

# GROUND AND GROUNDING: THE NATURE OF THINGS IN SCHELLING'S PHILOSOPHY

Joan Steigerwald (York University)

*This paper examines the notions of ground and grounding across several of Schelling's works, from the philosophy of nature, through transcendental idealism and identity philosophy, to the Freedom essay and The Ages of the World. It contends that Schelling repeatedly returns to the same problematic, that each attempt to establish a foundation for philosophy is inscribed with the particular and the concrete, so that the work of grounding is also an ungrounding. It reads the different expressions of Schelling's philosophy against and through one another, arguing that each offers both a foundation and critique of its others.*

The title of this paper, "Ground and Grounding: The Nature of Things in Schelling's Philosophy," indicates the complex of terms or notions that it brings into relationship. On the one hand, it traces the notion of ground through several of Schelling's works, and considers its relationships to functions of grounding. On the other hand, it examines how this ground works in the nature of things, understanding nature here not so much as essence, although that too, but more as the natural world, both in general and in its particularities. The term things is meant to signal concrete materiality, rather than a concept of objects. The ambition, then, is to bring the philosophical notions of ground and grounding into interaction with specificity and actuality in a diversity of things, and to highlight the productive tensions between these contrary moves in Schelling's works.

The provocation for the paper comes from the oft-cited passages at the center of Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*:

The distinction between essence [*Wesen*] insofar as it exists, and essence insofar as it is the ground [*Grund*] of existence [*Existenz*].... This ground of his existence, which God has in himself, is not God considered absolutely, that is, insofar as he exists; for it is

only the ground of his existence. It is *nature* [*Natur*] – in God; an essence indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him.<sup>1</sup>

Here are some of the most potent and elusive terms in any language—ground, essence, nature, existence; *Grund*, *Wesen*, *Natur*, *Existenz*.

Schelling takes his terms from the philosophy of nature, and the *Freedom* essay directs us in a note to passages from his 1801 essay *Presentation of my System of Philosophy*. (PI, 357)<sup>2</sup> The relationship between ground and existence in these passages is elaborated through the relationship between being in itself (*Seyn*) and that which has being (*Seyende*), and between absolute identity and relative totality, in analogy with the relationship between light and gravity. But these passages complicate as much as clarify these relationships, as they place gravity in nature and grounded through nature even as it grounds natural things, and they figure absolute identity emerging in actuality only through light. This invocation of his philosophy of nature thus adds layers of meaning, which can only be excavated by tracing the figures of gravity and light through Schelling's different works.

Schelling's presentation of ground and grounding, and the nature of things, in the 1801 essay at first seems to have the form of a rational metaphysics. It claims that the existing world of particular things is grounded in an absolute identity or being in itself, as the real essence of existence. If the ground acts as the basis of things existing in the world, it is not apparent in those things, and can only be revealed through a speculative or rational philosophy. But for a rational metaphysics, there are many murky elements to Schelling's account, as he is the first to admit. (SW IV, 146/PS, 164) The ground that grounds seems itself to depend on prior grounding, so that the

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophischen Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols., (ed.) K. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–1861), vol. I, 7, tr. by J. Love and J. Schmidt as *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 357–58, trans. mod. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PI. The *Sämmtliche Werke* are referred to parenthetically in the text separately as SW, followed by volume number, only when the English translation does not provide marginal reference to SW.

<sup>2</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, in SW IV, 146–47, 163, 203, tr. by M. Vater as *Presentation of my System of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*, (ed.) M. Vater and D. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 164–65, 174, 199–200. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PS.

nature of things, even being in itself, is always already grounded. Absolute identity, as the origin of all actual identity, is always somehow prior, and thus always absent rather than present. Moreover, the ground is also at work in nature and in things, constituting only a relative identity. It not only acts as the ground for nature, prior to nature, but also acts in nature to give each thing its characteristic nature. Here the ground works as a kind of ungrounding, as founding difference rather than identity. The ground acts not only as the basis of things, but also at their margins, to found not only the harmony of all with all, but also disharmony or dissonance and thus individuality. In his philosophy of nature Schelling attempts to make sense of the specificity of things in the becoming of the world—the tension between the grounding of nature as a whole and the grounding of nature in its particularity—through a series of boundary concepts. The boundary concepts, which help us grasp natural products as the band and bounds of opposed tendencies within the dynamic life of the world, reflect the dialectic of judgment, the jointure and antagonism in every act of judgment. But for Schelling this dialectic is a dialectic without end, with no sublimation, as it not possible to get beyond such boundary concepts to a ground that is not always already bounded. Schelling himself admits that the notion of ground, like that of gravity, eludes clear conception, figuring it as fleeing from light into the night. (SW IV, 163/PS, 174)

The ground appears in Schelling's works at points of origin or beginning, acting not only as the foundation of entities—of nature, consciousness and God—but also as the foundation of philosophy. It appears at the beginning of his philosophy of nature, of his transcendental philosophy and philosophy of identity, and of his philosophy of freedom and ages of the world. The ground can thus function as an instrument for the investigation of Schelling's work. Although it operates differently in different texts and contexts, so that his repeated return to the problem is not the same, the repeated return to the same term or notion across texts offers us a way to access Schelling's work as a whole. But this repetition or repeated return to the problem of grounding suggests Schelling's awareness of its irresolution. The multiple, specific sites of grounding in his work suggests there is no absolute grounding. It would seem, then, that the impossibility of grounding is the problematic at the basis of Schelling's work.

That the *Freedom* essay claims to take the distinction of ground and existence from the philosophy of nature, and that it illustrates the

distinction analogically through the concepts of gravity and light, is significant. As many recent interpreters of Schelling have argued, the philosophy of nature is central to Schelling's philosophical project. But the relationship between his philosophy of nature and his Idealism is widely disputed, complicated by Schelling's own diverse and changing statements, and indeed seems ultimately undecidable. I would suggest a kind of involution exists between the two, in which each inhabits the other, as both foundation and critique, thus each is at once prior to and a reflection on its other.<sup>3</sup> Nature, accordingly, operates variously in Schelling's philosophy—as the natural world unfolding historically and generating “the living, actual being that presents itself within it”<sup>4</sup>; as the “visible organism of our understanding” that arises genetically through cognitive activity<sup>5</sup>; as potencies or relative totalities derived from absolute identity; and as the basis and medium for the creation of the world as well as that world in its concrete specificity. Nature has a function similar to the

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<sup>3</sup> For Schelling the philosophy of nature and transcendental philosophy become tools to supplement and interrogate critically each other. W. J. T. Mitchell applies the notion of supplementation and external critique to theory, in the context of developing a theorization of images, arguing that ideology and iconography can each be used to interrogate the other, without either being posited as providing a meta-theoretical perspective or a grounding of the other. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal Picture Theory and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11–34. Tilottama Rajan argues that Schelling suggests a modern form of interdisciplinarity, in which “the formation of interdisciplines through a process of supplementation is the (in)completion of one discipline by another, in a process wherein disciplines in a positive sense remain a point of reference only in their ‘critical negation.’” The relationship of different philosophical sciences is not that of a unified organization under a single principle, but an endless involution of systems within systems, in which different sciences are in conflict with and rethought through each other. See Tilottama Rajan, “Romantic Psyche and Psychoanalysis: ‘The Abyss of the Past’: Psychoanalysis in Schelling’s *Ages of the World* (1815),” *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, December (2008), § 33 [<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/psychoanalysis/rajan/rajan.html>], accessed 26 June 2014, and “Smooth and Tangled Systems: Philosophy as Metadiscipline in German Idealism,” in *Romanticism and Knowledge*, ed. S. Fricke, F. Meinert, and K. Pink (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Schelling, *Der Weltalter*, in SW VIII, tr. by J. Wirth as *The Ages of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 199. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AW.

<sup>5</sup> Schelling, *Einleitung zu seinem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, in SW III, tr. by K. Peterson as *Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, in *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 272. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as IO.

ground in Schelling's philosophy. It operates as a foundation, but is also a part that needs prior grounding, complicating the place of his philosophy of nature in his system of philosophy. But despite the complex place of the philosophy of nature in Schelling's work, and that the analogies drawn from it threaten to obfuscate as much as illuminate his notion of a ground, they nevertheless provide a helpful starting point.

The passages from the *Presentation of my System of Philosophy* cited in the *Freedom* essay are difficult. The *Presentation* was first published in 1801 in Schelling's *Journal of Speculative Physics*, and he cites it as the first to advance in science the distinction between ground and existence. But if ostensibly acting to explicate the concepts of gravity and light, the passages are almost impossible to decipher without some prior concept of gravity and light from Schelling's other writings on the philosophy of nature. In the 1801 text, Schelling proposes that gravity is the absolute identity as "*immediate ground of the reality of A and B in the first existent.*" (SW IV, 146/PS, 164)<sup>6</sup> We seem here to be at the beginning, with the first existing things or beings and their ground. But Schelling then argues that A and B only become real when posited together, as relative totalities rather than having independent identity. Absolute identity thus acts as the ground of existence only in and through A and B. Although it is the ground of the reality of A and B, it does not exist until A and B are posited as existing things. Gravity, posited through absolute identity, proceeds from the nature of absolute identity as its ground, and accordingly also cannot exist other than in the form of the beings and relationships of A and B. Yet gravity must be conceived as absolute identity not to the extent absolute identity exists in actuality, but to the extent it is the ground of its own being. Schelling concludes, "how impossible it is, to fathom gravity as gravity" (SW IV, 147/PS, 165, trans. mod.). Gravity is not an actual power and cannot be present in actuality; rather Schelling conceives gravity as always already relational. It is the relationship of existing things, which must somehow ground that relationship to enable things to exist. Later in the text, Schelling suggests that the action of gravity becomes clearer through its relationship to light, or in the play of cohesion and expansion. Again, he argues gravity and light must be conceived relationally, and that it is only in its identity with light that gravity reveals itself as the ground of the potency of A and B. Thus baldly stated these passages remain cryptic, absolute identity only partially removing the seal under which gravity as ground is contained and concealed.

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<sup>6</sup> See the translation and discussion of these passages in PI, 147–50.

To unpack these opaque claims it is important to turn to Schelling's other works on the philosophy of nature and to trace the analogies of gravity and light presented elsewhere.

In his 1798 *On the World Soul* Schelling opens his narration of the history of the natural world with the interaction of light and gravity, as if depicting a scene of origin. Light is a positive, expansive power. Streaming from the Sun, it spreads into the innumerable materials of our world. The Earth reacts with an opposing power, negative attraction pushing back on the expansive power. Schelling argues here that no unrestricted power is possible, no absolute expansion or annihilation, but each power is viewed "only always in conflict with its *opposite*." Our world lies in the reciprocal interaction of the two; each power "admits an infinity of possible degrees, of which none is an absolute (the absolute highest or lowest)." Thus this inaugural scene of the play of light and gravity is not a site of origin, but stages the opening up of an infinite space of play (*Spielraum*), within which the diversity of material phenomena arises that *On the World Soul* will explore. (SW II, 384, 386)

Light, Schelling argues, moves with such power and speed that it is only grasped through its movement, and only becomes apparent when the attractive power makes its movement finite and an object of perception. Yet light is not less inert than any other material product; in the living, dynamic world of Schelling's philosophy of nature, all rest is only apparent and absolute rest an absurdity (*Unding*). If light and gravity present the first empirical phenomena of natural powers, Schelling is insistent that they cannot be understood as primordial materials or forces. These positive and negative powers do not serve as explanations, but only as "boundary concepts of empirical natural science [*Grenzebegriffe der empirischen Naturlehre*]." (SW II, 386) In his writings in which he examines light and gravity in more detail—his philosophy of nature informed by recent studies in the physical sciences—Schelling argues that not only do we witness the interplay of light and gravity, but that both light and gravity in turn can only be grasped as comprised of an interplay of opposed principles. Each power is itself a relationship of opposed processes in the endless becoming of nature, in which none is an absolute origin or end point. The apparently originary scene of the interaction of the light of the Sun and the Earth is only first in our perception. Light, as Schelling contends in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* from 1800, does not mark the limit of the universe, but a

"boundary to the intuiting of the intelligence."<sup>7</sup> In *On the World Soul*, at the end Schelling circles back to the interaction between the light of the Sun and the Earth with which he began, now conceiving light as a form of the world soul. In invoking the antique poetic figure of a world soul, he is not trying to indicate a hyper-physical spirit behind the organization of the natural world, a divine source for the archetypes of creation, but quite the contrary trying to indicate the interplay of opposed powers that infuses our world in differing proportions, and makes each natural product an embodied mind or vitalized matter. Light, as the world soul, becomes a figure of the boundary concept for the whole of empirical natural science. (SW II, 565–68)

If light becomes apparent in its dynamic interactions with material objects, evident in a diversity of luminous phenomena from combustion and electricity to sensible perceptions, gravity remains in the dark. Gravity only becomes apparent through the reciprocal interaction of powers or bodies in the universe. Schelling insistently rejects the assumption that gravity is a simple attractive force in all his writings on the philosophy of nature. Gravity appears simple, but its condition is duplicity. Moreover, in demonstrating the composite character of gravity, Schelling claims to demonstrate the basic construction of matter, seeing in the concept of gravity and the concept of matter, and indeed in the concept of a universe, a similar problematic. In the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling argues that the relative stability of matter emerges at the "common boundary (*gemeinschaftliche Grenze*)" between the positive expansive power and the negative inhibiting power, a boundary of the opposed powers in relationship to one another and thus "absolutely contingent [*schlechthin zufällige*] to both."<sup>8</sup> He depicts this relative stability through the figure of a lever (*Hebel*), which balances weights at its fulcrum without eliminating the effects of each weight. In a lever, a stasis exists only insofar as both weights are actively opposed. Similarly, a relatively stable material product is possible only through the synthesis or the common effect of positive expansive and negative inhibiting powers, as opposed activities into infinity.<sup>9</sup> In his 1797 *Ideas Towards a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling details how the dynamic of attractive and repulsive powers must reciprocally ex-

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<sup>7</sup> Schelling, *Das System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, in SW III, tr. by P. Heath as *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Charlottesville: University Press of West Virginia, 1978), 494.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, 439–46, and IO, 312–13.

haust each other to form a communal power and reveal their presence in space as a single mass. But he also argues that if a balance of powers produces a state of internal rest within a body, that body also engages in a reciprocal attraction and repulsion with other external bodies, so that its stasis is continually perturbed and must continually reconstitute itself. The primary motion produced by the dynamic interplay of powers is thus not rectilinear but relational. The equilibrium of each material product is dependent on a reciprocal interaction of powers not only internal to itself but also external to it; each mass contains and is contained within a system of interacting powers. Schelling concludes that "with the solution of the problem of how matter in general is *originally* possible, the problem of a possible universe has also been solved."<sup>10</sup> As Schelling articulates this argument in his *Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* of 1799, "indifference arises only out of difference." Absolute indifference exists nowhere, with indifference canceled at every point and at every point restored. If the condition of gravity is duplicity (*Duplicität*), cancelled duality is matter. But the impossibility of an absolute cancelation of duality results in an infinite system in which only qualified indifference can be conceived in any product. "The organization thus determined is none other than the organization of the universe in the system of gravitation." (IO, 312) In asserting that the world is an organization, Schelling is not suggesting that the world could be determined through a definitive idea of a whole, but proposing an infinite interplay of powers in which the structure of the whole as well as the structure of each of its parts can only be relatively conceived.

In Schelling's philosophy of nature, then, there can be no grounding of existing things through primary powers or principles, since those powers or principles are always in need of grounding. As *On the World Soul* depicts the phenomena of our world as arising through the reciprocal interaction of the expansive power of light and the attractive power of earth as boundary concepts of empirical science, so the *Introduction* depicts nature as the mean (*Mittlere*) arising out of both productivity and product. Moreover, as both light and gravity are not conceived as fundamental forces, but rather each as comprised of a duplicity of opposed principles, so neither productivity nor product are simple or fundamental, but rather each are also marked by duplicity. A pure product, as a negation of all produc-

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<sup>10</sup> Schelling, *Ideen zur einer Philosophie der Nature*, in SW II, 183, tr. by E. Harris and P. Heath as *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 146.



tivity, can no more exist than pure productivity. No product can be actually finite, for the productive power of the whole of nature surges through it. "It must therefore be at once infinite and finite; it must be only seemingly finite, but in infinite *development*." Similarly, limitation cannot be established by a difference already existing or external to productivity, but it "must be furnished by an *opposition arising in productivity itself*." Productivity is always "*engaged in a transition into a product, or of a product that is productive to infinity*." (IO, 290, 308, 299) Each product is productive at every stage in a determinate way through particular constraints, yet no product subsists, rather what persists is an endless productivity or becoming. This infinite becoming of natural products is an "empirical infinity," a continual process of formation, annihilation and renewed formation of products that Schelling figures as a whirlpool. Where the current of pure activity "meets resistance, a whirlpool forms itself; this whirlpool is not an abiding thing, but something that vanishes at every moment, and every moment springs up anew." (IO, 289) If there is a striving in nature to identity, what is found is always a triplicity (*Dritte*), individual syntheses of duplicity in a graduated scale of activity and organization tracing the natural history of the world. In this dynamic image of the natural history of the world Schelling offers a philosophy of life that has no principle of life, but is rather what Jason Wirth portrays as a conspiracy of life.<sup>11</sup> Schelling conceives the differences he remarks between organic and inorganic, as those between matter and the universe, as differences in methods of analysis at different levels of activity and organization, rather than differences of actual powers or substances. In Schelling's philosophy of life, this natural history is comprised of an infinite series of intermediate oppositions, in which each product "*never is, but only becomes [ist nie, sondern wird nur]*." (IO, 310) The ground as the nature of things is always relational and in the midst of things.

The analogy of ground and existence to gravity and light in the *Freedom* essay offers an invitation into Schelling's philosophy of nature. Within his philosophy of nature Schelling provides a series of figures—the Sun and Earth, illumination and darkness, boundary concepts and levers, a duplicity or rather a triplicity of products and productivity—to assist in thinking or imagining the nature of the

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<sup>11</sup> Jason Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and his Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press Press, 2012). See Joan Steigerwald, "Rethinking Organic Vitality in Germany at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," in *Vitalism and the Scientific Image in Post-Enlightenment Life Science, 1800–2010*, (ed.) S. Normandin and C. Wolfe (New York: Springer, 2013), 51–75.

ground and grounding. But none allow it to be grasped decisively. The ground of nature is always already within nature, divided from within and without itself, and at unease, and thus the ground acts as the potential for ungrounding, for differentiation and deviation, as well as for drawing together and supporting.

In Schelling's 1801 *Presentation of my System of Philosophy*, the sections on gravity and light, and on the philosophy of nature more generally, are not advanced as primary, but as dependent on prior grounding. The essay begins by positing absolute reason as the ground for his philosophical system. "Reason is absolutely One and absolutely self-identical." (SW IV, 116/PS, 147, trans. mod.) It is abstracted from the subjective thoughts of individuals and from the objective world of things, standing in contrast, and thus indifferent, to both. Expressed by the law of identity,  $A = A$ , absolute reason is meant to reach to what in philosophy lies between the subjective and objective. Schelling introduces his essay by arguing that the philosophy of identity newly presented here is the system that grounds his prior different presentations in the forms of a philosophy of nature and a transcendental idealism. Abstracted from the standpoints of the subjective and the objective, absolute identity is the universal ground of all. (SW IV, 107–18/PS, 141–48)

Yet, the absolute principle of philosophy cannot be absolutely abstract, but must be expressed. Schelling begins by reflecting on his need to find a parlance (*Sprachgebrauch*) to awaken the idea of an absolute principle or ground for philosophy. (SW IV, 114/PS, 145) The language that Schelling offers here is that of reason and logic. More specifically, he uses the form of a logical proposition,  $A = A$ , which is meant to posit the immediate and original cognition of absolute identity. This formulation, using the logical symbol of the equal sign "=", is meant to capture thinking in its most universal form, in contrast to the particular forms of subjective or objective thought. This unconditioned cognition, which grounds all other cognition, Schelling contends, needs no demonstration, as it simply "is" by being thought. He then proceeds to link reason and being. He argues that the law of identity, expressed through  $A = A$ , is the highest law for the being of reason, and that since nothing outside reason is, all being is expressed through  $A = A$ . All particular beings, all things that are or exist, flow from this grounding identity of absolute reason. The copula as the logical operator "=" in the formula  $A = A$ , is tied to the copula as the present indicative of the verb "to be" or "is," to give expression to what reason is as the thinking of identity in its

highest or most universal form. This act of reasoning, this thinking identity, is then linked to being, what reason is as the ground of all that has being. The move works particularly well in the German language, as the form of the verb to be, *seyn*, is also the form of the noun being, *Seyn*.  $A = A$  or  $A \text{ ist } A$ , that relationship of reason, becomes the *Seyn* of reason, and the *Seyn* of all *Seyende* or the being of all that is.

In his essay "The Supplement of the Copula," Jacques Derrida reflects on the language of philosophy, and critically examines the question of whether the history of philosophy is limited by the resources and organization of the language in which it is expressed. This question has particular import in regard to the copula "is" and the word "to be," which function to express certain truths and support the edifice of metaphysics. Derrida interrogates this question through the linguist Émile Benveniste, who, while assuming that thought can only be grasped as formed in language, asks if there are aspects of thought independent of the linguistic categories of particular languages. Benveniste takes as a test case the absence of the verb "to be" in some languages. But Derrida notes that in looking for the absence of the verb "to be," Benveniste's analysis locates what stands in its stead, filling that absence with multiple analogies or perceived analogies. If Benveniste affirms that the verb to be is not necessarily universal, he also affirms that the equivalence of phrases to the verb "to be" is universal. He thus demonstrates the universal function of the copula through an abundance of particular examples. Perhaps the most general form of the function of the copula is the nominal sentence. Found in Russian and Hungarian, for example, it has no verb at all. Rather a pause assures the conjunction of terms and asserts their identity. Here we have a blank spacing, no graphic mark, an arrest of voice, an absence of the verb "to be." It seems closest to the function of the copula as a pure relating or logical operator. Yet Derrida notes that this absence is only a suspension. Benveniste fills it with the verb "to be," with being and its equivalents.<sup>12</sup> What then here is foundational and what derived? Do all languages, even those without the verb "to be," express the copula as the most general form of rational function? Or is the copula, as an abstract rational operation, always inscribed with particular meanings or analogies of being?

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Supplement of the Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics," in *Margins of Philosophy*, (tr.) A. Bass as (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 175–205.

Schelling provides a means to rethink these questions. In Schelling's different philosophical systems, this space of suspension is always already filled, but filled variously, indeed endlessly, and never decisively. It might be filled by a logical operator or reason in its most abstract sense, but Schelling acknowledges that these logical or rational operations can only be grasped in and through reflective and discursive forms of thought. It might be filled by being in the most general sense, but Schelling acknowledges being can only be grasped through particular existing things in the world and their powers or potencies. In his later writings Schelling fills this space with God as the absolute being, but then acknowledges that God can only be grasped through his revelation in the world and in human history. This space of suspension is always already filled, but filled in particular ways in particular systems, each a figure for grounding, yet acting within a given system rather than as the basis of all systems, so that the function of grounding is always figured, particular and relative. The space of suspension becomes both the band and boundary of identity and difference, bound to specific expressions.

In the 1801 essay, Schelling's argument that the proposition  $A = A$  posits identity itself is taken from Johann Gottlieb Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, as Schelling acknowledges. (SW IV, 117/PS, 147) Fichte, however, moves from the copula expressed as logical proposition  $A = A$ , through its expression as the verb "to be" (*seyn*) in the third person indicative  $A$  is  $A$ , to its expression in the first person indicative  $I$  am  $I$  or *Ich bin Ich*. The proposition accepted by everyone, expressed in its intersubjective form,  $A$  is  $A$ , is changed into its subjective form  $I$  am  $I$  or  $I$  am, Fichte contending that we must reflect on reasoning or thinking in general by reflecting on our own activity of thinking and acting in the world. The relationship of the subject  $A$  to the predicate  $A$ , is a synthetic judgment enacted by the finite subject or  $I$ . Fichte traces this activity of the  $I$  through its encounters with objects and other subjects in the world, with what is other than the  $I$ , or the not- $I$  op-posed or counter-counterposited (*entgegen-gesetzt*) to the  $I$ . Such encounters provoke reflection—producing the interdetermination or determinate concepts of the not- $I$  beyond the activity of the  $I$  and of the  $I$  as a finite conscious being acting in the world. In Fichte's subjective idealism, both the not  $I$  and the finite  $I$  are grounded in the absolute  $I$ , the free act of the  $I$  exceeding all such limitation and determination. But for Fichte the absolute, as the complete freedom and immediate self-intuition of the  $I$ , is an ideal endlessly striven towards, yet never realized in actuality; derived from the self reflecting on itself, it remains a presupposition and projection of the finite  $I$ . In his 1801 essay, Schelling stays with the

third person indicative, A is A, in an attempt to express an absolute identity abstracted from the standpoints of the subjective and the objective, and as the universal ground of all.

The attempt to seek a foundation for Schelling's philosophy in any one of his philosophical systems, however, seems misplaced. In fact, despite his insistent moves away from Fichte, Schelling repeatedly returns to the expressions of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* in the various presentations of his philosophy. Schelling's philosophy of nature traces a natural history of the world in which the "ideal must arise out of the real and be explained from it," yet he also presents that philosophy of nature as the speculations of thinking beings reflecting on the conditions of that history in the terms of transcendental idealism. (IO, 272) Schelling explores the analogies between natural products conceived as bands or boundaries of opposed tendencies within the dynamic life of the world, and concepts as enfolded judgments marked by the antagonism and jointure of the dialectic of thinking. The "boundary concepts" that mark stages of activity and organization in the dynamic becoming and life of the world, also mark stages of analysis in the dialectical activity of thinking between spontaneity and limitation, opposition and synthesis. But he holds that thought can no more be derived from the activity of nature than nature from the activity of thought. The dialectical form of our concepts reflects our embeddedness in nature as thinking and living beings engaged with the world. Schelling grants that the true representation of science is "that it is the development of a living actual being which presents itself within it." (AW, 199) We are necessarily in a world of our own thinking and making, even as we as thinking and acting beings are constrained and produced by that world. The philosophy of nature thus acts as the limit of transcendental philosophy, as its dark interior, while transcendental philosophy's endless interrogation of nature prevents the philosophy of nature from completion. In his 1801 *Presentation*, Schelling posits absolute reason as the ground for philosophy, distinguishing the logic of the copula and the law of identity from the dialectic of reflection. But, as Michael Vater has pointed out, precisely through this opposition absolute reason and reflection slide into one another. Schelling in fact states that "absolute identity cannot cognize itself infinitely without infinitely positing itself as subject and object." (SW IV, 123/PS, 151) Absolute identity can only know itself by actualizing

itself in finite limited knowers and in finite particular things.<sup>13</sup> It is not clear, then, that Schelling has moved beyond Fichte's problem that absolute reason and absolute identity remain presuppositions and projections of the finite I. Schelling's identity philosophy offers something new, a perspective on the absolute, but as a system of philosophy it cannot get outside of the particularity of its parlance (*Sprachgebrauch*) and the boundedness of its science.<sup>14</sup> The conclusion drawn here is that Schelling posits no grounding for philosophy, just as he posits no grounding for nature; instead he examines different possible methods and principles for philosophical analysis, and their involutions with and in one another.

In 1806, Schelling returns to the problem of the copula, by way of a new beginning for his philosophy of nature, a new introduction to *On the World Soul*.<sup>15</sup> In this introduction, the copula functions as "the eternal unity of the infinite with the finite," but, in a manner similar to the 1801 essay, precisely through that unity effecting the entanglement and enfolding of the one with the other. The copula acts as the band, the infinite in itself, the true and real infinite. But this band (*Band*) must express itself in the bound (*Verbundene*). The bound is the actual infinite, the infinity of forms in which the eternal band affirms itself, as its imprint (*Abdruck*). "What is in the one, is also in the other." (SW II, 360–62) Schelling depicts an involution of infinitude and finitude, of band and bound, as a play of reflection and images, of shadowing (*Abschattung*) and counter glow (*Gegenschein*). In this space of play (*Spielraum*) figures crowd in, traces of both band and bound, the marks of the world in all their particularity and infinity. Matter here takes pride of place, the essay opening with musings on matter as the figure of all things, at once part and whole, bearing the opacity of the real and translucency of the ideal. "The darkest of all things, yea the dark itself [*das Dunkel selbst*], is matter." (SW 2, 359) It is the unknown root of the appearances of nature, but in which we may deduce the inner spring-work (*Triebwerk*) of the universe and the highest ground of philosophy. Here too is the infinite space of play of gravity and light. Gravity shows itself overall as midpoint, manifest in the present and in every point, acting as the

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Vater, "Intellectual Intuition in Schelling's Identity Philosophy 1801–1804," in *Schelling: Between Fichte and Hegel/Zwischen Fichte und Hegel*, (ed.) C. Asmuth, A. Denker, and M. Vater (Amsterdam: Grüner, 2000), 220.

<sup>14</sup> Rajan finds a similar problematic in Idealism's project of establishing philosophy as a metadiscipline, in that philosophy is always entangled with the margins of philosophy, the empirical disciplines it seeks to systematize and contain. See "Smooth and Tangled Systems."

<sup>15</sup> See Iain Hamilton Grant's discussion of the introduction in this issue.

germ of things. Light is also ubiquitous, giving identity to individuality and striving to unfold the buds of things. "The darkness of gravity and the glare of light together first bring forth the beautiful appearances of life." (SW 2, 369) The copula is the source of life, affirming itself in each individual, through which nature unfolds itself as productivity. Invoking the anthropomorphic images that would become the predominant expressions of the *Freedom* essay and *The Ages of the World*, Schelling also figures the band as an endless love (*Liebe*) of itself, an endless desire (*Lust*) to reveal itself; the imprint of this eternal "wanting of itself [*sich-selber-Wollens*]" is the world. The abstract band of the copula is imprinted by the endless images of the bound, even as it acts to imprint all. The abstract band becomes the "living copula" to which we belong and in which we are, the ground evident only in the images of the world. (SW 2, 362, 374)

Despite, or perhaps because, of his preoccupation with grounds and grounding, Schelling articulates the inherent paradox of a science founded on first principles. It seems that philosophical science must do without an absolute beginning, for whatever beginning it takes as its point of departure proves to be merely derived, with the progressive process of determination and the regressive process of grounding belonging to one another.<sup>16</sup> After his 1806 essay, Schelling casts this problematic increasingly figuratively, the *Freedom* essay and the drafts of *The Ages of the World* shrouding reason in the symbolic language of mythology. The problematic of first principles now is rendered as the problem of first origins, the history of the world soul is narrated as a creation story, a story of the self-revelation of God in and through the world, and philosophy is presented as turning from dialectic to history. But Schelling continues to enlist the terms of his philosophy of nature, transcendental idealism and identity philosophy, still circling around the same problematic, even as he expresses it differently.

To return to the 1809 *Freedom* essay with which this paper begins, the perplexing opposition between the ground and existence of God becomes clearer in light of Schelling's considerations of ground and grounding in earlier texts. The central problem of the *Freedom* essay is how autonomous life can exist in the world, or more specifically how freedom is possible in a scientific system. Schelling departs

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus," tr. by N. Midgley and J. Norman as "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism," in *The New Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 49.

from the opposition of nature and spirit or mind (*Geist*) informing most contemporary philosophical investigations of freedom, arguing instead that both nature and freedom in the existing world are informed jointly by ground and spirit. The scientific system Schelling is troubled by is Pantheism, and Spinoza in particular, insofar as it presents a mechanistic worldview in which all activity is determined and all becomes lifeless things. But Schelling is also troubled by Idealism as a rational science, including his own previous contributions to such a science; in a system of purely formal reason there is no ground for autonomous life outside reason, but then reason determines itself without basis. Schelling concludes that neither deterministic systems of nature nor deterministic systems of reason can provide a ground for autonomous life. Life can only freely exist through freedom not only from mechanistic nature, but also from absolute reason. Spinoza's nature must be spiritualized (*vergeistigt*) and pure reason grounded (*gegründet*), so that "all everything real [*Wirklichkeit*] (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground." (PI, 352) Autonomous life can only be constituted through the mutual informing or involution of ground and spirit.<sup>17</sup> For Schelling, freedom is only possible in nature if its basis is comprehended as a conflictual site.

The figure of a living God helps illuminate these claims. Schelling contends that "God himself is not a system, but rather a life." (PI, 399) Insofar as God exists and is actualized in the world, he is a living God, inflected by the same duplicity as his creation. God is the world soul, at once ground and spirit, just like his creation. Autonomous life, in order to exist freely in and through nature, must be separated from God and become in a ground different from him. But since nothing can be outside God, things must have their ground in that which in God is not God himself. The world of existing things is only possible through the ground. The ground persists in existing things; indeed, the ground, like gravity, only has actuality in existing things. Yet the forms of existing things, for all their dependence on the ground as their real basis, are also dependent on what is distinct from the ground, the ideal spirit, much as gravity is dependent on light for its actual appearance in the world. The life of independently existing things needs both. It is this interplay of ground and spirit

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<sup>17</sup> Schelling, *Stuttgart Privatvorlesungen*, in SW VII, tr. by T. Pfau as *Stuttgart Seminars*, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 458; and Martin Heidegger, *Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, tr. by J. Stambaugh as *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), 14–50.



that ensures that God is a living God, and ensures the life of his creation and all its creatures. Schelling portrays God as always already divided in himself to account for the life and autonomy of his creatures, but thus also inscribes back into God the divisions obtaining in his creatures.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to express his meaning in terms closer to us as human beings, Schelling portrays creation or the self-realization of God as analogous to the genesis of representation in consciousness, according to the approach of transcendental idealism. He thus figures the ground as “the yearning [*Sehnsucht*] which the eternal One feels to give birth to himself.” The ground as yearning is already the first stirring of divine existence, for, corresponding to the yearning, an inner reflexive representation is generated in God himself, through which God sees himself in his image. This representation of God within God is the word of yearning; in the beginning is the word, through which God expresses or realizes himself in the world. Schelling depicts the yearning that wants to give birth to God in creation as a will. It is a will that is not yet understanding, and for that reason it is not an independent and complete will. Rather it is a yearning for understanding. Schelling christens it a “prescient will [*ahnender Wille*] whose prescience is the understanding.” (PI, 359, trans. mod.) The word of yearning produced through reflection is the representation of understanding, productive of the concepts and words that we use to order the world. Yearning combined with understanding, then, becomes the all-powerful creative will; only both together in God are productive of the world. The existing world, as the self-revelation of God, is a joint formation, depending on the involution of yearning and understanding.

Each existing thing is the image of God, but it is not God itself. Each life has self-will autonomous of the divine spirit; if dependent on the universal will for actualization as will, it is also dependent on the ground to actualize itself as a particular will independent of the universal will. Schelling’s argument is most clearly expressed in relation to human beings. Each human being participates in universal spirit, but is also a particular being with a distinct personality and selfhood. Human selfhood requires a ground in what is distinct from God to be capable of autonomous life. Self-autonomy is the freedom to accord or deviate from the divine will, the capacity for good or

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<sup>18</sup> David Clark, “‘The Necessary Heritage of Darkness’: Tropics of Negativity in Schelling, Derrida, and de Man,” in *Intersections: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory*, (ed.) T. Rajan and D. Clark (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 87.

evil. In human beings the image of God is brought to its fullest light, the word of God made most articulate, but the human being thus also has the greatest capacity to dissent from God. "In him there is the deepest abyss and the highest heaven." (PI, 363) But the entire unfolding of the world participates in a similar dynamic. Each entity is autonomous, taking its being from the ground distinct from God as well as its image from the representation of universal spirit. All autonomous life, as duplicitous being constituted from the opposition and juncture of ground and spirit, has the capacity for deviance, deviance that might produce a false life, such as disease or monstrosity, but that might also produce fruitful transformations, in the free becoming of the world.

Thus it is startling that Schelling, towards the close of his *Freedom* essay, suggests as the end of creation the expulsion of evil and the domination of spirit, and a final separation and dissolution of the ground. This move seems to concede what he has rejected from the beginning, that pure spirit cut off from the ground could explain freedom, as has been claimed in Idealism. Indeed, Schelling argues that even God has the ground as the condition of his existence, which he cannot abolish without abolishing himself. (PI, 399) If the ground precedes God, it is a condition within God, without which God is not an actual living God. Thus the prospect of incapacitating and expelling the ground seems at odds with his entire prior argument. But Schelling also makes a further move, positing love as higher than spirit, love as combining what could exist for itself and yet cannot exist without its other. The entire entangled life of the world, then, seems but a premise of love. But no sooner than he posits love as the purpose of creation, Schelling posits an unground (*Ungrund*) as its primal ground (*Urgrund*), the essence of the absolute in itself, before all duality and opposition, before the distinction of ground and existence with which the essay began. (PI, 401–409) At the end of the text thus appears a regressive movement to the ground of grounds, the *Urgrund*, as a primal scene of origins. Clark highlights the projective and speculative character of this move. As the indifference of all opposition, the *Ungrund* can only be characterized negatively.<sup>19</sup> It acts as the space of the copula, in which all that is, is, comes to be, and is joined in love. The unground accordingly is involved from the start with the world, acting as its primal ground, but also acting as its ungrounding, constituting the identity and difference of the duplicitous life and love of the world. What then is the end of nature? The

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<sup>19</sup> Clark, "The Necessary Heritage of Darkness," 119–33.

*Freedom* essay seems to conclude in ambiguity, in indecisiveness, or in undecidability.<sup>20</sup>

This ambiguity and indecisiveness appears again in the drafts for *The Ages of the World*, Schelling now troubling over the problem of the beginning, as opposed to the ends, of creation. The first 1811 draft opens by proffering an image of the divine morning of the world, a fabled pre-worldly time. Like the pure spirit of the *Freedom* essay, the inaccessible light of the eternal is freedom from existence, a purity and simplicity; a bliss entirely filled from itself, it is a still inwardness or emptiness. Yet we can see only an endless series of times, in which nowhere does anything original show itself, and nothing grounded in itself is evident. The primordial essence (*Urwesen*) itself thus must be posited as always already past, as never present to us, but rather as eternally lying buried in the ground. To allow what absolutely is not to step out into being (*Seyn*), Schelling posits “an other will [*ein andere Wille*].” The first will is now figured as the pure want (*Wollen*) of eternity, a will that wills nothing, eternally the same and affirming. The other will is the will of existence, a striving to development, a restricting and contracting drive. But this other will is also eternal according to its nature. As in the *Freedom* essay, in the 1811 *Ages* draft Schelling insists that if the essence of all essences is love, love needs the opposing power of individuality as the ground of its existence. Both affirming love and contracting will are somehow present in eternity, shrouded in darkness, before, or rather beyond, a beginning and development in time.<sup>21</sup> In the last version of *The Ages of the World*, the 1815 draft, Schelling again introduces the absolute as always already divided in itself, now articulated as the opposition between freedom and necessity, an eternal opposition in which both are equally originary and essential. Pure freedom receives scant attention, only a brief sketch in a few pages. As in the 1811 *Ages*, pure spirit is a pure will that wills nothing, a pure want (*Wollen*), the immutable affirmative concept of absolute eternity. All the action churns in the ground, the negative power as the necessary nature of God and the world. Schelling now emphasizes that the ground of God is always already divided in itself, comprised of both an eternal drive to expansion, to reach out and affirm itself in accord with its necessity, but equally and oppositely a drive to closure, to withdraw into itself. The ground of God thus is an

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<sup>20</sup> David Farrel Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 100–101.

<sup>21</sup> Schelling, *Die Weltalter: Fragmente in den Urfassung von 1811 und 1813*, (ed.) M. Schröter (Munich: Beck, 1946), 10–21.

endless activity that can never begin or end, a blind life ceaselessly circulating (*Umtrieb*) within itself, a rotary motion entangled in contrary drives. (AW, 207–42) Again, Schelling inscribes the oppositions of the world in time onto the divine essence of eternity beyond time, making contradiction fundamental.

In the *Ages* Schelling is compelled to posit a beginning to the unfolding of the existing world, a beginning to which he repeatedly returns in successive drafts, yet never satisfactorily finding one, and in the end abandoning the project. Schelling portrays the beginning as an unconscious decision effected in the ground of God, a development from below rather than from the still purity of spirit. In a violent break from the machinations of necessity and unwitting obsession (*Sucht*), a yearning (*Sehnsucht*) is awakened in the ground to escape its eternal rotary motion, and a cision is produced by a movement towards affirmation. In the 1815 draft, this decision is described as not only inconceivable, but “unprethinkable [*unvor-denklich*],” an eternal beginning “having *happened* since all eternity (and as still always happening).” (AW, 219, 225) Yet Schelling also attempts to portray the possibility of this eternal beginning, arguing that the power of beginning is effected by wanting what is posited as not having being, so that what is not becomes what should be and an object of yearning. Schelling draws an analogy here to science, which also begins by a recognition of ignorance, yet also cannot posit ignorance without making science the object of its desire. Similarly, even affirmation requires a negation, a turning inward and a limitation of the self as the object of its yearning. The ground of God restricts itself, negates itself, and thus affirms itself to become independent being. The life of the ground is redeemed from the ceaseless contradiction of circular motion as the affirming drive predominates, and yearning emerges from the necessity of obsession to ally itself with the pure will of freedom. Only insofar as the ground is inflected with an affirming drive from within itself can it be pulled out of its darkness by spirit, and only insofar as the affirming drive allows itself to be pulled into the profane world of necessity can it exist. Here becomes the world, the band (*Band*) or boundary (*Grenze*) between both, figured as the world soul, the organ or instrument (*Werkzeug*) of a living God, at once ascending and descending, the place of love and war. (AW, 223–25, 243–54)

In the *Ages* it is the ground of God that attracts Schelling’s attention. Unlike the *Freedom* essay, he remains with the contradictions of this endless beginning and becoming, unable to escape the existing world to a tranquil or indifferent eternity beyond the conflicts of history. Schelling tarries with the negative, the ground consuming

his text, preventing its completion. Although the living God and living world can only be conceived through the ground, it nevertheless remains indeterminate, figured as unruly and dark, compulsive and unspeakable. The ground is not only tangled up in the general state of inconsonance found in the world as a whole and its origin, but is contradictory within itself. A conflicting annular drive of blind obsession without direction, it is dependent on an affirming positive drive to get it out of itself and become a directed will; yet the ground also subverts the tendency of spirit to draw all into harmony with the universal will. Like Plato's *khora* the ground is the receptacle for all things corporeal, granting or opening a place for being; it is not being itself, but a withdrawal that leaves space for presence. But it also has a positivity. Like a surging sea, or gravity, it requires some form of impression to become some being in particular; yet it is also active in that being. The ground of God becomes the existing God of creation as the multitude of individuated things through the gradual unfolding of a seed kernel planted in the dark earth and emerging into light. It is this ground that gives to each created being its independence from the whole, its own life and freedom. But its necessary activity in each created being means that all that becomes can only become in discontent; the whole of nature and each particular nature commences with a rotation around its own axis, and thus in a state of inner aversion and rage. Such is the grim fate of all life. (AW, 243–48, 319–23) In Schelling's *Ages of the World* there is no resolution, only life endlessly becoming, inflected with duplicity and contradiction, "visible nature, in particular and as a whole, an allegory [*Gleichniß*] of this perpetually advancing and retreating movement." (AW, 231)

The *Ages* circles around the problem of the ground without end. It is a problem to which Schelling returns repeatedly in his different philosophical systems, from his philosophy of nature and transcendental idealism, through his identity philosophy, to his philosophy of freedom and the ages of the world. In various works Schelling insistently introduces the ground that is meant to ground as dependent on prior grounding; the ground that grounds is always already grounded. Grounding is thus always absent, never present. And yet grounding is also always at work in nature, as the basis of the endless the diversity and life of the world. Grounding is thus always a movement in two directions, progressive and regressive, an involution of infinitude and finitude, at once grounding and ungrounding the nature of things. We might agree with David Krell that the interrogation of the absolute ground is a questioning without an answer, the confronta-

tion with an enigma that cannot be resolved.<sup>22</sup> In the 1815 *Ages*, however, Schelling invites us to consider whether such a contradiction is not exactly what we would want. He criticizes the assumption that the paradoxes and tensions in his philosophical systems could be resolved by a purely formal unity. Instead he highlights the dialectic of judgment as a product of the copula or band that makes each judgment at once an antagonism and jointure. Each concept is an enfolded judgment, a boundary concept marking the tension between affirmation and constraint at different moments in the analysis of the ongoing becoming of the world. Schelling contends that the main weakness of all modern philosophy lies in the lack of intermediate concepts. "But the intermediate concepts [*mittleren Begriffe*] are precisely the most important concepts, nay, the only concepts that actually explain in all of science." (AW, 286) Through these boundary concepts or intermediary concepts Schelling attempts to depict the life of the world, living nature and the life of God. But it is perhaps the figures and mixed metaphors littering his philosophical systems that best express this inevitable tension. Here we are, always already in the midst of things, in the space of play of light and dark. Here too lies the world, the nature of things and its ground.

*steiger@yorku.ca*

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<sup>22</sup> Krell, *The Tragic Absolute*, 13.