

SCHELLING'S DARK NATURE AND THE PROSPECTS FOR 'ECOLOGICAL CIVILISATION'

Gord Barentsen

ABSTRACT: 'Ecological civilisation' establishes ecology as an ur-science which informs a radical rethinking of humanity's relationship with Nature, fueled by the acknowledgement that neoliberalist assumptions about Nature and science ultimately pose dire threats to the survival of the human species. Friedrich Schelling's thought, and specifically his *Naturphilosophie*, has rightly been seen as a precursor of the process philosophy underwriting contemporary notions of ecological civilisation and the critique of the Cartesian gap between humanity and Nature perpetuated by neoliberalism. Yet the psyche-Nature isomorphism cemented early in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* by his description of Nature in protopsychanalytic terms such as drive [*Trieb*] and compulsion [*Zwang*] gesture to a dark, indeterminate Nature which, in its profound ambivalence toward its own products, resists idealist projections of unity or harmony. The question thus arises: can the transformative political action demanded by an ecological civilisation be underwritten by a Nature infected by an indeterminacy which also implicates the human psyche? This essay explores this question by examining first the Nature articulated by Schelling in his *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), then turning to this Nature's recrudescence as theodicy and a theory of personality in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809). I conclude without concluding, with more questions than answers in the form of brief observations on the implications of Schelling's dark Nature for ethical metanarrative and its relevance to the future.

KEYWORDS: Ecological civilisation; Friedrich Schelling; *Naturphilosophie*; *Ungrund*; Nature; Freedom; Evil; Individuation; Speculative Naturalism; Ethics; John Caputo

INTRODUCTION

'Acorn.' 'Ash.' 'Beech.' 'Cygnet.' 'Dandelion.' 'Fern.' 'Heather.' 'Lark.' 'Mistletoe.' 'Nectar.' 'Newt.' 'Otter.' 'Pasture.' In early 2018 the editors of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* decided to remove these and other words describing

Nature from their children's dictionary in favour of contemporary substitutes such as 'analogue,' 'attachment,' 'broadband,' 'blog,' and 'cut and paste.' In fact, these changes were made back in 2007 – they only recently attracted scrutiny when, in 2015, a group of writers including Canadian author Margaret Atwood and Sir Andrew Motion (UK Poet Laureate from 1999-2009) wrote to protest the decision.¹

Although this attempt to trim and prune Nature's linguistic proliferation may not be an overtly political position, it nevertheless aligns with the uniquely neoliberalist trajectory of pathological monetisation – a pathology which objectifies Nature as a source of capitalist gain just as it marginalises discourses which question or challenge it. Arran Gare aptly describes this project as paradoxically both materialist and idealist: on the one hand, a governing scientific materialism naturalises the premises of empirical science as capable of explaining all aspects of human experience, stripping Nature of its depth to enforce a hegemony of the distinct and measurable. On the other hand, neoliberalism's Idealism reduces Being and the world to a social construct and, 'while sharing [scientific materialism's] commitment to the domination of nature, differs in treating human subjects as above nature and in celebrating human rationality.'² This paradox has precipitated what can only be described, from an anthropocentric perspective, as an ecological crisis our species has never before seen.

One proposed solution to this crisis is to nurture an 'ecological civilisation' – in other words, to cultivate a 'religious' relationship with Nature in the broadest non-denominational sense.³ To be sure, this idea ultimately harks back to the

¹ Alison Flood, 'Oxford Junior Dictionary's replacement of "natural" words with 21st-century terms sparks outcry', *The Guardian*, 13 Jan 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/13/oxford-junior-dictionary-replacement-natural-words>>. Referenced 30 Mar 2019.

² Arran Gare, 'The Roots of Postmodernism', in Catherine Heller and Anne Daniell (eds.), *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 32.

³ Put simply, Arran Gare defines 'ecological civilization' as a mode of human existence based on a 'transformation of the relationship between science and other domains of culture' which reworks current 'deep assumptions' about humanity's relationship to Nature (Arran Gare, 'Toward an Ecological Civilization', *Process Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2010, p. 12. While Gare does not define this transformation as 'religious,' the word's complex etymology compellingly

First System Programme of German Idealism, written most likely in the final years of the eighteenth century by either Schelling, Hegel, or Hölderlin. The *Programme* is a manifesto of both German Idealism and Romanticism; it envisions the ‘absolutely free individual’ as the starting point for a ‘mythology of reason’ which unites the sensuous with the world of ideas to achieve ‘the equal formation of all forces, in particular persons as well as all individuals.’⁴ But as we turn to the *Naturphilosophie* of Friedrich Schelling’s 1799 *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, we will see that these forces are not so easily enlisted into the service of either human consciousness or a post-Kantian kingdom of ends. Indeed, even as Schelling’s conception of Nature merits him a place among the first process philosophers, this conception is also *protopsychanalytic*; Schelling is already describing a dark, indeterminate Nature in the register of compulsion, drive, and derangement – a Nature which cannot be contained by the rubric of ‘overcoming’ in either individual or collective political senses, and a Nature which would become so important to the major psychoanalytic theories of the 20th century.

In this spirit, this essay asks a crucial question meant to productively interrogate the idea of ecological civilisation: to what extent can we ground such a civilisation on a dark, indeterminate Nature – in essence, to ground civilisation on the ungrounded? Put differently: can we feasibly underwrite a new social contract with a Nature that is itself deranged and schizophrenic toward its own products? Gare rightly recognises Schelling as a seminal thinker in the tradition of process thought with which the notions of ecological civilisation and speculative naturalism are closely aligned.⁵ Moreover, ecological civilisation’s drive to make ecology an ur-science which constellates other disciplines makes a working-through of Schelling’s engagement with the

addresses the nature of this relationship. ‘Religion’ is perhaps based on the Latin *religare* (‘to bind’), but in his ‘On the Nature of the Gods’ Cicero derives it from *relegere* (‘to re-read’), suggesting a practice of careful attention and, in this sense, ‘devotion.’ Both senses speak to the ethos of care and attention demanded by an ecological civilisation.

⁴ I refer to David Ferrell Krell’s translation of the *Programme*. See David Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2005, pp. 25-26.

⁵ Arran Gare, ‘Speculative Naturalism: A Manifesto’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 307f., 308 n. 17.

problem of Nature all the more important. Thus, I begin with the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling's *First Outline* to articulate his first and most radical conception of Nature's infinite productivity. I will then turn to *Naturphilosophie's* extension to theodicy in the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (the 'Freedom essay'), which offers crucial insights into how Nature's derangement operates in the domains of the human and divine. I will end by revisiting the idea of transformative action which underwrites 'ecological civilisation' and explore some of the implications of Schelling's framework for issues of ethics and morality.

SHELLING'S *NATURPHILOSOPHIE*: INHIBITION AND 'UNNATURAL NATURE'

In contrast to a scientific mechanism which understands Nature solely in terms of surface relations between phenomena, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is a 'speculative physics' which aims to discover the fundamental dynamic forces and drives – the ground of Nature's infinite productivity. That is, *Naturphilosophie* 'assumes that the sum of phenomena is not a mere world, but of necessity a Nature (that is, that this whole is not merely a product, but at the same time productive).'⁶ Thus *Naturphilosophie* operates in a register not of stasis but of process, drive and compulsion: in the Introduction to the *Outline*, Schelling writes that 'Nature can produce nothing but what shows regularity and purpose, and Nature is compelled [*gezwungen*] to produce it' (*FO* 194). This Nature is one of 'absolute activity,' which is marked by 'the drive [*Trieb*] to an infinite development' (*FO* 18). Through this productive drive, Nature is also compelled to create organic and inorganic natural products as part of a general economy⁷ of infinitely productive relations. And like Nature in turn, the

⁶ Friedrich Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith Peterson, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 197. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *FO*.

⁷ In *The Accursed Share* (3 vols., 1946-1949), Georges Bataille juxtaposes a restricted economy (a network of limited and discernible relations between things, such as the act of changing a tire which involves predetermined actions and tools) with a general economy, which accounts for the excess of energy in complex systems. Whether this non-recuperable energy is expressed in culture as art or more broadly as war (Bataille's main examples), it poses a risk to the prevailing

organism self-organises according to principles irreducible to a conceptual system, recapitulating Nature's infinite productivity in ways which anticipate a mind-Nature parallelism which Schelling will later explore in the *Freedom* essay. As Robert Richards writes, '[*Naturphilosophie*] suggested that nature might furnish a path back to the self [. . .] the exploration of nature might even be regarded as a necessary propaedeutic to the development of the self.'⁸ Nature is a Deleuzian fold, entangling interiority and exteriority: one finds oneself *within* Nature, but in going back through Nature one can move forward through Nature's 'exploration.' Indeed, Jason Wirth offers a compelling case for considering the *Naturphilosophie*, if not as psychology, nonetheless *psychologically*; he suggests that 'doing *Naturphilosophie*' is not 'doing a science,' but rather 'doing philosophy in accordance with nature,' as 'a gateway into the originating experience of philosophizing' itself.⁹ To plumb the depths of Nature is to sound the depths of one's own nature.

Schelling's particular formulation of *Naturphilosophie* derives from the broader field of German nature philosophy which, at the turn of the nineteenth century, encompassed Romantic biology and other disciplines. Writing that 'all Romantic biologists were *Naturphilosophen*, but not all *Naturphilosophen* were Romantics',¹⁰ Richards argues that *Naturphilosophie* not only shifts away from eighteenth-century mechanist philosophy but also marks Schelling's move away from Kant within *Naturphilosophie* itself. Contrary to Kant's conception of the archetypes of species as transcendental entities of an ideal reality, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* begins with the 'real' instead of the 'ideal,' existence instead of categorical consciousness: 'the ideal must arise out of the real and admit of explanation from it' (*FO* 194). Schelling moves against Kant's noumenal-

system. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1, 3 vols., New York, Zone Books, 1991, pp. 23-26.

⁸ Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 134.

⁹ Jason Wirth, *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2015, p. 17. Schelling's use of fundamentally psychological terms such as drive [*Trieb*] and compulsion [*Zwang*] to describe Nature prefigure their deployment in depth psychology, particularly Jungian metapsychology. For the connection between Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and Jungian metapsychology see Gord Barentsen, 'Silent Partnerships: Schelling, Jung, and the Romantic Metasubject', *Symposium*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015, pp. 71ff.

¹⁰ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, p. 8.

phenomenal bifurcation of existence on the one hand, and on the other hand he also moves against Fichte's 'absolute I,' which makes Nature an epiphenomenon of subjective consciousness. In the architectonic of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, organicism is a regulative idea which denies Nature any genuinely aleatory force. In contrast, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is 'an a priori study of the 'Idea' of nature [. . .] [it] is not a mechanical system but a series of basic 'forces' or 'impulses' that mirror at the basic level the same kind of determinations that are operative in us at the level of freedom. [Thus *Naturphilosophie*] must construct an account of nature that is continuous with our freedom.'¹¹

Richards writes, perhaps with some irony, that 'the fundamental idea of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* was simply that nature strove to achieve the absolute'.¹² Hardly a simple idea, however, for although Schelling critiques Kantian formalism by conceiving Nature as radical productivity, he does not jettison the a priori. Rather, anticipating Deleuze's transcendental empiricism, Schelling relocates the a priori in experience. In the Introduction to the *First Outline* he writes:

Not only do we know this or that through experience, but we originally know nothing at all except through experience, and by means of experience, and in this sense the whole of our knowledge consists of the judgments of experience. These judgments become a priori principles when we become conscious of them as necessary [. . .] every judgment which is merely historical for me—i.e., a judgment of experience—becomes, notwithstanding, an a priori principle as soon as I arrive, whether directly or indirectly, at insight into its internal necessity. [. . .] It is *not, therefore*, that WE KNOW *Nature* as a priori, but *Nature* IS a priori. (FO 198)

Written after the *First Outline*, and as an attempt to rein in Nature's infinite productivity by synchronising it with transcendental Idealism's emphasis on self-consciousness, Schelling's Introduction describes Nature's productivity is 'the most perfect geometry [. . .] a mode of explanation whereby the real itself is transported into the ideal world, and those motions are changed into intuitions which take place only in ourselves, and to which nothing outside of us

¹¹ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 178, 181.

¹² Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, p. 297.

corresponds' (*FO* 193). But even here, in introducing psychology and appealing to experience as the criteria for a priori principles, Schelling does not rein in this indeterminacy so much as redouble it on the level of psyche.¹³ And in stating that 'Nature is a priori' he folds the a priori back into contingency, which makes the *Naturphilosophie* forever resistant to encapsulation by self-consciousness just as it opens up self-consciousness to the contingency of Nature.

In the *Naturphilosophie*, then, the a priori is no longer separated from phenomena, but is now imbricated with thought's (revisable) experience of natural objects as external stimuli. What Hegel will economise as dialectic becomes, with Schelling, dialects of dialectic as the a priori is now beholden to the intensity of interactions and events written by 'judgments of experience.' These judgements are part of an anterior organisation, but this organisation is paradoxically, simultaneously constituted by its parts in events where the individual realises a thought's 'internal necessity.' Indeed, this internal necessity offers a way through what would otherwise pose a logical problem for Schelling: how far one can move from the deductive principles of natural science to experiential Nature if 'the ideal must arise out of the real and admit of explanation from it'? This movement is the sole means of discerning the a priori structures of Nature's infinite unfolding.

Schelling conceives the 'regularity' and purpose' of both Nature's productivity and thought's 'internal necessity' (*FO* 194) as a graduated scale of development [*Stufenfolge*]. The *Stufenfolge* is a development of increasing complexity in Nature's products, directed toward an 'absolute product' that 'lives in all products, that always becomes and never is, and in which the absolute activity [of Nature] exhausts itself' (*FO* 16, 43 n). This gradient is meant to culminate in man as its 'greatest and most perfect form' (*FO* 144), but the sexual generation of these beings both troubles and corroborates this

¹³ Peterson translates *versetzt* as 'transported,' but *versetzt* can also mean 'translate,' an interpretation which profoundly troubles Schelling's Idealist project in the Introduction. Read as 'translate,' Nature retains some degree of originary authority as that which is rendered by a consciousness which can never fully articulate or replace it. Indeed, Nature poses precisely this problem for the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling's abortive attempt at Fichtean idealism.

Stufenfolge. In other words, sexuality becomes a *pharmakon*, both a toxin and antidote for Nature. Schelling writes of the separation of the sexes within Nature's 'infinite metamorphosis' that 'each organism has a level of formation at which [this] separation is necessary. [But this] highest point of disturbed equilibrium is [also] the moment of the reestablishment of equilibrium' (FO 36, 40-41). This dis/equilibrium describes the production of the genus against the individual in a systolic-diastolic movement of expansion and contraction foregrounded in Schelling's later work. But sexual separation does not fold the organism back into a teleological hierarchy of developmental stages. Instead, it opens the organism up to Nature's radical productivity: 'from the moment of the [separation] onward, the product no longer completely expresses the character of the stage of development at which it stood.' Schelling describes this as 'derangement' [*Störungheit*], and this trope of illness marks the 'most intense moment of natural activity' in the organism (FO 39). Nature blossoms through 'abortive' experiments on itself, seizing on its own aberrations, 'pursuing' its individuating derangement as far as possible in a given manifestation (FO 41 n). And precisely this derangement, this illness, is a drive toward absolute knowledge as what Tilottama Rajan refers to as 'a following of the particular wherever it might lead, regardless of its consistency with a larger whole.'¹⁴ Each organism is a tumescence in Nature, a derangement of the *Stufenfolge*, a symptom of radical auto-alterity in Nature which resists Schelling's attempt, in the later Introduction to the *First Outline*, to contain it in an anterior organisation which 'must have existed as a whole previous to its parts' (FO 198). But Schelling still faces the question which dogs him throughout his oeuvre: why is there something and not nothing? How do things come to be from within Nature as the '*most primal fluid*—the absolute noncomposite [. . .] receptive to every form [. . .] a mass wherein *no part is distinguished from the other by figure*' (FO 6)?

Schelling's answer to this question in the *First Outline* is *inhibition* – an intrinsic, primordial self-limiting force which engenders the phenomena of the natural world. As a homogeneous 'universal organism' Nature, as 'absolute

¹⁴ Tilottama Rajan, 'First Outline of a System of Theory: Schelling and the Margins of Philosophy, 1799-1815', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2007, p. 315.

activity,' is 'inhibited at sundry stages' which produce natural objects (*FO* 6-7). Inhibition is at the root of all conflict and difference as 'an original diremption in *Nature itself* [. . .] that original antithesis in the heart of Nature, which does not [. . .] itself appear' but nevertheless constitutes Nature as object to itself (*FO* 205; my italics). As the agent of Nature's auto-alterity and the differential movement within an always already universal organism, inhibition infinitely counterbalances Nature's infinite productivity. Schelling writes: 'If nature is absolute activity, then this activity must appear as inhibited ad infinitum. (The original cause of this inhibition must only be sought in [Nature] itself, since Nature is absolutely active)' (*FO* 16). Schelling is well aware of the 'irresolvable difficulty' of this deadlock between infinite activity and infinite inhibition (*FO* 17). David Farrell Krell sums up the problem in terms of Freudian Eros and Thanatos:

Schelling [must] conceive of an original duplicity, a dyas, in which infinite activity and infinite inhibition work together to produce the natural world. [But sexuality and its relation to illness disturb this balance. Both] alike tend toward the universal and the infinite. It is as though infinite activity itself, the absolute as such, were both sexually active and subject to ultimate passivity and even an inevitable infection or malignancy. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, for Schelling to locate the duplicitous source of life without colliding against the ultimate source of illness and demise.¹⁵

Here Krell emphasises sexuality and illness as markers of the organism's highly ambivalent, indeed 'unnatural' relationship with Nature. With sex, both an Erotic drive toward the absolute product and a Thanatotic drive back to universal indifference explode on to this primal site. Nature craves its original state of indifference, a zero-point that can only be hypothesised behind the original diremption: 'Nature contests the Individual; it longs [*verlangt*] for the Absolute and continually endeavors to represent it. [. . .] Individual products, therefore, in which Nature's activity is at a standstill, can only be seen as *misbegotten attempts* to achieve such a proportion' (*FO* 35; my italics). But just as the *Stufenfolge* is disrupted by the sexual proliferation of beings, each 'misbegotten attempt' also recapitulates Nature's intrinsic dynamism (*FO* 25).

¹⁵ David Krell, 'Three Ends of the Absolute: Schelling on Inhibition, Hölderlin on Separation, and Novalis on Density', *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 32, 2002, p. 65.

As the propensity to reproduce such misbegotten attempts (and consequently Nature's self-inhibition), sexuality is a pestilent force to a Nature yearning for primordial indifference.

There is a compulsion, then, in Nature which is recapitulated in its 'misbegotten attempts' and their persistent strife with Nature. Perhaps nowhere is this made clearer in the *First Outline* than in Schelling's admission, repressed into the margins of the Introduction to the *Outline* in a lengthy footnote, that

Nature hates sex, and where it does arise, it arises against the will of Nature. The separation into sexes is an inevitable fate, with which, after Nature is once organic [. . .] it can never overcome.—By this very hatred of separation it finds itself involved in a contradiction, inasmuch as what is odious to Nature it is compelled to develop in the most careful manner, and to lead to the summit of existence, as if it did so on purpose; whereas it is always striving only for a return into the identity of the genus, which, however, is enchained to the (never to be canceled) duplicity of the sexes, as to an inevitable condition. [. . .] Nature develops the individual only from compulsion. (*FO* 231 n)

Thus Nature is hostile to the organism, which is an obstacle to its *backward* yearning for indifference. But the organism is also necessary for the *forward* unfolding of an absolute product, the consummation of the *Stufenfolge* which already exists as potential in Nature. Indeed, faced with this *pharmakon*, Nature's stance toward its own products can only be one of ambivalence and anxiety.

THE ACTANT: DRIVE, DISEASE, DERANGEMENT

The *First Outline's* structure is rhizomatic, a body without organs consisting of intersecting and mutually determining systems and disciplines which are constellated in a text with numerous 'undeveloped tendencies' (Rajan, 'First Outline', pp. 329-330). Indeed, one can say that this performativity of the *First Outline's Naturphilosophie* (un)grounds Schelling's oeuvre as its metaphysical unconscious, the 'fluidity' from which the other strands of his philosophy emerge and in which they entwine (*FO* 29). Never fully plumbing the depths of his Nature, but in opposition to Hegel's philosophy of nature which is

‘structured by an anthropomorphism that reads nature as pathologized spirit,’¹⁶ Schelling nevertheless privileges Nature’s productive aporiae in subsequent works and phases of his thought. The *First Outline’s Naturphilosophie* reveals a uniquely idealist intensity in its invocation of a philosophical creation myth, a ‘Proteus’ drawing all possible forms into a circle ‘determined for it in advance’ (FO 28). Yet this gathering requires ‘infinitely many attempts’ (FO 28), which makes the circle both determinate and immanent. But to articulate the dynamic of how this ‘gathering’ comes about, we must turn to what Schelling calls the *actant* as the constituent part of this dynamic productivity.

In the first of the *First Outline’s* three Divisions, Schelling develops the actant [*Aktion*]¹⁷ as the nonmolar, monadic force articulating Nature’s absolute productivity, which is the first principle of the *Naturphilosophie’s* ‘dynamic atomism’ (FO 5). As unrepresentable combinatory forces in the natural world, actants collectively constitute an ‘infinite homogeneity,’ combining in various relations and ratios to form different natural products. Schelling writes:

[Actants are] the most originary points of inhibition of Nature’s activity. [As] the most originary negative presentations of the unconditioned in Nature [they] are not themselves in space; they cannot be viewed as parts of matter. [They are, rather,] action in general. (FO 19-21)

Although the actant briefly reappears in his retrospective Introduction to the *First Outline* and the second Division, Schelling does not revisit the concept as such elsewhere in his oeuvre. Nevertheless, the actant plays an important role in the *First Outline* as the fundamental component of ‘the original multiplicity of individual principles in Nature. [. . .] Each [actant] in Nature is

¹⁶ Tilottama Rajan, ‘Philosophy as Encyclopedia: Hegel, Schelling, and the Organization of Knowledge’, *Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2004, p. 9.

¹⁷ Peterson (FO 244 n. 1) translates *Aktion* as ‘actant’ instead of ‘action’ (which for him is too general) or actor (which for him is too intentional). But Peterson does not mention the ‘actant’s’ provenance both in narratology and the thought of French philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour. In the narratological framework of Greimasian semiotics, actants ‘operate on the level of function rather than content. That is, an actant may embody itself in a particular character (termed an *acteur*) or it may reside in the function of more than one character in respect of their common role in the story’s underlying “oppositional” structure. In short, the deep structure of the narrative generates and defines its actants at a level beyond that of the story’s surface content’ (Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, 2nd ed., London and New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 70-71).

a fixed point for it, a seed around which Nature can begin to form itself (*FO* 21 n. 1). And just as Nature ‘forms itself’ around the actant in the phenomenal world, so Schelling surrounds the actant with a proliferation of textual predicates in an attempt to define it – not unlike the natural catalogue stricken from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*. Actants are ‘dynamic atoms,’ ‘pure intensity,’ ‘originary qualities,’ ‘simple productivities’ of Nature – and yet their ‘simple’ nature proves unruly as their *Trieb* drives them from text into subtext and back again in the form of lengthy footnotes complicating and unfolding this ‘simplicity’ (*FO* 21 n., 208). As if sedimenting the actants’ dynamism in the texture of language, Schelling’s text itself recapitulates the ‘infinite multiplicity of original actants’ (*FO* 28). Taking up atomism to define the actant as a factor of Nature’s productivity, Schelling concedes that the intangibility of the actants is precisely what makes them necessary:

Our opinion is [. . .] not that there are such simple actants in Nature, but only that they are the ideal grounds of the explanation of quality. These simple actants do not really allow of demonstration—they do not exist; they are what one must posit in Nature, what one must think in Nature, in order to explain the originary qualities. (*FO* 21 n)

Not existing in space or as matter (but nevertheless ‘constituent factors of matter’), and ‘truly singular’ like Leibnizian monads yet infinitely decomposable (*FO* 21 & n.), the actant is a liminality between the ideality of the unconditioned and the materiality of space.

The First Division of the *First Outline* tries to work through its unruly textual excess by turning from the metaphysical overgrowth of the first section on the actants (‘The Original Qualities and Actants in Nature’) to something closer to dramatic narrative in the following section (‘Actants and Their Combinations’). Here, Schelling describes the creation of matter as ‘the drama [*Schauspiel*] of a struggle between form and the formless’ (*FO* 28). For Schelling, Nature’s universal fluidity is always already inexplicably ‘solidified’ by the actants in this drama without beginning, which transpires in ‘infinite multiplicity’ between fluid and solid. That is, the actants, in their creation of natural products, are always already subject to a drama of (de)combination in their infinite multiplicity. He writes:

While the actants are decombined, left to itself each one will produce what it must produce according to its nature. To that extent, in every product there will

be a constant drive toward free transformation. While the actants are continually combined anew, none of them will remain free with respect to its production. Thus, there will be compulsion and freedom in the product at once. Since actants are constantly set free and recaptured, and since infinitely various combinations of them are possible (and in every combination a slew of various proportions are possible), then continually new and singular materials will be originally produced in this product. It is indeed possible to find the elements of these materials through the art of chemistry, but not [. . .] the proportion of the combination.
(FO 33)

This dynamic of coalescence and dissolution is ultimately pathologised by Schelling as the actants' mutual derangement [*Störung*] into universal fluidity, which is in turn – indeed, *simultaneously* resisted by each actant's individuality (FO 26, 28). This derangement describes what we have seen as Nature's auto-alterity, a Nature divided against itself yet compelled to form products in a tension which creates generative fibrillations in Nature. And again, the language Schelling uses here is significant: the actant's 'constant drive [*Trieb*] toward free transformation' is inhibited by the 'compulsion' [*Zwang*] of its combination with other actants in a productive coimplication of freedom and necessity (FO 33). In the Introduction to the *Outline* Schelling writes that discovering the 'intermediate links' in natural products with the unknowable 'last conditions' of Nature is the task of *experimentation* in *Naturphilosophie* – not the experimentation of the empirical natural sciences which assumes that one day the circle of its knowledge will complete itself and which imposes principles on Nature from without, but rather an 'infinite task' of 'collect[ing] the fragments of the great whole of Nature [. . .] into a system' (FO 199) which is always on the cusp of itself. It involves investigating the internal necessity of principles and not assuming their a priori nature, and this process is ultimately a psychoanalytic moment – 'doing *Naturphilosophie*' as an encounter in Wirth's sense – where, in Schelling's words, 'Nature speaks to us to the extent to which we ourselves fall silent.'¹⁸ We must let Nature question us.

But what kind of 'questions' does a deranged Nature ask? What does its facticity present to us? The natural products we see in the world are, after all,

¹⁸ This sentence closes Schelling's 'On the Relation Between the Real and Ideal in Nature' (1806), which Iain Hamilton Grant has translated with Schelling's *On the World Soul* (1798-1809). I am grateful to him for generously providing me with a copy of the unpublished draft.

‘nothing other than productive Nature itself determined in a certain way’ (FO 34), inhibited according to inscrutable laws into the unique, terrible, and solitary forms which surround us. Each one of them is part of Schelling’s *Stufenfolge*, the graduated series of stages with which Nature hopes to achieve the Absolute, or ‘the most universal proportion in which all actants, without prejudice to their individuality, can be unified’ (FO 35). Yet each natural product is also a ‘misbegotten attempt’ at this proportion (*ibid.*), a wayward line of flight *away* from the absolute ideal for which Nature strives, but can never achieve, caught in an ‘infinite process of formation’ (*ibid.*) which constitutes these lines of flight to begin with. Nature is caught within its actantial dynamics – within the derangement of a free drive to create infinite products and the compulsion to combine them into a ‘universal proportion.’ It is from this derangement that the materiality and historicity of Being emerges.

This infinitely productive derangement of the actants forms an onto-aetiology which Schelling locates in disease. Disease, for Schelling, is coterminous with life itself: because disease ‘is produced by the same causes through which the phenomenon of life is produced[, it] must have the same factors as life’ (FO 160). So although in the *First Outline*’s Appendix on disease (FO 158ff) the term *Aktion* is not used, Schelling in effect transposes the actants’ deranging dynamism of activity and receptivity into physiology: here, the organism is not a static ‘being’ but a ‘perpetual being-produced,’ an ‘activity mediated by receptivity’ (FO 160) against a series of external stimuli which prevent the organism from ‘exhausting’ its activity in a final (dead, inorganic) object. In this ‘being-produced,’ the organism reproduces an ‘original duplicity’ whereby it generates itself ‘objectively’ in response to external conditions (its receptivity to the world) as well as ‘subjectively’ – that is, as an object to itself (its activity). Disease is precisely the ‘othering’ of the organism’s presence to itself as object, a ‘disproportion’ within its economy of excitability, or susceptibility to external stimuli (FO 169). And this force of disease is ultimately predicated on a ‘uniformly acting external force’ which acts on the organism while at the same time it ‘seems to sustain the life of universal Nature just as much as it sustains the individual life of every organic being (as the life of Nature is exhibited in universal alterations)’ (FO 171). Both life and disease, then, emerge from a constitutive tension between the world of external forces

and the higher-order dynamical force which sustains the organism against the barrage of stimuli from without (*FO* 161). Extending the premises of the *Naturphilosophie* into the human and divine domains of theodicy, the *Freedom* essay, to which we now turn, aligns this diseased productivity with both the energy of evil and the yearning nature of God itself.

THE *FREEDOM* ESSAY: THE *UNGRUND* AND THE ENERGY OF EVIL

Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom (1809) is Schelling's attempt at a theodicy which surpasses the Leibnizian notion of evil as lack of Being and Hegel's somewhat more complicated understanding of evil as negation ultimately gathered up into the grand teleological *Aufhebung* of absolute Spirit. Watermarked by the trauma and anxiety of the *First Outline's* Nature, the *Freedom* essay recasts this anxiety in the contexts of God, man, and their complex relations as Schelling's self-described 'theory of personality'.¹⁹ The question of how Nature creates its products is translated into the question of how God and its human analogue, personality, enter time and history. More specifically, the issue here, as it was for Nature in the *First Outline*, is that of *individuation* – of how individual entities come into being, exist and persist in the world.

The *Freedom* essay returns to the *Stufenfolge* of the *First Outline*, but casts it as the series of stages through which God himself must proceed. In other words, where the *First Outline's* speculative physics theorised the emergence of entities in Nature as part of Nature's individuation toward the absolute product, the *Freedom* essay turns to God, who for Schelling is 'not a system, but rather a life' that must also individuate (*Freedom* 62). Alan White explains that in contrast to the idealist intensity of Schelling's earlier work such as the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), in the *Freedom* essay 'the ground as such is said to have all content within it and to resist being grasped or explained by the power of understanding, to resist revealing itself in actual existence [. . .] the source of

¹⁹ Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 73. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Freedom*.

content is obscurity and darkness rather than clarity and light.’²⁰ This darkness which recedes from knowledge in the *Freedom* essay is ‘a being before all ground and before all that exists [and] before any duality [. . .] the original ground or the *non-ground* [*Ungrund*]’ which exists even before God (*Freedom* 68). The *Ungrund* is a state of ‘absolute *indifference*’ (*Freedom* 68) between opposites which does not nullify them (it is not Hegel’s ‘night where all cows are black’) but rather suspends them in relation to each other. Thus, Schelling writes that even though the *Ungrund* is before all opposites and duality, it is ‘neutral’ towards them, which is precisely why opposites and polarities can ‘[break] forth immediately from the Neither-Nor’ of its indifference (*Freedom* 69).

For Schelling, the *Ungrund* provides a resolution to the problem of thinking becoming for a God that is ‘infinitely’ different to the world of things (28), a resolution which marks the materiality of Nature as the dark ground of spirit, the receding origin of Being and becoming. The world of becoming must emerge from God; but how can things separate from a God which encompasses all things? Schelling’s answer is that things are ultimately grounded in ‘that which in God himself is not *He Himself*, that is, in that which is the ground of his existence’ (*Freedom* 28). In other words, the *Ungrund* marks the *not-God within God*, that within God which God cannot know and which always already implicates God in the history of Nature. In a broadly psychoanalytic sense, the *Ungrund* is God’s unconscious; it harbours ‘the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself’ (*Freedom* 28), the drive to individuation in and through Nature’s materiality. But we have seen from the *Naturphilosophie* that this materiality is deranged, ambivalent toward its own existence; perhaps this is why Schelling writes early in the *Freedom* essay that *Naturphilosophie* is the only project adequate to the task of freedom (*Freedom* 26-27). As life, then, God’s yearning is driven by unknown forces, and in this God is like man. Both God and man are confronted with an un-grounding Other which becomes an existential *pharmakon*, both the cause of and cure for the melancholic desire of an endless approximation to wholeness. Both God and man are destined to ‘the deep indestructible melancholy of all life’ (*Freedom* 63). Melancholy

²⁰ Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 119-120.

[*Melancholie*] is only mentioned once in the *Freedom* essay, but it is pervasive within the text's individuating economy. This tension between the essay's sense of futurity (its desire for love that unites all) and melancholy (the acknowledgement that this desire must find and re-find itself) is central to the text's complexity, resonating through the optative proclamation that 'the good *should* be raised out of the darkness [. . .] whereas evil *should* be separated from the good in order to be cast out eternally into non-Being' (*Freedom* 67; my italics). This tension and melancholy is the medium from which *personality* emerges as the core concept which fuels the *Freedom* essay's futurity.

This melancholy is the basis for the analogy Schelling draws between God's relationship to the not-God of the *Ungrund* and the human being's relationship with the *centrum*, a term Schelling takes up from Jakob Böhme to describe 'the undivided power of the initial ground' as it exists in the person (*Freedom* 44). Through the freedom of the not-God within God, 'a fundamentally unlimited power is asserted next to and outside of divine power' (*Freedom* 11) that is conceptually unthinkable, and which inaugurates a divine individuation marking Schelling's radical turn from the notions of emanationism and theodicy prevailing in his time. This not-God within God marks the (un)beginning of all things as a difference always already operating in Being, and this (un)beginning's human equivalent is in Schelling's formulation of personality.

In contrast to Hegel's assertion that dialectical progression is always already attributed to Being – that 'substance is essentially subject' and inherently logical²¹ – the *Freedom* essay emphasises the emergence of personality in an unprethinkable 'moment' of creation analogous to God's entry into time and history, a non-egoic 'free act' from the abyss of the unconditioned:

Man is in the initial creation [. . .] an undecided being— [. . .] only man himself can decide. But this decision cannot occur within time; it occurs outside of all time and, hence, together with the first creation (though as a deed distinct from creation). (*Freedom* 51)

Like Nature's original diremption in the *First Outline*, 'decision' [*Entscheidung*] cannot be an act of conscious volition, since it precedes ego. Rather, it is a

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 13.

primordial scission which inaugurates becoming. This paradoxically free and necessary act means that freedom is *the freedom to exist as one must*, and this free necessity is the kernel of Schelling's philosophy of freedom. For Schelling this paradox, as personality, is 'the connection between a self-determining being and a basis [*centrum*] independent of him' (*Freedom* 59). And crucially for the *Freedom* essay's protopsychological dimension, this act leaves in each individual a residual *feeling* of personality in time and history, as the mark of both what one has always been and what one *must also be*. This feeling is 'a feeling in accord with [this act] as if he had been what he is already from all eternity and had by no means become so first in time. [Thus this act] cannot appear in consciousness to the degree the latter is self-awareness and only ideal, since it precedes consciousness just as it precedes essence, indeed, first *produces* it' (*Freedom* 51).

Key to the specifically idealist intensity of the *Freedom* essay's theodicy is a recasting of the *First Outline's* *Stufenfolge* as God's progression toward an ultimate apocatastasis, a 'final, total separation' reminiscent of *The Book of Revelation* wherein 'everything true and good' is 'raised into bright consciousness' and the 'eternally dark ground of selfhood' is locked away (*Freedom* 70). In this resolution, everything is 'subordinate to spirit' and temporality and contingency are gathered up into an idealist regime (*ibid.*). Yet its disclosure of the *Ungrund* as God's unconscious, and the *centrum* as its human iteration, necessarily harbours a dark kernel of indeterminacy which frustrates this teleology. Individuation can go awry, and the power of the *centrum* can always be falsely appropriated in the ego's being-for-itself, which Schelling will describe as the basis of evil. Freedom is the necessary introduction of chaos and the anarchy of the *Ungrund* into time and history, a fracturing of the *Freedom* essay's Idealism which reflects Schelling's turn away from prevalent teleological or systematic explanations of Being. Evil is the energetic force of movement without which existence would founder and congeal, unable to move.

In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling closely aligns evil with disease; what disease is to Nature, evil is to human spiritual life. Evil results from the self's estrangement, as the 'dark principle of [. . .] self-will,' from the *centrum*. In this estrangement, the will 'steps out from its being beyond nature' to 'elevate the ground over the cause, to use the spirit that it obtained only for the sake of the *centrum* outside the *centrum* and against creatures; from this results collapse

within the will itself and outside it' (*Freedom* 34). In other words, self-will attempts to bend the *centrum* to its own designs. Outside the harmony of the *centrum*'s 'divine measure and balance' self-will, as 'a bond of living forces,' can no longer rule the rebellious dominion of forces as 'cravings and appetites,' which leads to a 'peculiar life [of] mendacity, a growth of restlessness and decay' (*Freedom* 34). Evil is a disruption of cosmic harmony which thereby shows this harmony's constitutive self-difference; it is the force whereby 'things feverishly move away from their nonthingly center.'²² But this evil is *productive*, and in precisely the same way as Nature's ambivalence toward its products in the *First Outline*. This productivity's connection with historicity and materiality risks the individual's annihilation in 'restlessness and decay' as the ego proclaims: *I am the centrum*. But it is also a connection with the the *Freedom* essay's apocatastatic drive, and is thus essential to the individual's existence in the world.

Thus, Schelling's account of freedom both diagnoses creaturely existence as what the *First Outline* called a 'misbegotten attempt' – here, a miscomprehension of the proper relation to 'universal will' – and prognoses 'transfiguration' by which the person (as creature) unites with 'the primal will' of understanding so that 'a single whole comes into being' (*Freedom* 32). In this prognosis, individuation is the blind will's elevation into something more than itself as part of the universal will or 'principle of understanding.' Personality is 'selfhood raised to spirit' (*Freedom* 38), both a cision in the individual and a connection with the ideal as 'will that beholds itself in complete freedom [as] above and outside of all nature' (*Freedom* 33). In Schelling's drama of freedom, individuation is not driven by a process of identification or the unfolding of something preformed. Rather, the 'mutation and division of all forces' drives self-will from its darkness into a transfiguration where it paradoxically becomes particular and universal as 'selfhood.' Yet this prognosis is nevertheless of a *completed* individuation. However, if will is groundless Being, what does it mean to unify with the *centrum*, the primal will? Is it not to expose oneself to Nature's derangement? In the *Freedom* essay, this imperilment is the evil nature of the

²² Jason Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 170.

world – the inevitable suspension of this transfiguration as the condition for time and history. This positive force of evil persists in spite of Schelling's efforts to fold individuation's productivity back into an Idealist economy through the *Freedom* essay's scriptural traces of 'darkness' and 'light.' Likewise, the *Freedom* essay's bright horizon of spirit is clouded by the dark indeterminacy of the relationship between existence and the *Ungrund*: the 'anarchy' of the ground can always break through to existence (*Freedom* 29), and this is man's 'propensity' [*Hang*] for evil as the energy of personality in time and history (*Freedom* 47). Personality always runs the risk, *as personality*, of being derailed, deranged, or mutated by one force or another being for-itself, irrespective of the integrity of the whole. And with this productive derangement and indeterminacy at the heart of Nature and its human actors, we turn now to the implications of such un-grounding potency for ecological civilisation's transformative project.

CONCLUSION: FORSAKING, OR GIVING INDETERMINACY ITS DUE

Ecological civilisation and its desire for a transformative ethics is informed by what Gare identifies as a specifically Schellingian speculative naturalism, one which, based on Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* of opposing forces, gravity and magnetism, ultimately aims at the constructive transformation of culture and the 'overcoming' of contemporary neoliberalist nihilism in the ecological, social, and economic spheres.²³ Schelling is thus understood as the progenitor of 'a system that overcame the oppositions between idealism and realism, spiritualism and materialism.'²⁴ But can we speak with confidence in terms of 'overcoming' and positive political action in a framework where drive and compulsion, in possessing psyche and Nature, dispossess them from each other and themselves? When human beings can never be guaranteed as 'rational actors'?

Bruce Matthews has more directly advocated for an 'activist' reading of Schelling's Nature, suggesting that Schelling's mythology of nature harbours a

²³ See Gare, 'Speculative Naturalism', pp. 314-315, 300-301.

²⁴ Arran Gare, 'From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2011, p. 28.

‘utopian potential’ with ‘an emancipatory power capable of liberating an engaged hope from its bondage to the ideology of irony that currently emasculates transformative political action.’²⁵ To be sure, Matthews points to the ‘organic, and thus partially chaotic, process of self-differentiation that generates increasingly complex iterative systems’.²⁶ But he nevertheless gathers up this differentiation into an Idealist project of ‘balanced relationship [and] reciprocity with nature’s nexus of living forces’ in the name of ‘redemptive harmony’.²⁷ Matthews ultimately resuscitates an anthropocentric fantasy of ‘realizing a unity with nature’²⁸ which, in an ideological sleight-of-hand, reinstates human freedom in its idealist intensity as a future which ‘offers unseen possibilities and thus an open-ended orientation to *what should be*’.²⁹ Transforming Schelling’s ‘should’ from an *optative* to an ethical *imperative*, Matthews acknowledges the aleatory energy of this self-differentiation but asserts transformative political action as an unproblematic possibility within this stochastic matrix, insisting on a ‘subversive and emancipatory power’ (*ibid.*, p. 216) in Schelling’s ‘mythology of nature’ which cannot be corroborated *by* this Nature. Casting Schelling’s Nature as a platform for a neo-Kantian kingdom of ends, Matthews ultimately eclipses Nature’s radical productivity by assuming, as part of his desire for transformative politics, that humanity can and will one day overcome the very Nature articulated by Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*.

By invoking Schelling’s later idea of a philosophical religion, the concept of an ecological civilisation aims to uncover what Gare calls ‘a *Weltanschauung* inclusive enough to overcome philosophy’s compulsive tendency to splinter off into mutually exclusive schools of thought’ (Gare, ‘From Kant to Schelling to Process Philosophy’, p. 68). To this end he draws on C.D. Broad, who writes that speculative naturalism seeks ‘to take over all aspects of human experience,

²⁵ Bruce Matthews, ‘The New Mythology: Romanticism Between Religion and Humanism’, in Dalia Nassar (ed.), *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 203.

²⁶ Matthews, ‘The New Mythology’, pp. 207-8.

²⁷ Matthews, ‘The New Mythology’, p. 212.

²⁸ Matthews, ‘The New Mythology’, p. 213.

²⁹ Matthews, ‘The New Mythology’, p. 215.

to reflect upon them, and to try to think out a view of Reality as a whole which shall do justice to all of them' (qtd. in Gare, 'Speculative Naturalism', p. 302). But 'doing justice to them' paradoxically involves exploring the ways in which one paradigm, one force, one entity, one psyche in a system troubles and risks unworking, even deranging another; it involves being attuned to the paradox of the actants, both individual and inextricably bound to and prehended by the others. And given the productive nature of Schelling's evil, the drive to be for-itself which marks Broad's philosophical splintering, is this movement not part of the dynamism which drives existence *itself* in its peril and risk? Should it be 'overcome' when it so crucially informs Broad's conception of 'the whole range of human experience' (*ibid.*)? And yet is it feasible to resist the human, all-too-human urge to overcome such divisions? I suggest that Schelling ultimately – perhaps against his will – issues an inconclusive challenge to the necessary anthropomorphism of speculative naturalism in conceding that 'emergent levels' of organisation (Gare, 'Speculative Naturalism', p. 321) may have nothing to do with the privileging, and little to do with the survival of a humanity which will always follow to some extent the derangement of Schelling's Nature. At the point where Schelling's thought touches Speculative Realism's disavowal of the correlation between thought and Being, his *Naturphilosophie* explicitly reserves the right to see humanity collectively as a 'misbegotten attempt.' And this right (to use human terms) includes the right to deploy discursive vehicles including (but not limited to) neoliberalism *itself* as the means to discard such aberrations and continue its scrabbling both back and onward to the stasis of the Absolute. Neoliberalist capitalism as telluric autoimmunological response; a less than cheery prospect for the species to be sure.

What, then, is to be done? Does this mean we have no other choice than the nihilism Nietzsche tried unsuccessfully to dispel, or the cognitive dissonance of political leaders when faced with the destructive and seemingly uncontrollable autonomy of military, industrial and capital economies? If we are to listen to Nature's interrogations and deranged whisperings, to what extent are we collectively willing to hear objections to our way of life and the rationalist fantasy, promoted perhaps first and foremost by the United Nations, that a species of more than seven billion is somehow one 'human family,' each

of whose members deserve everything the world has to offer? No organism in the history of the planet has numbered in the billions and survived in perpetuity by according each of its members such privilege, and yet our collective ethics seems to demand no less. But does the answer lie in an *ethics*? John Caputo distinguishes between the ‘thou shalt’s of the ethical and the freedom of what he calls a *poetics of obligation*, a species of morality which ‘happens’ in an event unbound by the discursive confines of ethics.³⁰ Nomadic and not architectonic, this happening is *morality as obligation*, which contains an undecidability that destabilises ethics as its (Derridean) dangerous supplement even as it insists on *decision*, albeit decision freed from the guarantees of the ethical. This poetics of obligation is the outcome of a deconstruction of ethics which preserves a connectedness with others, both human and nonhuman. For Caputo, it is

the feeling that comes over us when others need our help, when they call out for help, or support, or freedom, or whatever they need, a feeling that grows in strength directly in proportion to the desperateness of the situation of the other. *The power of obligation varies directly with the powerlessness of the one who calls for help, which is the power of powerlessness.*³¹

This obligation is a chemical binding, a magnetic pull between the person and ‘the Other’ in its most general sense as ‘a deep anonymity in things, in the world, in the stars as in ourselves,’ the uncanny force within ethics that ethics cannot contain.³² To use a Schellingian turn of phrase I have developed here, it is *the non-ethical within ethics*. The chemical-magnetic bind of obligation, then, is bound to bring some together in moments of morality while leaving others on the outside. As a dissolution of the guarantees of the ethical the poetics of obligation, and its due diligence paid to the uniqueness of personality which moves, corpuscular, through and across all discourse, always risks what others will inevitably call obscenity – in Caputo’s words, the risk that Yahweh’s command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac stands on the same footing as the commands Nazi officers gave to their soldiers to kill Jews.³³ And yet this risk of

³⁰ John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 4-5.

³¹ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 5.

³² Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 18.

³³ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 10.

obscurity is the very condition of freedom.

Is there an ethics of the future which can do justice to the magnetism of obligation? One which can incorporate its indeterminate remainder? One capable of sustaining a humanist equilibrium between the desire for system and the drive to derange the whole in the name of free transformation? Or must we ultimately forsake ethics and the architectonic of a decrepit, seven-billion 'strong' body politic in favour of the nomadic, the corpuscular, and the 'organic' – that is, organs separating from the metaphoric body as actants both for-themselves and bound to others according to the inscrutable intensities of magnetism? If there is a 'solution' to this dilemma, perhaps it lies in cultivating a willingness to forsake – the strength to deprive ourselves of comfort and consumption not only as a pragmatic duty in a world with finite resources, but also as a philosophical sensitivity to our membership in a Nature which surpasses us. Kierkegaard, speaking as Johannes Climacus, states the matter succinctly:

When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? Similarly, when a man is very knowledgeable but his knowledge is meaningless or virtually meaningless to him, does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know, even if he loudly proclaims that this is what he needs, or does it consist, instead, in taking something away from him?³⁴

In the same spirit, there is a Chinese folk tale which tells a story of the herding of cattle at the end of the season. While the cattle were led into their enclosure, one door was always left open; those cattle who wandered through the open door into the wilderness were allowed to go unhindered as homage to the powers of indeterminate Being. If there is something encrypted in this parable for the future of an ecological civilisation, perhaps we must give serious thought to what we, collectively, must let go to give Nature its due.

gordbarentsen@outlook.com

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 275.

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