

# THE IDEA OF NATURE AS A STRUCTURE

## A FEW THOUGHTS ON SCHELLING'S *NATURPHILOSOPHIE*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay I provide a reading of Schelling's idea of nature, exploring how it points to a common structure iterated in both the organic and inorganic world. I explore the meaning and constitution of this structure through its reorientation of the subject/object divide and its logic of symbiotic "involution." I then reflect on one of the popular images of this structure in *Naturphilosophie*, the whirlpool. I explore how the whirlpool expresses the dynamic at the core of Schelling's idea of nature and explore some of its potential shared ground with some more contemporary views.

**KEYWORDS:** *Naturphilosophie*; German Idealism; Structure; Nature; Kant; Schelling

### INTRODUCTION

The desire to develop the idea of nature is one of the prominent tasks Schelling set himself in the early *Naturphilosophie* trilogy, comprising *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), *On the World Soul* (1798) and *First Outline of a System of Naturphilosophie* (1799).<sup>1</sup> Whilst in the past readers of Schelling have battled against the conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of Schelling's work are from *Schellings sämtliche Werke* (SW) with the volume number followed by page number. All translations from German are my own, but I have provided English translation pagination and included full references in the bibliography. I use the following abbreviations: "CPR," *Critique of Pure Reason*; "F," *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*; "FO," *First Outline of a System of Naturphilosophie*; "IN," *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*; "ON," *On the True Concept of Naturphilosophie and*  
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that *Naturphilosophie* is simply a rudimentary precursor to the might of Hegel's absolute idealism, recent times have brought a welcome plethora of creative philosophical interpretations of Schelling's early work on its own terms.<sup>2</sup> But that is not to say that all the "i's" have been dotted and all the "t's" have been crossed. For it is far from the case that *Naturphilosophie* is now fully understood such that Joseph Esposito's starting point must still be reiterated, that Schelling's "works in *Naturphilosophie* are poorly organised, undeveloped, and almost totally lacking in sustained argumentation" (Esposito 1977, 9). But perhaps we could look at this differently, perhaps it is precisely for these reasons that *Naturphilosophie* presents fertile philosophical ground, perhaps it is *because* it is poorly organised, undeveloped and lacking in sustained argumentation that it lends itself so well to further study, inviting us to question what Schelling even means by the term "nature."

One way to respond to this challenge is to investigate the relationship between mind or spirit (*Geist*)<sup>3</sup> and nature, terms which weigh heavy on the trajectory of *Naturphilosophie* and continue to proliferate in contemporary thought (most notably in the "nature/culture" disjunction as well as the so-called "hard" problem of consciousness). And yet how spirit and nature are connected in *Naturphilosophie* is liable to misconstrue Schelling's idea of nature by either entirely reducing it to a realist physicalism or to subjectivity, a problematic this essay pushes off from. I stake the claim that Schelling's idea of nature refers to a more nuanced perspective, namely, a unitary structure striking through all "worlds," both organic and inorganic. Indeed, even at a terminological level, it is striking that despite the making constitutive of "organism" as the fulcrum around which Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* orbits, he is never far from discussions of how "organisation" may relate to this centre.<sup>4</sup>

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*the Correct Way of Solving its Problems*; "PL," *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*; "STI," *System of Transcendental Idealism*; "SP," *System of Philosophy in General and Naturphilosophie in Particular*.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Satoor (2022), Garcia (2021), Vercellone (2020), Woodard (2020), Förster (2018), Fisher (2017), Gare (2011), Nassar (2010) and Grant (2008).

<sup>3</sup> I opt to call this "spirit" throughout the essay.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., see Peterson's "Introduction" to Schelling (2004, xxiii) and the many discussions of "*organisirtes*," "*organisirendes*" and "*Organisation*" throughout *First Outline* (SW 3:17, 18, 32; FO 17, 18, 27).

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“ONE TOUCH OF NATURE MAKES ALL WORLDS AKIN”

Perhaps one of the most famous passages from *Naturphilosophie* is also one of the most ambiguous: “nature shall be visible spirit, spirit [shall be] invisible nature” (SW 2:56; IN 42). What does this passage mean? It serves as an intervention into a discussion occurring in the philosophical landscape Schelling inhabited; a stubborn interjection into the philosophical climate of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. However, an easily overlooked discussion it intervenes in and against which it unfolds is that of Kant’s Critical philosophy.

In the Transcendental Analytic, in both A and B Deductions, Kant shows how the laws of nature are identical to categorialisation by the understanding: the “understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature” (CPR A127), and the pure concepts of the understanding “prescrib[e] the law to nature” (CPR B159). Nature becomes somewhat epistemologised since it is only possible to talk about as identical to subjective legislation and experience: “we ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity in them that we call nature” (CPR A125). This strips nature of its previous status as an ontological substrate, thereby becoming limited to the “sum of objects of possible experience” or appearances experienceable by a subject. Whilst Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* will come to see this as reducing nature to a single-sided subjectivity, it stands in a complicated relation to it because Kant’s dualism is not premised on a difference between appearances and nature, but on their identity. Schelling inherits Kant’s conception of nature (specifically understood as *not* thing in itself or noumenal) although he makes some fundamental and irreversible modifications to it. Thus, since Kant doesn’t align nature with the thing in itself or the noumenal – nature is never banished to the land beyond<sup>5</sup> – Schelling’s desire to develop the idea of nature is not the desire to recover an “out there” in the simplistic sense.

Schelling’s claim is not simply that Kant is wrong (which sometimes leads to the view that Schelling is actually still “Kantian” in the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*), but that the Critical philosophy cannot grasp how it is correct. That is, the Critical identification of nature and understanding is correct precisely

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<sup>5</sup> As Dallmayr (2011,35) and Snow (1996, 101) seem to read it. The problem with reading Kant in this way is that he would then be merely rearticulating the Cartesian duality – nature as *res extensa* outside the *res cogitans* – instead of resituating it – nature as *res extensa* only in so far as it is legislated by *res cogitans*. See Beiser (2008, 356-7).

because it taps into and expresses the epistemological (subjective) reiteration of the wider ontological (objective) frame, a frame the Critical philosophy cannot grasp. In this connection, in *First Outline of a System of Naturphilosophie* Schelling warps Kant's claim to read: "nature is self-sufficient" because "nature is its own legislator" (SW 3:17; FO 17). In other words, Schelling's rejoinder to the Critical philosophy is that it is not *we* who legislate nature, it legislates itself and recognises this through us. Nature leaves a trace on the conditions of possibility of our experience so that when Kant claims the understanding legislates nature, he tacitly locks onto the ontological forms which objectively determine the very possibility of subjectivity itself.<sup>6</sup> This represents a widening of the transcendental more than its rejection, its ontologisation more than its abandonment.<sup>7</sup> By zeroing in on the surroundings, Schelling's idea of nature points to the conditions of possibility for the writing of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself.

To state this in a more detailed way, *Naturphilosophie* claims that spirit *emerges* from nature, that the pure concepts of the understanding emerge from an absolute, albeit not noumenal, objective condition of possibility: "there is an idealism of nature and an idealism of the I. For me, the former is original, and *the latter* derived" (SW 4:84; ON 48). But to properly understand the quotation about nature as visible spirit, spirit as invisible nature, we must refrain from reading this as spirit emerging from matter<sup>8</sup> because nature is not solely aligned with physicality and necessity in *Naturphilosophie*. Rather, we might read this as stating that spirit is the lighting up of the terrain from which it emerges and that without this light, nature remains invisible, shrouded in darkness, such that the "relation" between nature and spirit is more like a tension. The "nature-spirit" dynamic,

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<sup>6</sup> Wieland (1975, 255) puts it similarly: "nature is in this case the sum [*Inbegriff*] of the conditions which make the I possible. This is one of the primary thoughts of [Schelling's] *Naturphilosophie*: to, as it were, venture the presentation of the pre-history of self-consciousness." This also matches up somewhat to how Hegel reads Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* where "nature is the absolute substance, and the subject [or] intelligence, only an accident" (Hegel 1986, 101). For this reason he adds the moniker "objective" to denote the unity at work in Schelling's idea of nature.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Serres also picks up on this: "There is an objective transcendental, the constitutive condition for the subject through the apparition of the object as object in general" (Serres 2015, 119). Also see Beiser (2002, 515).

<sup>8</sup> As Maurizio Ferraris does when he claims that a Schellingian style ontology must "pass from the inorganic to the organic and, finally, to the conscious" (Ferraris 2013, 200). Franks (2020, 88-9) also puts forward a view in which *Naturphilosophie* is read as primarily pushing a physical thesis. Whilst this may be the case at some level, the physical is just one element of a broader thinking of nature in Schelling.

then, is far from simple precisely because nature is not a simple “thing” and spirit is not a simple epiphenomenon or “non-thing”.

When Schelling claims that spirit emerges from nature, he simultaneously asserts that it is only through spirit that nature comes to recognise itself *as* nature.<sup>9</sup> This is exactly what Schelling means when he says that “to philosophise about nature means *to create* nature” (SW 3:13; FO 14); he is calling upon philosophy to consciously use spirit as a tool for reconstructing the context that gives rise to it, to bring the objective hub from which it emerges back into thought. This means that in the case where nature is without spirit there could be no recognition of nature as nature; doomed to trail off into a darkness which doesn’t know itself as darkness, it couldn’t make itself visible and would therefore be like not existing at all. Similarly, spirit without nature would be equal to nothing because it must arise within and as a part of a context; spirit is, after all, nothing more than the context folding back on itself for Schelling. Ultimately, we are thrown into a view where nature and spirit are only meaningful from the perspective of a henotic, isomorphic knot such that “the system of nature is at the same time the system of our spirit” (SW 2:39; IN 30). Nature is therefore like a motion from which spirit is centrifugally ejected only to centripetally slingshot back such that “nature becomes a circle which returns into itself, a self-concluding system” (SW 2:54; IN 40).

It is easy to understand why, in light of this view, Merleau-Ponty labels nature “the horizon against which human being stands out” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 51). But we must be careful here, spirit (human being) is still umbilically tethered to this horizon and so we must refrain from rendering nature as the static, dualist “background” rallied against in ontological anthropology and view it, along with them, as a dynamic ground giving rise to human activity.<sup>10</sup> Also underpinning this is Schelling’s decision to introduce history precisely the way he does in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*: “the human being will be returned through freedom to the same point at which nature had originally placed him, [the point] which he abandoned when history began” (SW 3:589; STI 200). History is spirit backtracking to the originary ground from which it arose, from the wellspring of

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<sup>9</sup> See Esposito (1977, 172).

<sup>10</sup> See Descola (2014, xv, 11).

its becoming, such that it recognises its continuity with nature, that “human history [...] is a continuation of these patterns by other means” (Nail 2021, 54).<sup>11</sup>

Although it is sometimes tempting to adopt the view that Schelling’s nature is entirely reducible to a form of “realism”<sup>12</sup> or equally in the other direction, reducible to spirit,<sup>13</sup> I think a more complex picture is at stake. If nature is to do the theoretical work *Naturphilosophie* requires of it, it cannot merely be a physicalist outside or a gesturing to specific organic and inorganic phenomena; it cannot be identical to the matter physicists discuss, nor can it be indicative of the hard realism they adopt. Heidegger picks up on this when he says that a demonstration of nature could not take the form of “pointing to the presence of the grape phylloxera [*Reblaus*] on grapevines” precisely because Schelling doesn’t mean individual “things” by it; *Naturphilosophie* is not about pointing out a particular phenomenon in the surroundings and studying it (Heidegger 1988, 189). But neither can it be merely a projection of spirit, for then it would be no different from Kant’s reduction of nature to the understanding. Instead, Schelling calls for an “absolute identity,” an interweaving of “spirit *in us* and nature *outside us*” (SW 2:56; IN 42). But, once again, this can’t mean that these terms are wholly reducible to each other,<sup>14</sup> it means that spirit requires nature as the ground from which it grows just as nature requires spirit for the recognition of what it is. Co-dependent and yet not dualist, they curve into each other, dovetailing to form a continuity and yet are completely irreducible to each other: “No objective existence is possible without a spirit which knows it, and *vice versa*: no spirit is possible without a world which exists for it” (SW 2:222; IN 177).

For this reason it is remiss to overemphasise Schelling’s intention to view “*nature as subject*” (SW 3:17-8 and 284; FO 17 and 202) since the meaning of nature involves a quite different understanding of how the line is drawn between subject and object.<sup>15</sup> The late Bruno Latour is informative in providing a brief prospectus of the traditional categories of nature = dead, inanimate object, and spirit = living, animated subject. The history of thinking nature “gave rise to the strange

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<sup>11</sup> Schelling voices the same in the later *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*: “the birth of spirit is the realm of history just like the birth of light is the realm of nature” (SW 7:377; F 44).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Ferraris (2013, 187-201) and Grant (2008, ix, 13, 48, 188).

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Richards (2002, 133), Sturma (2000) and Snow (1996, 81).

<sup>14</sup> I reiterate Asmuth (2002, 315) here.

<sup>15</sup> As Grant (2008, 168) and Esposito (1977, 170) point out.

opinion that has made it possible to deanimate one sector of the world, deemed objective and inert, and to overanimate another sector, deemed to be subjective, conscious, free” (Latour 2021, 85). But where Latour places the first challenge to this distinction in the Gaia theory of James Lovelock, it would be more adequate from the perspective of the history of philosophy to place it in *Naturphilosophie* and to view Lovelock’s project as a genuine inheritor of Schellingian themes. For Schelling’s idea of nature turns this distinction upside down precisely through the organic vivification of the objective side. The objective becomes aligned with the world conceived as an organic unity from which both the organic subject and inorganic object arise,<sup>16</sup> a point made clear by the “absolute bond” (SW 2:250) and “life” in the untranslated work, *On the World Soul*:

life is not the *property* or *product* of animalistic matter, rather [it is] *the reverse*, matter is the *product of life*. The *organism* is not the *property of individual nature-things* [*Naturdinge*], rather [it is] *the reverse*, the *individual nature-things* are only so many limitations or *individual ways of intuiting* [*Anschauungsweisen*] the *universal organism* [...] Thus things are not principles of the organism, rather the reverse, the *organism is the principle of things* (SW 2:500).

The nuance added to this view in *First Outline* is that an organic subject must emerge *such that* a vantage point on the organic objective (“universal organism”) can take root. But Schelling is careful not to lopsidedly align nature with subject since this would, once again, risk slipping back into the Critical philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Thus nature must be viewed both “as subject” and “as object,” which means the unity of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* or, as will be explored in the last section of this essay, the “*identity of product and productivity*” (SW 3:284; FO 202). Suggested here, then, is a reorientation of what “subject” and “object” mean: “nature as object” means nature viewed through the lens of the product, whilst “nature as subject” means nature viewed through the lens of productivity, and the binding

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<sup>16</sup> See Richards (2002, 289-91).

<sup>17</sup> Schelling rearticulates Kant’s “sum of appearances” as the “sum of being” (SW 3:13; FO 14) which is only one side of the idea of nature. This is also expressed in an analogy: “the *Naturphilosoph* handles nature like the transcendental-philosopher handles the I” (SW 3:12; FO 14). But this doesn’t mean *Naturphilosophie* considers nature as a single-sided self or subject, it means there is an equivalence between the two approaches: where Critical philosophy homes in on and deepens the I, *Naturphilosophie* homes in on and deepens nature, which grounds the I.

of both is the idea of nature considered as objectively organic.<sup>18</sup>

From a broader perspective, what we have been observing here, and as Merleau-Ponty summarises, is Schelling seeing off two “errors”: “Nature is only by us: Fichte [and Kant]. Nature is only outside of us: dogmatism” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 43). In an effort to avoid singly reducing nature to one of these sides, *Naturphilosophie* instead tries to be a “philosophy of structure” (Merleau-Ponty 1967, 33). That is to say, it tries to develop the idea of nature as an iterative shape striking through all phenomena, or to put it in Ortega y Gasset’s words, the idea of nature is just a marker denoting “the maximum structure” (Ortega y Gasset 2010, 143). This structure refers to a unified constellation, a nexus which pulses through all worlds as a logic of symbiotic involution, dynamism and organicism (SW 3:302; FO 215). Just as the pre-Critical Kant had viewed Saturn’s rings as a condensed iteration of the structure at large (cosmos), Schelling extends this to nature as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Nature as structure essentially signifies that a “paragon” (*Vorbilder*), a primordial form or archetypal image, immanently stretches through the whole and from which evermore complex “bifurcations” (*Entzweiung*) emanate (SW 2:14-5, 2:69 and 7:415; IN 11, 51 and F 77). Edwin A. Abbott’s line from 1884’s *Flatland*, a work which I explore further in the next section, puts this exceptionally well, hitting upon a fundamentally Schellingian motto: “one touch of nature makes all worlds akin” (Abbott 1998, 3). For Schelling, developing an idea of nature expounds the view that one structure strikes through all worlds. Anywhere we find this type of expression after Schelling, whether in the challenge to the nature/culture disjunction in ontological anthropology,<sup>20</sup> the continuity between human thought and life in environmental philosophy,<sup>21</sup> the problematisation of nature in continental philosophies of ecology,<sup>22</sup> or the biological semiosis of Jakob Uexküll’s “*Umwelt*,” we sense the (often unconscious) “touch” of Schelling’s idea of nature.

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<sup>18</sup> Here I diverge from Corriero’s (2020, 3-4), Cho’s (2006, 60) and Pita’s (1999, 94-5) views in so far as they view *Naturphilosophie* as eschewing the product (nature viewed as object) to only take up productivity (nature viewed as subject).

<sup>19</sup> For more on this relation see Thomson (2022).

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Descola (2014) and Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017).

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Marder (2013).

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Dallmayr (2011, 33-52) and Morton (2007).



## IDEAL AND REAL: A ROMANCE OF MANY DIMENSIONS

To build upon the above, it might be said that the idea of nature cached explicitly as structure holds within it a reference to a romance playing out in the history of European philosophy. For Schelling, the subject and the object are like lovers, forced apart from each other for no reason other than convention, and when they finally meet, they at last recognise how they have never really been apart, that they are nothing independently, that the very fabric of their being is stitched into the other, and yet they do not entirely dissolve into one another either. Nowhere in the *Naturphilosophie* is this more apparent than when Schelling talks about one of the most constitutive characteristics of nature as structure: the binding of the ideal and the real, where the idea of nature is “a type of explanation [where] the real itself is shifted into the ideal world, and those motions are transmuted into intuitions which proceed only in ourselves, and to which nothing outside of us corresponds” and therefore “the task of *Naturphilosophie* [is] to explain the ideal by the real” (SW 3:272; FO 193-4). Expressed here is a concentricity of otherwise opposed poles – the real outside us and the ideal inside us – unified in a sort of Möbius strip, a band of continuity.

Initially, Schelling views the real as a system skewed toward being and the ideal as a system skewed toward thought (SW 2:35; IN 27). Whilst we have already seen how the terms “subject” and “object” are redistributed by the peculiar idea of nature Schelling seeks to develop, they become even more complicated precisely when the ideal and the real are situated “in-one-another” (*Ineinander*) (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 208) such that they constitute a “union” (*Vereinigung*) (SW 2:37; IN 28). It would be remiss not to note that these expressions echo Schelling’s close friend and mentor, Goethe, when he says, “were the eye not of the sun,/How could we behold the light?” (Goethe 1988, 164), and indirectly anticipate Uexküll’s biological semiosis in which “the spider’s web is configured in a fly-like way, because the spider is also fly-like” (Uexküll 2010, 190). And a more contemporary and unconscious inheritance of this thinking is found in Eduardo Kohn’s passage that “our thoughts are like the world because they are of the world” (Kohn 2013, 60).<sup>23</sup> Clearly, this type of perspective only fully makes sense in light of the foregrounding of biological semiosis, but in the pre-semiotic turn, Schelling expresses it differently: “the absolute-ideal is also the absolute-

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<sup>23</sup> Another contemporary resonance with this position can be found in Nail (2021, 280n17).

real” (SW 2:58; IN 44).<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the correlates can be mapped out exactly: just as the eye is “sun-like” for Goethe, the spider is “fly-like” for Uexküll and thought is “world-like” for Kohn, for Schelling the ideal is “real-like,” thought is being-like; concentrically bound up, the terms are symbiotically *involved*.

If the reader will allow me, I’d like to unpack this with an example. In the above mentioned novella, *Flatland*, we are introduced to a two-dimensional world called “flatland.” The protagonist, “A Square,” an inhabitant of flatland, takes us on a journey through his world, describing its laws, customs, and physical characteristics. In the second half of the book, he describes an encounter with “a stranger from spaceland,” a visitor who mysteriously enters flatland seemingly from nowhere. The stranger is in fact a sphere from a three-dimensional world called “spaceland.” But when he tries to explain to A Square that flatland is *in* spaceland, that two-dimensional space is located in a higher dimension, he finds that it is no use, A Square simply cannot wrap his head around it. So the sphere “resorts to deeds” and lifts A Square out of flatland into spaceland so that he can see for himself that his entire world is just a flat surface in a vast three-dimensional world (Abbott 1998, 93-8). A Square comes to realise that flatland is only two-dimensional *because* it is limited by another dimension outside it; the two-dimensional must be situated in the three-dimensional. But this is not to say that spaceland is nature and flatland is not nature. Instead, nature is the very logic that flatland must be situated in spaceland for it to have the characteristics it does, and that spaceland must itself be situated in a higher dimension to have the characteristics *it* does. As A Square puts it to the sphere: “As you yourself, superior to all flatland forms, combine many circles in one, so doubtless there is one above you who combines many spheres in one supreme existence, surpassing even the solids of spaceland.” (Abbott 1998, 101). A Square plots out a central Schellingian thematic here: these worlds must be situated, an idea which strikes equally through them all, and this tells us that Schelling thinks an essential symbiosis between the ideal and the real at this point.

This type of symbiotic tension comes out in full force in *First Outline* where Schelling discusses “the dynamical organisation [*Organisation*] of the universe as an infinite *involution*” (SW 3:154; FO 112). Called upon here is a reiterative scoping:

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<sup>24</sup> For more on this see Woodard (2020, 45) and Esposito (1977, 81).

an “internal” is grounded by an “external” but this external must, in turn, be grounded by something outside it such that it is simultaneously a second-order internal, which must, again, be grounded by a second-order external and so on. Schelling develops this view earlier in the text specifically in thinking the organic and inorganic. His aim is to show how the organic and inorganic “are originally only *one* product” (SW 3:92; FO 69) but that they must still be considered “*opposed* to one another” (SW 3:92; FO 70). The sapling of what will become the thinking of symbiotic involution is clear: “opposed, they cannot unify themselves other than [both] being opposed to a higher *third*, common [to both]” (SW 3:92; FO 70). The organic and inorganic, internal and external, are opposed only in so far as they are both situated in relation to a shared third position, i.e., they require a common point of opposition for the sake of their unity. And so a shifting of the terms becomes apparent where each level also occupies the position of its other: “the organisation [*Organisation*] and its outer world must be together in relation to another outside, again an *inner*, i.e., again, *one* organic [being]” (SW 3:92; FO 70).

How does this map on to the example from *Flatland* and what does this tell us about the ideal-real relationship? In a word, the relationships between two-dimensional and three-dimensional, the organic internal and inorganic external, the ideal and the real, all participate in relationships of symbiotic involution, which is denoted by unification in a higher, common organisation or “third” and this anchors a position of relative identity or what Schelling calls a point of “indifference” (SW 3:309; FO 219). Like the supercritical fluid where a state is reached in which matter is both gas and liquid, there is a point where the ideal and the real meet. Whilst the real is situated “outside” the ideal, the real itself must be grounded by another, higher, ideal, which is to say, the real is structured like the ideal, or in Schelling’s own words, “that a universe exists is itself only an *idea*” (SW 2:24; IN 18).<sup>25</sup> To put it in a nutshell, underlying both ideal and real is a shared structural root within which both are contracted, such that traversing

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<sup>25</sup> A passage like this can be used to claim that Schelling views forces (and by extension nature itself) simply *as* spirit – as Esposito (1977, 55) does – due to the eschewal of the purely *physical*. Because this passage is cached within a discussion of how matter cannot be thought without simultaneously thinking constitutive forces, however, it is really a comment on how the status of force as *idea* necessitates a transgression of the mechanical.

the “opposition” of the ideal and real will always result in a point of their eclipse/collapse.

Again, if the reader will allow me, we might think this through another example, this time the film trilogy *The Matrix*. When Neo first escapes the matrix, he effectively realises that there is a real world and an ideal world. The ideal world of the matrix is structured according to a programmed code undergirding the appearances occurring “inside” it; on the other hand, the real world, the world of the machines and Zion, is supposedly not encoded or inflected by an “outside.” But by the second film, Neo discovers that he can stop the machines in the real world *as if* they were in the coded ideal world of the matrix. He stops them from coming toward his crew by bending the reality around him, a feat no one thought was possible whilst outside the matrix, not even Neo himself. It becomes evident that the difference is not between a real world equal to nature and an ideal world equal to spirit, for both real and ideal share an essential trait: each must be situated inside the other to maintain any meaning whatsoever. When Neo controls the machines outside the matrix, he effectively discovers that there is a communal seam uniting the real and the ideal.

This dovetails into why Schelling describes his view of nature specifically as an “idea,” as he expresses it in 1804’s *System of Philosophy in General*:

by idea, here and subsequently, I do not understand the mere mode of *thinking*, as the term is generally understood (even in Spinoza); instead, I understand the idea (following its original meaning) as the archetype [*Urgestalt*], as the essence or heart of things, so to speak (SW 6:183; SP 172).

The idea expresses the essence of things, the structurally involuted root of the ideal and the real. As in the example from *The Matrix*, the idea of nature is the archetypal expression of both ideal and real in their shared commonality, the delineation of the point at which they overlap and the marking out of their ontological condition of possibility. And yet Schelling’s idea resists falling into Kant’s transcendental precisely because it emphasises context and situation in an environment not found solely within the limits of subjectivity (or in the unity of apperception); whilst nature is explicitly an “idea,” Schelling intends this to be understood in an inherently “pre-Kantian” and even “pre-Spinozian” way as an *Urgestalt*, a primordial shape, an organisation, a structure.

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 “THE COLOUR OF THE UNCONDITIONED”: WHIRLPOOLS

We are now in a better position to assess one of Schelling’s most famous and poetic formulations of nature: the “whirlpool” (*Wirbel*). The whirlpool arises amid a discussion on unconditioned productivity and the conditioned product in the *First Outline*, which we must first unpack.

Much of the *Naturphilosophie* pushes off from Jacobi’s analysis of the problematic of the unconditioned which invoked a curious paradox.<sup>26</sup> Taking the German terms literally, the unconditioned or the *Unbedingt* – the “un-thinged”<sup>27</sup> – is what is explicitly not a thing or an object. But when we think it, we necessarily transform it into the conditioned or *Bedingt* – the “thinged.” For Jacobi and all post-Kantians after him, the question is, how can we account for the unconditioned whilst simultaneously maintaining its meaning and integrity; is this not an impossible task? The romantic poet Novalis also lamented this prospect at the beginning of his poem *Pollen*: “We search everywhere for the *Unbedingte* and find always only *Dinge*” (Novalis 1978, 226). Taking inspiration from Terrence Deacon’s (2013, 23) unrelated observation of the dynamic between the English verb “to matter” and the noun “matter,” we might idiosyncratically retranslate Novalis’ verse to, “we search everywhere for what matters and find always only matter.” “What matters” can be understood in two ways: what is most significant, but also what produces matter but is not matter itself. Owing to the circumstances of our corporeal position in the world, the constitution of our cognitive makeup etc, when we attempt to search for what matters (in both senses), we end up reifying it into matter itself; indeed, there could be no way of recognising it other than as a “something.”

Schelling turns this complex dynamic into the overarching model for thinking nature as structure. The unconditioned is recognised only from the perspective of its opposite, the conditioned; and yet the “colour of the unconditioned” partially shines through (SW 3:12; FO 13). He connects this to nature in the following way. Nature is pure productivity, infinite becoming, but this immanently contains inhibited (*gehemmt*) products or finite being within it;<sup>28</sup> for it is only from the perspective of the product that productivity is recognised as

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g., Snow (1996, 33-66), who bases her whole reading around Jacobi as Schelling’s starting point.

<sup>27</sup> I adopt this from Grant (2008, 16, 107).

<sup>28</sup> The contemporary correlate of this is Nail’s (2021, 25) view of matter as becoming.

productivity in the first place by virtue of the fact that we (as finite products) are thinking it. Without the product, productivity would continually become, but there would be no folding back on itself, no temporary standing perspective from which to know it. It is to this view that Schelling attached his image of the whirlpool, set out in the *Introduction to the Outline*:

One [can] think of a tide [*Strom*], which is *pure identity*; where it meets a resistance, a whirlpool forms, this whirlpool is not fixed, rather at every moment it disappears, at every moment it arises again [...] Only when points of inhibition [*Hemmungspunkte*] are given, [can the undifferentiated products of nature] become gradually deposed and emerge from universal identity (SW 3:289; FO 206).

What is to be accounted for is not the continual flow of water, but the temporary moments of inhibition which open a standpoint from which to trace the continual flow. This image becomes the *raison d'être* of Schelling's early project: "*Naturphilosophie* has not to explain the productive [in] nature, for if this were not originally posited in nature it could never be in nature [in the first place]. It has to explain the permanent." (SW 3:289; FO 206). Nature considered through the prism of the unconditioned is assumed to always be productive; this is a presupposition right from the start of the *First Outline*. Schelling's reasoning for this is that because it is *possible* to think nature as infinitely productive this must pertain to some *actual* modicum of nature, an original "positing" which is there for the taking, although thinking the unconditioned directly must always remain out of reach.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, *Naturphilosophie* does not try to demonstrate nature as an unconditioned, rather, it tries to answer why finite products should arise out of an infinite productivity at all. Schelling phrases this earlier in the text, saying that the "active" does not need to be explained in nature but rather, what must be explained is "the *resting, permanent*" (SW 3:18; FO 17).

In this connection, a broader overview of this part of the *Naturphilosophie* is that it still believes itself able to answer Leibniz's question, "why is there something rather than nothing?"<sup>30</sup> For much of the philosophical acrobatics of the *First Outline* are crystallised around attempting to answer *why* infinite

<sup>29</sup> This manner of thinking was common in post-Kantian philosophy and reflects a key tenet of early German Idealist thinking, as Esposito (1977, 21) points out.

<sup>30</sup> See SW 1:310; PL 175. Although Snow (1996, 6 and 176) reads this passage as Schelling asking directly "why is there something rather than nothing?" he actually asks, "why is there a field of experience at all?" although I take this to express basically the same concern.

productivity should inhibit itself into finite products; *why* the unconditioned should give rise to the conditioned in the first place; *why* products do not just entirely dissolve into productivity; more vexed still is the question of why a split should occur between nature and spirit. Even though *Naturphilosophie* searches for a decidedly rational answer to these elusive questions,<sup>31</sup> there is never a satisfying resolution for Schelling. In my view, Schelling's corpus post-1804's *Philosophy and Religion* takes the road it does because he recognises that the "why?" question is resolved only by a necessarily inexplicable suspension. There really is no reason why infinite productivity should inhibit itself into finite products, or why the unconditioned should give rise to the conditioned, why products don't just instantaneously dissolve into productivity or indeed, why spirit should split from nature at all. Whilst Schelling's post-1804 work is based upon the realisation of this failure of reason, one of the inadvertent strengths of *Naturphilosophie* is that in its repeated failure to answer the "why?" question, it provides a wealth of answers to the "how?" question.

From the perspective of contemporary reception, *Naturphilosophie*'s lapse into the "how?" question anticipates the ontological turn in anthropology, if not always in its results, then at least in its approach. Ontological anthropology does not attempt to answer "why?" questions, more often occupying itself with "how?" questions. Deacon provides a nice example of this: "although we can explain how a device might be built to distinguish red light from green light – and can even explain how retinal cells accomplish this – this account provides no purchase in explaining why red light *looks* red." (Deacon 2013, 7). To riff on this example for a moment, just as red film placed over a lamp causes the light to shine red but still allows for something essential about the white light to get through, Schelling's idea of nature is not about trying to remove the red film to figure out *why*, it is not about peeping "behind" it to look directly into the light, it is about exploring *how* the red film and the light shining through it share an inherent, common grammar. Another example is Kohn (2013), who does not ask why the Runa have the relations they do with the jaguar, but *how*. Kohn asks not *why* forests think, but *how* forests think; likewise, Schelling's failure to answer why a product should emerge from productivity gives rise to the complexity of how it emerges.

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<sup>31</sup> See Beiser (2008, 579).

Interestingly, it is precisely in the moments when Schelling misrecognises himself as irrefutably answering the “why?” question through the suspension instantiated by the “*Ungrund*” that he appears farthest away from contemporary lines of thought. What Schelling didn’t and perhaps couldn’t recognise is that it is precisely the unacknowledged failure of *Naturphilosophie* to hit its intended target which anticipates the contemporary paradigm so uncannily.

In light of these failures, one of Schelling’s inadvertent answers to the “how?” of the idea of nature is force (*Kraft*). Placing force at the heart of *Naturphilosophie* indicates how the idea of nature is phrased as specifically objective, that is, as capable of harbouring both productivity and product in an ontological condition of possibility. In the example of the whirlpool, Schelling describes how a free-flow of force is inhibited by counteracting forces, which gives rise to matter. Derived from Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* which argues for a so-called “balance” of attractive and repulsive force,<sup>32</sup> Schelling similarly posits two forces as striving against each other (SW 2:22-3; IN 18). But far from the equilibrium Kant sought, which resulted in the “density problem,”<sup>33</sup> Schelling realised that a continual disruption would need to be at work for anything based on this model to be maintained. Challenging the “pastoral” and “Edenic” renderings of nature, there is always some minute imbalance propelling the forces to struggle against each other and so absolute equilibrium (total stasis and harmony) is staved off. In this connection, Schelling critiques the view that matter arises via a balance of forces, for it is not that “matter has forces” as much as matter *is* a continual oscillatory disequilibrium of forces viewed through the prism of the product (SW 2:23; IN 17-8), or put another way, “attractive and repulsive forces constitute the *essence* [*Wesen*] of matter itself” (SW 2:205; IN 165). Clearly, this view engenders a radical temporality since a system based on disequilibrium can never be completely equalised, total dissolution could never occur, and completion (in an absolute product) never achieved; when a whirlpool dissipates another one soon appears. It is for this reason that *Naturphilosophie* is often accompanied by a sense of non-closure, as Andrew Bowie puts it: there must be “an inherent difference of subject and object which prevents nature ever finally reaching stasis as a

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<sup>32</sup> See Warren (2010).

<sup>33</sup> See Westphal (2009, 191-97).



completed object” (Bowie 2008, 75).

Emphasising the oscillation of forces signals how nature is always on the move, propelled by a profound dissatisfaction. This view is taken forward in *On the World Soul* where the organic itself is premised on a continual disruption of equilibrium – a fundamental condition of possibility for life to occur. Schelling describes how “life exists in a chemical process,” asking how this process is tied up with a nature that “conserves a continual *disruption* of equilibrium in animal bodies” (SW 2:500). He derives this view from an earlier discussion where, although the “opposing forces have a necessary striving to set themselves into *equilibrium*,” if they ever achieved such equilibrium all matter would “flow together into one lump” such that “the whole world would sink into inertia” (SW 2:391), i.e., everything would slip into death. Without the continual disruption and unbalancing of forces, life could not be held open. There is no “mother nature” here, no “balance” or “harmony” of nature since for Schelling nature issues forth a fundamental violence to life, perhaps even an intrusion, and yet, what is most interesting for us to think, this violence itself is a condition of possibility for life, a part of the structure itself.

It is in this connection that the idea of nature, as well as containing the structure of symbiotic involution, also contains a wholly dynamic, never entirely balanced, violent kernel around which it orbits, a continual “de-structuring” so to speak. Indeed, whilst traversing the span of *Naturphilosophie* one often gets the vertiginous sense that Schelling’s own restlessness leaks into his thinking on what a vivified nature actually is; never content, it strives toward equilibrium only to stay *out* of balance, such that balance equates to total death, a view he maintains even in the later *Freedom* essay: “where there is no struggle, there is no life” (SW 7:400; F 63). Forces are never still and silent, representing the antitheses of the mechanist’s viewpoint in which stasis is not only allowed but presupposed. By viewing things in this way, the answer to “how do we think nature through the prism of the unconditioned/conditioned?” is sought in the form of continual oscillation and the temporary viewpoints emerging from it, and whilst these temporary viewpoints, these *Anschauungsweisen*, like tensed bundles of quality, reiterate the whole structure in tinted miniature (SW 3:198; FO 143), they are also simultaneously caught up in a move towards dissolution and ultimately de-structure.

## CONCLUSION

Deepening the idea of nature becomes one of the pillars of many contemporary views such that it has become commonplace to assume that something profound is expressed by the word “nature” beyond the gesturing to merely what is “out there.” As I have tried to show, Schelling’s idea of nature is not entirely reducible to pointing out “natural phenomena,” or any view based on “naturalness” and the return to an “Edenic” state, neither is it entirely reducible to spirit. When Merleau-Ponty said, “do a psychoanalysis on nature” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 267) he didn’t mean that we should treat nature like a subject, he meant that we should tap into something more fundamental which may have slipped through the cracks of our everyday understanding. Likewise, *Naturphilosophie* seeks to make visible an essential aseitic, objectively transcendental structure striking through all living and non-living worlds emerging within it. And this is what the passage from *Ideas* which opens this essay really means: what we find visible here is invisible over there, but both are equally undergirded by the same structure iterating itself in multiple domains; spirit shines light back toward the ground from which it emerged. Finally, the residual problematic Schelling’s idea of nature cedes to modern philosophy is how it might further investigations of this structure, how to reconstruct it in the process of thinking and how to think an idea of nature which has the capacity to express both structure and disintegration of structure or de-structure

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