connecting the “possibility of immediate knowledge” with access to a “revelation” of truth more originary than that of the religions of historical faith. The revelation of which he speaks is to be sought in the forces of nature. Continuing from where we left off above:

We entertain the greatest respect for the profound significance of historical investigations.... We believe that truth lies nearer to us and that we should first seek the solution for the problems that have become vital in our time among ourselves and on our own soil, before we wander to such distant sources. The time of merely historical faith is past as soon as the possibility of immediate knowledge is given. We have an earlier revelation than any written one - nature. It contains archetypes that no one has yet interpreted, whereas the written ones have long since received their fulfillment and exegesis. If the understanding of that unwritten revelation were inaugurated, the only true system of religion and science would appear, not in the miserable garb pieced together out of a few philosophical and critical conceptions, but at once in the full significance of truth and of nature. (SW I.7, 307)

And what does nature as the manifestation of divine life produce in human consciousness but, at a lower level of complexity, myth, and at a higher, revelation. As Schelling writes regarding the relation between mythology and revelation in his Philosophie der Offenbarung (Philosophy of Revelation [1841–2]), in myth the “presentations (vorstellungen) are products of a necessary process,” whereas revelation “presupposes an actus outside consciousness and a relationship
which the most free of all causes, god, has himself freely given to mankind.” (SW II.14, 3)

Echoing Plato’s call to seek the two classes of causes, the natural and the divine, Schelling here, some 50 years after composing his notebooks at the Stift in Tübingen, once again assigns the divine as the source of a free and thus immediate knowledge, capable of overcoming the limits of an estranged consciousness, chained as it is to a reality determined by the necessary causes of tradition and convention. Obviously such knowledge, unmediated and free, breathes life into the imagination and creativity required by every act of discovery or revelation, be it scientific or artistic. The actus for this creative development Schelling locates in the most potent freedom, the divine freedom of god, with the result that knowledge, unmediated, free and creative, becomes redemptive in its power to bring unity to humanity’s limited and fractured consciousness. All to, in effect, free us from ourselves. And since the arena of this transformative knowing is this world, this knowledge is ultimately a Mitwissenschaft, a conscientia, through which humanity realizes its essential unity and dependence on nature.

But where does this leave us regarding the “future symbolism and mythology,” a new mythology of nature, which I am here linking with the immediate revelation of a nature reborn and thus capable of reconciling our and creation’s unnecessary suffering? The key to any possible answer to this question is Mitwissenschaft and how it facilitates a broader epistemology more adequate to the challenges of the 21st century. Providing participation in nature through the ideas, the possibility is provided of moving beyond the “weary” philosophy of a merely critical, diagnostic practice, to once again stake our success on the ability to create transformative meaning that will prove “commensurate to the experience” of the coming decades. Most importantly, by accepting nature and its ideas as guarantors of life, we might stop generating theories of normativity detached from a living, immediate source of awe, respect and reverence, and instead begin to accept the challenge of wrestling with the sacred as the magnetic source that pulls us toward the horizon of a better future.

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