

SCHELLING AND THE SIXTH EXTINCTION: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS BEHIND SCHELLING'S ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION OF NATURE

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ABSTRACT: What Elizabeth Kolbert has called the 'sixth mass extinction' due to anthropogenic climate change has obliged us to rethink our traditional assumptions about the rapport between ourselves and nature. While the reconceptualization of nature has largely been led by scientists and environmental theorists and activists, this paper argues that Schelling provides the best and earliest model for rethinking nature in the Anthropocene. To this end, Schelling critiques two approaches to nature. Schelling repudiates Fichte's idealism for reducing nature to an instrument for the self-assertion of our egos much like modern industrial capitalism views nature as an economic resource to be exploited for human gain. Further, Schelling critiques Spinoza for mechanizing nature as a structurally invariant system in the same way that climate change denialists hold that the earth's ecosystem is perfectly homeostatic. Having dismissed these two approaches, Schelling develops another environmentally ethical conception of nature to answer the question of how the free human subject emerges out of an allegedly blind and lifeless nature. Schelling's solution to safeguarding nature is to paradoxically anthropomorphize it *further* by reconceiving it as always-already structured as per the dynamic free spirit. This paper shall thus conclude by extracting two environmentally ethical principles that Schelling's anthropomorphization of nature entails. Contra Fichte, the 'dependency principle' states that humans are radically dependent upon nature rather than nature being dependent on our positing it as an object of our intuition. Moreover, the 'contingency principle' stipulates against Spinoza that nature is itself contingent, dynamic and precarious. In this way, Schelling provides a conceptualization of nature befitting the demands placed upon thought in the age of the sixth extinction.

KEYWORDS: Schelling; Naturphilosophie; Elizabeth Kolbert; The Sixth Extinction; Spinoza; Fichte; German idealism; ontology; metaphysics; climate change; global warming; the Anthropocene; anthropocentrism

One of the major crises of our day is anthropogenic climate change by which humans have developed the capacity to cause widespread ecological disaster, and hence endanger all life including ourselves. In *The Sixth Extinction*, the best recent book on anthropogenic global warming, Elizabeth Kolbert draws upon the research and findings of climate scientists to detail how humans' appropriation of subterranean reserves of energy such as fossil fuel traps greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane near the earth's surface, thereby raising the atmosphere's temperature.¹ According to Kolbert's figures, since the nineteenth century industrial revolution, our ever-increasing use of fossil fuel, combustion and deforestation has raised the levels of greenhouse gases in the air by 40%, with a 6% increase in carbon dioxide per year. Since 1975, computer modelling has calculated that a doubling of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would lead to an irreversible increase in global temperature around 3°C above what it was in the 1950s.

As Kolbert argues, even small increases in CO₂ beyond this event horizon would have three devastating effects. Firstly, since carbon dioxide dissolves water, its increasing concentration will lead to the melting of the north and south poles and ocean acidification, which will create immense difficulties for the many species that depend on ice and coral reefs to survive. Secondly, it threatens the existence of our own species and social order as masses of climate refugees are predicted to either die or migrate when their resources have dried up and their homelands have become inhabitable disaster zones. Finally, anthropogenic climate change threatens the earth in its entirety as a habitable planet by any standards of what we could consider to be acceptable living. In light of all this, Kolbert argues that we are presently undergoing a 'sixth mass extinction' on the same scale as the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event, when an asteroid hit earth and created a dust-ridden environment that wiped out the dinosaurs along with three quarters of life's diversity.²

It is true that other climate scientists have criticized the precise predictions of the computer modelling upon which Kolbert relies. According to leading U.S. climate researcher James Hansen, this is because the modelling assumes that variables and quantities remain fixed over large time scales, and is therefore insensitive to possible and unknown climate processes and feedback factors.³ Nonetheless, Hansen's alternate

¹ Kolbert, Elizabeth, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2014, p. 105. For a less recent yet equally perspicuous account of the current ecological crisis, see Flannery, Tim, *The Weather Makers: How We Are Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth*, New York, HarperCollins, 2010.

² Kolbert, *Sixth Extinction*, p. 8.

³ See, for instance, Hansen, James, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*. London, Bloomsbury, 2010, particularly pp. 62, 65.

argument that the Earth is demonstrably absorbing more heat than it is radiating out comes to the same general conclusion that the Earth is indeed heating up: ‘regardless of the validity of such assumptions, Charney’s idealized problem allowed attention to be focused on certain climate processes that are surely important’; and: ‘the startling conclusion is that continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself’.⁴ While there is therefore room for some doubt and much clarification apropos the precise details of runaway greenhouse effects, in light of all the actual and potential destructive changes, Kolbert’s general conclusion that we are on the brink of another mass extinction is clearly justified. So, the general startling picture that ultimately emerges from contemporary climate science no matter which climate scientist’s argument or data we look at is the brute fact that humans are radically reliant upon our external environment to survive, an environment which is itself subject to contingency, mutation and destruction.

Given the existential threats it entails, anthropogenic climate change has obliged us to rethink many of our traditional scientific, politico-economic and philosophical assumptions about the rapport between humans and nature. In *The Decline of Nature*, Gilbert F. Lafreniere fastidiously traces an environmental history of our western attitudes towards nature. Lafreniere identifies two general historical approaches to nature.⁵ In the middle ages, the mass deforestation of Western Europe for agricultural and grazing spaces was ideologically accompanied by the biblical ‘idea of providence’, according to which man is God’s steward with the right of dominion over all of nature and its creations. Even after the scientific revolution, the ‘idea of progress’ simply secularised the belief that nature is an endless resource for us to feed our insatiable appetite for fuel, warmth, pottery and glass manufacturing, cooking, mining, shipbuilding and war machines. From the middle ages to modernity, the hegemonic Western view of nature is that it is a self-rejuvenating resource to be endlessly exploited for human gain alone.

However, since the environmental movement first emerged in the 1960s in reaction to evidence that industrial activity is polluting the soil, water, air and food, and hence provoking disease and a scarcity of resources, these age-old assumptions about nature have been radically thrown into doubt. Climate science’s discovery of anthropogenic

⁴ Hansen, James, *Storms*, pp. 62, 5.

⁵ Lafreniere, Gilbert F., *The Decline of Nature: Environmental History and the Western Worldview*, London, Academia Press, 2008, pp. xiv, 63. For another classic history of Western attitudes towards nature, see Hughes, J. Donald, *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind’s Changing Role in the Community of Life*, London, Routledge, 2009.

global warming in the 1970s has only put a final nail in the coffin of the classical division between nature and humans in favour of re-envisioning ourselves as radically dependent upon an equally precarious nature's own well-being. As J. Donald Hughes puts it in his now classic account of the history of Western attitudes to nature, 'the idea of environment, as something separate from the human, and offering merely a setting for human history, is misleading. Whatever humans have done to the rest of the community has inevitably affected themselves.'⁶ Never before has there been such a pressing need for a reconceptualization of nature that abandons the old approaches, which continue to ideologically contribute to the current ecological crisis.

While this reconceptualization of nature has largely been led by natural scientists and environmental theorists and activists, this paper argues that Friedrich Schelling provides the best and earliest model for rethinking nature in the Anthropocene. Although in recent years there has been several works that explore the implications of Schelling's thought for environmental philosophy, there has been remarkably little compared to other major philosophical figures like Whitehead. At first glance, this is surprising given that Schelling is well known for developing a 'speculative physics' or '*naturphilosophie*' with the explicit intention of collapsing the distinction between nature and spirit, substance and subject. On second thoughts, it is not so surprising when we remember that Schelling has largely been neglected as a historical stepping-stone, what he would call a 'vanishing mediator', in German idealism's transition from Kant and Fichte's critical idealisms to Hegel's absolute idealism.⁷ Over the last two decades, however, anthologies like *The New Schelling* and *Schelling Now* have reinvigorated scholarly interest in Schelling and launched a veritable 'Schelling renaissance'.⁸ Prominent thinkers like Slavoj Žižek, Iain Hamilton Grant and Markus Gabriel have argued for the enduring relevance of Schelling's thought to contemporary metaphysical debates in continental philosophy.⁹ Each year since the turn of the century has seen an

⁶ Hughes, *Environmental History*, p. 6.

⁷ For some older notable exceptions to this trend of not taking Schelling seriously as an independent figure, see Tilliette, Xavier, *Schelling: une philosophie en devenir*, 2 vols., Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1970; Tillich, Paul, *Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development*, trans. Victor Nuovo, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1974; Heidegger, Martin, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, London, Ohio University Press, 1985.

⁸ Welchman, Alistair and Judith Norman (ed.), *The New Schelling*, London, Continuum, 2004; Wirth, Jason M. (ed.), *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005.

⁹ Grant, Iain Hamilton, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, London, Continuum, 2006; Žižek, Slavoj, *The Indivisible Remainder*, London, Verso, 2007; Gabriel, Markus and Slavoj Žižek, *Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, London, Continuum, 2009; Gabriel, Markus, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism*, London, Continuum, 2011.

increasing number of publications on Schelling introducing him to a new generation of scholars by making the case for his contemporary relevance.

With the need to defend and reintroduce Schelling now largely behind us as he becomes ever more widely accepted as an important figure in his own right, recent works in Schelling studies have begun examining the implications of his philosophy for other fields, such as art, philosophy of mind and psychoanalysis.¹⁰ While there are no book-length studies, there have been three notable essays and a book chapter that examine Schelling's implications for environmental philosophy.¹¹ Although these are valuable resources that any further discussion of Schelling's relation to environmental philosophy such as my own must take into account, I believe that the present paper nonetheless contributes a rather different interpretation of Schelling in this respect. Whereas most of the works cited only really focus on Schelling's critique of Fichte's anthropogenic view of nature, this paper also considers Spinoza's distinct mechanical approach to nature that equally draws Schelling's ire, even as he is sympathetic to Spinoza's more general ambition to construct a philosophy of nature. In both cases, I also seek to link the two approaches that Schelling critiques to the contemporary capitalist and climate change denialist's view of nature as an inexhaustible economic resource to be endlessly exploited for human gain. Moreover, my reading of Schelling's own conceptualization of nature differs from the others in that it characterizes it as an increasing anthropomorphization of nature in order to counterintuitively protect it against humans' subjective impositions. Finally, my identification of not one, but two approaches against which Schelling develops his at once anthropic and yet environmentally ethical concept of nature also permits me to extrapolate two implicit principles to conceptualizing nature along the lines set forth by Schelling. As we shall see, my contention is that these two principles, which insist on our radical dependency upon nature, and on nature's own intrinsic contingency, provide the best and earliest way of thinking nature in light of contemporary climate science's insights into anthropogenic global warming.

Certainly, Schelling's tendency to conduct his education in public, continuously change his ideas and positions, and write in a vague compositional style means that it is

¹⁰ For an exemplary instance of this trend in Schelling scholarship, see McGrath, S.J. *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious*, London, Routledge, 2012.

¹¹ Miller, Elaine P., "'The World Must Be Romanticised...': The (Environmental) Ethical Implications of Schelling's Organic Worldview', *Environmental Values*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2005; Dallmayre, Fred, 'Nature and Spirit: Schelling', *Return to Nature? An Ecological Counterhistory*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011; Gare, Arran, 'From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization', *Cosmos and History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2011; Matthews, Bruce, 'Schelling in the Anthropocene: A New Mythology of Nature', *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 1., 2015.

possible to interpret him in a number of different ways. Far from providing an interpretation of his philosophy as a whole, this paper is more specifically interested in the stage of Schelling's intellectual development where he combines Fichte and Spinoza to cancel out each other's shortcomings by anthropomorphizing nature in a way that can provide an environmental ethics for our time. Consequently, I do not address Schelling's Parmenidean tendency and philosophy of identity that he briefly entertains.¹² Nor do I take into account Schelling's later distinction between positive and negative philosophy, or his scepticism of Giordano Bruno and Jakob Böhme's Neo-Platonic view that the telos of nature is to become self-conscious in the strict sense.¹³ Schelling's writings on the philosophy of mythology and religion are also completely cast aside.¹⁴ In looking for conceptual resources to elaborate an environmental ethics, I primarily draw on Schelling's four 1794-6 essays where he first distances himself from Fichte and gravitates around Spinoza, before developing his own constructive naturphilosophie in the 1799 *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*. I also draw on Schelling's more mature, and hence often clearer and more refined presentations of his fusion of Fichte and Spinoza into a naturphilosophie in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* (which despite its title already presupposes Schelling's philosophy of nature), the 1809 *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, and the 1811 *Clara, or On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*. Finally, my discussion of Schelling's stages of natural history is primarily drawn from the 1799 *Philosophy of Nature*, but also the 1811-15 *Ages of the World* drafts, particularly the third version. In short, I base my analysis of Schelling's critiques of Fichte and Spinoza on the 1794-6 period, and his naturphilosophie on the 1799-1800 and 1809-15 texts. While there are certainly differences over these periods, Schelling often repeats the same critiques of Fichte and Spinoza, as well as his anthropomorphization of nature. So, it is ultimately this particular thread in Schelling's thought that I shall trace with an eye to developing an environmental ethics rather than to providing an interpretation of his philosophy in its entirety.

I shall thus begin by showing how Schelling's ostensibly metaphysical critiques of Fichte and Spinoza can be read as rejections of two approaches to nature. In the first

¹² For his philosophy of identity, see Schelling, F.W.J., 'Presentation of My System of Philosophy', trans. Michael G. Vater, *Philosophical Forum*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2001. For Schelling's repudiation of this philosophy, see *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

¹³ See Schelling, F.W.J., *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews, Albany, Suny Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Schelling's 1842-3 *Philosophy of Revelation* is also partly translated in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*.

section, I will argue that Schelling repudiates Fichte's idealism for reducing nature to an instrument for the self-assertion of our own egos much like modern industrial capitalism views nature as an economic resource to be exploited for human gain. In the second section, I will show that Schelling also critiques what he terms Spinoza's 'dogmatic realism' for mechanizing nature as a structurally invariant system in much the same way that climate change denialists hold that the earth's ecosystem is perfectly homeostatic. Having dismissed these two approaches, in the final section, we shall see that Schelling develops another environmentally ethical conception of nature to answer the question of how the free human subject emerges out of an allegedly blind and lifeless nature. Schelling's solution to safeguarding nature is to paradoxically anthropomorphize it further by reconceiving it as distinct and anterior as per Spinoza, and yet structured by the same dynamism as Fichte's free human spirit. The paradox of Schelling's approach to nature is that he avoids both Spinoza's 'denialism' of nature's mutability and Fichte's 'economic' view, not through a further separation of nature from man, but through nature's *increasing* anthropomorphization. I shall thus conclude by extracting two environmentally ethical principles that Schelling's anthropomorphization of nature entails. What I term the 'dependency principle' states against Fichte that humans are radically dependent upon nature rather than nature being dependent on our positing it as an object of our intuition. Moreover, what I term the 'contingency principle' stipulates contra Spinoza that nature is itself contingent, dynamic and precarious. To be clear, I am not claiming that Schelling himself intended his abstract, metaphysical speculations to harbour an environmentally ethical concept of nature. All I am saying is that it is possible to extrapolate such a concept from Schelling's philosophy, a concept that is alone adequate to meet the challenges placed upon thought by scientific knowledge in the age of the sixth extinction.

1. FICHTE'S 'ECONOMIC' APPROACH TO NATURE

At first, the young Schelling of the early to mid-1790s generally endorses Fichte's idealism. In particular, Schelling is drawn to Fichte's account of freedom, which he sees as missing from the other major philosophies of his day. Notwithstanding the theosophical and romantic visions of a 'spiritual' nature championed by Goethe and other German thinkers, on Schelling's account, the late eighteenth century intellectual climate was largely dominated by mechanical philosophers and Newtonian scientists who disavowed human autonomy by reducing all our activity, passions and thought to mirror reflections of a fixed and immutable nature. In the next section, we shall see that Schelling traces these mechanical philosophies back to the instrumental aspects of Spinoza's system as 'the point around which everything moves, or rather imprisonment

of thought, from which thought has sought to emancipate itself by the succeeding systems without yet being able to do so.¹⁵ Against what he sees as the dominant mechanical philosophies of his day, Schelling upholds Fichte as alone affirming the human subject's freedom to break with nature's mechanical causality: 'until the discovery of [Fichte's] idealism, a genuine concept of freedom was lacking in all the more recent systems'.¹⁶ According to Fichte, human freedom denotes our capacity to decide and re-decide our ego's own nature or essence forever anew. In Fichte's own terms, 'the object of the activity of the Ego is posited as product of freedom, that is, as accidental, as a thus which could be otherwise'.¹⁷ If Schelling is attracted to Fichte's idealism, then, it is because it provides an account of freedom missing from late nineteenth century mechanical philosophies and Newtonian science.

By the turn of the century, however, Schelling becomes much more critical of Fichte. In particular, Schelling takes issue with the fact that Fichte's idealism is only concerned with how our capacity to freely define and redefine our own dynamic essence appears as a phenomenon *for us* rather than with the ontological status of freedom *in itself*. What is missing from Fichte's idealist account of the primacy of human autonomy is any role for a nature that is external and distinct from spirit as the backdrop against which spirit emerges. As Schelling puts it, 'the entire new European philosophy since its beginning has the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground'.¹⁸ On Fichte's account, nature, the 'object' or the 'non-I' is not an anterior or even external substance separate from the subject. Instead, it is posited by the subject as the means by which the subject can think itself as an object or other of its own thought. Put otherwise, Fichte's view of nature is that it is merely a subjectively posited tool for the I's self-assertion. So, while Fichte describes the subject as free in a way that Schelling admires, he does so in such a way as if it alone exists, as if external nature is nothing but the subject's own positing of an object, which the subject can then reshape or 'negate' to assert its freedom. In a letter to Schelling, Fichte himself explains that their dispute arose because Schelling makes room for both spirit and nature in the realm of being where Fichte only sees nature as the act of the subject's self-positing: 'I still do not agree with *your opposition* between transcendental philosophy and philosophy of nature. [...] *The thing* is not added to *consciousness*, nor

¹⁵ Schelling, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Schelling, F.W.J., *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005, p. 17.

¹⁷ Fichte, J.G., *Science of Knowledge*, trans. A.E. Kroeger, London, Trübner and Co., 1889, p. 222.

¹⁸ Schelling, *Freedom*, p. 26.

consciousness to the thing, but both are immediately united in the I.¹⁹ For Schelling, the problem with Fichte's idealism is that it cannot really refute the mechanical view of nature, since it does not contest its ground in the real world of things-in-themselves: 'the fight against dogmatism is waged with weak weapons if criticism rests its whole system merely upon the state of our *cognitive faculty*, and not upon our genuine essence'.²⁰ Certainly, Schelling agrees with Fichte that idealism must maintain its notion of freedom as the subject's active and self-organizing capacity. However, it must come to reconcile human dynamism with a concept of trans-human nature writ large.

While Schelling's critique of Fichte's idealism is written in an abstract, metaphysical register, my contention is that it nonetheless implies a certain environmentally ethical concern for nature. That is to say, it is possible to interpret Schelling's critique of Fichte's idealism as an effort to protect nature as something above and beyond its use-value for humans. In other words, Schelling is seeking to rid philosophy of the anthropocentric worldview that sees the entire world as orbiting around our own ego as its centre of gravity. In light of this, Schelling's criticisms of Fichte can be read as an inadvertent criticism of Western industrial capitalism's subjugation of nature to the status of a commodity, which is to be endlessly exploited for the self-assertion of our own individual egos. As Matthews formulates the contemporary relevance of Schelling's critique of Fichte for environmental ethics:

According to Schelling, this devaluation of sensuous nature has its roots in modernity's promotion of the thinking human subject to the rank of the absolute, an inflation of the cogito that leads to the vainglorious deification of the human subject at the subsequent cost of what Schelling presciently calls the 'annihilation of nature'.²¹

So, while Schelling's critique of Fichte's idealism operates at a metaphysical level, we can nonetheless extrapolate a strong parallel with the concerns of environmental ethics. According to such an ethic, industrial capitalism treats nature as an indefatigable economic resource to be ceaselessly appropriated and consumed for profit. Given that Fichte also sees nature as nothing more than an instrument for human flourishing without any independent worth or existence of its own, we can thus say that the

¹⁹ Fichte, J.G., 'Fichte in Berlin to Schelling in Jena, November 15, 1800', *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800-1802)*, trans. Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood, New York, SUNY Press, 2012, p. 42.

²⁰ Schelling, F.W.J., 'Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism', *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti, London, Associated University Presses, 1980, p. 161.

²¹ Matthews, Bruce, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom*, Albany, Suny Press, 2011, p. 2.

contemporary industrial capitalist's philosophy essentially consists in a Fichtean idealist attitude towards nature.

As Schelling will go on to argue with respect to Fichte, the modern economic view of nature *qua* commodity overlooks two key insights. Firstly, it is not so much that nature is reducible to the posited objects of our intuitions as it is the external and anterior backdrop upon which we depend. Secondly, nature is not some immutable and self-regenerating resource that can be endlessly extracted for commercial gain. On the contrary, it is itself finite, contingent, and hence subject to exhaustion. What both Fichtean idealism and the contemporary economic worldview both miss is that nature is a precarious ecosystem upon which we are nonetheless reliant for our survival and flourishing. As we shall see, such a view of nature as contingent and yet essential for our well-being is crucial now more than ever in the age of the sixth mass extinction event.

2. SPINOZA'S 'DENIALIST' VIEW OF NATURE

Having rejected Fichte's reduction of nature to spirit, Schelling turns to Spinoza's realism for conceptual resources to mitigate idealism. According to Spinoza, we can explain effects with reference to their causes, because the causes must contain at least as much reality as their effects if they are able to produce them: 'the knowledge of an effect opens on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause'.²² Now, since all effects are reducible to their causes inasmuch as they have identical properties, effects are really one and the same thing as their causes. Further, since each finite cause must be reducible to a more primordial cause from whence it gains its existence, all cause-effects are ultimately reducible to one ultimate self-caused substance. In Spinoza's own words, 'it follows quite clearly that God is one: that is, in the universe there is only one substance, and this is absolutely infinite'; and: 'He is an immanent, and not a transient cause, since all that He produces is within Himself, and not outside Him, because there is nothing outside Him'.²³ By tracing all effects back to an all-encompassing uncaused cause, substance, or necessary being, Spinoza reduces all particular things to what he calls modifications or 'modes' of the general 'attributes' of substance's essence.²⁴

While Spinoza refers to this monist substance by God in the above quotations, he elsewhere calls it 'nature' in the sense of extension. After all, if all things are reducible to one monist substance's modes, corporeal bodies can be no exception. As Spinoza

²² Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics, Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, p. 218.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 224; *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-being, Complete Works*, p. 50.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 217.

succinctly puts it, ‘the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things’.²⁵ More precisely, Spinoza argues that God, nature or necessary substance is one and the same with the physical laws of motion and rest, which determine the interactions of extended bodies: ‘when we consider extension alone, then we become aware of nothing else in it except Motion and Rest, from which we then discover all the effects that result there from’.²⁶ This is why Schelling characterizes Spinoza’s philosophy as a ‘realism’ inasmuch as it posits extended nature as the one monist substance from whence everything else immanently derives as its modes.

To rectify Fichte’s excessive idealism, Schelling follows Spinoza’s realism to the extent that it is able to speak of nature in itself and independently of its phenomenal relation to us. Despite his great sympathy for Spinoza in this respect, however, Schelling is not a pure Spinozist because he still sees Spinoza as making an error in his approach to nature, albeit one that is the opposite to that of Fichte. Whereas Fichte affirms the primacy of the subject by reducing nature to an object of its intuition, Spinoza goes too far in the opposite direction: he inversely reduces the subject to a merely epiphenomenal effect of a mechanical nature’s structurally invariant laws. According to Spinoza, since everything is mechanically governed by the laws of motion and rest, error thus consists in overlooking the real material causes of things in favour of attributing the effects to subjective phenomena.²⁷ As an example, Spinoza argues that our belief that we have a free will transpires when we falsely attribute our actions to our subjective intent rather than to nature’s laws of motion and rest, which are wholly outside our control. For Spinoza, then, human autonomy is but the misrecognition of the real, natural causes of our actions by attributing them to the illusory cause of our own will.

On Schelling’s account, the trouble with Spinoza is that his subjugation of the free spirit to a blind, ‘subjectless’ nature fails to account for our own capacity to freely negate this supposedly necessary and immutable substance in favour of our own self-determination: ‘in demanding that the subject lose itself in the absolute, he had demanded implicitly the identity of the subjective with absolute causality’.²⁸ Given that our freedom to actively reshape nature cannot be denied for Schelling as for Fichte, the question must necessarily be posed as to how we could even emerge out of a dead, mechanical nature only to turn against it: ‘I ask you how dogmatism can ever explain that power by which man takes a stand against the absolute, and how it can explain the

²⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 54.

²⁶ Spinoza, *Short Treatise*, pp. 87-8.

²⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 264.

²⁸ Schelling, ‘Philosophical Letters’, p. 178.

feeling which accompanies this contest?²⁹ Termed differently, what Schelling specifies as Spinoza's 'dogmatic realism' simply cannot account for how the dynamic human subject described by Fichte arises out of nature's monotonous circularity of cause and effect if nature is not always-already itself active, 'free', and self-organizing. So, although Spinoza had the right ambition to develop a system of nature in a way that Schelling greatly admires and further pursues, he ultimately failed to do so by denying nature's dynamism, and hence opposing nature to the excrescent free spirit: 'if he had posited living substance instead of dead, blind substance, then the dualism of attributes would have offered him a means of really grasping the finitude of things'.³⁰ While Schelling will follow Spinoza in his noble effort to construct a system of nature, he will ultimately part ways with Spinoza's instrumental approach by arguing for an active, self-organizing nature that can elucidate how it can negate itself through the emergence of the free spirit.

Just as Schelling's critique of Fichte's idealism can be read as opposing the economic approach to nature, so can we appropriate his critique of Spinoza's mechanical aspects to take aim at climate change denialists. Schelling's critique of Spinoza is not that he reduces nature to the means of the ego's self-assertion as Fichte does. On the contrary, it is the autonomous human subject that is reduced to a mere epiphenomenal effect of an immutable nature's mechanical causality. It is important to note that Schelling does not take issue as Fichte does with Spinoza's idea of an external and anterior nature separate from the human subject. Here, Schelling is much more sympathetic to Spinoza than to Fichte. What draws Schelling's ire is Spinoza's *particular* conception of nature as an immutable system of mechanical laws. According to Schelling, Spinoza's dogmatic realism disavows the brute fact that nature is *not* eternal, blind and immutable. On the contrary, nature is radically contingent, precarious and

²⁹ Schelling, 'Philosophical Letters', p. 157.

³⁰ Schelling, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 72. Here, Schelling's reading of Spinoza recalls Johann Gottfried Herder's earlier interpretation of Spinoza. On the one hand, Herder criticizes Spinoza for 'resolving' Descartes' Cartesian dualism by subordinating spirit's free activity to a mechanical and geometrical operation of nature: 'in his *Ethics* he still took matter for extension, that is space, and set it up beside thought, an entirely different kind of thing. [...] Without essence, without active forces, extension is empty' (Herder, Johann Gottfried, 'Second Conversation', *God, Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick H. Burkhardt, New York, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1940, pp. 101-2). On the other hand, Herder argues that if Spinoza had lived to see modern science's discovery of matter's active forces in chemistry and magnetism, he would have been able to derive the dynamics of spirit from matter's own active and self-organizing forces: '[matter] is not dead, but lives. [...] The more we learn about matter, the more forces we discover in it, so that the empty conception of a dead extension completely disappears' ('Second Conversation', p. 105). It is precisely Herder's Spinozist philosophy of nature without Spinoza's own mechanical residuals that Schelling seeks to develop by combining Spinoza with Fichte.

dynamic. On Schelling's reading, Spinoza thus closely anticipates what environmentalists today associate with the climate change denialist's view that nature is an immutably homeostatic reservoir of abundance, which can be drained without fear of its exhaustion.³¹ The Spinozist attitude towards nature thus compliments the Fichtean or 'economic' view according to which nature's products can be ceaselessly extracted for our benefit, since it possesses a self-sustaining immune system.

In light of contemporary climate science's overwhelming evidence that humans' industrial activity is driving nature to an event horizon beyond which we would no longer be able to exploit its fruits of abundance as we have in the past, Spinoza and the climate change denialists' mutual assertion of nature's immutability is no longer tenable. Schelling's critique of dogmatic realism is thus now more relevant than ever if we are to develop an attitude towards nature befitting thought in the Anthropocene.

3. THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF SCHELLING'S *NATURPHILOSOPHIE*

3.1. *Anthropomorphization as environmental ethic*

Schelling not only critiques two problematic approaches to nature, but also develops a third way. In this final section, I shall argue that Schelling's own concept of nature is alone adequate to meet the demands placed upon thought by contemporary climate science. Schelling's reconceptualization of nature comes about when he attempts to resolve the problem as to how the free human subject could emerge from an external

³¹ It must be mentioned that several deep ecologists have argued in Spinoza's defence that his ethics of living according to our adequate idea of all living things' dependency upon each other anticipates their modern environmental ethics of preserving species and protecting eco-systems. See, for instance, de Jonge, Eddy, *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*, London, Routledge, 2004; Naess, Arne, 'Spinoza and the Deep Ecology Movement', *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2008; McDonald, Brendan, 'Spinoza, Deep Ecology, and Human Diversity: Schizophrenics and Others Who Could Heal the Earth If Society Realized Eco-Literacy', *The Trumpeter*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2012. Although these deep ecologists can faithfully read Spinoza as arguing for our dependency upon nature as Schelling well acknowledges, it is more of a stretch to interpret him, contra Schelling's reading, as asserting that nature is *itself* finite. On the contrary, Spinoza is adamant that nature is absolutely immutable. This is precisely why Naess prefaces his deep ecological reading of Spinoza by forewarning that it is creative and selective rather than historically faithful: 'because I am not a professional historian, I am not interested as a philosopher in hiding the dependence of my interpretation of the *Ethics* upon my general philosophy' ('Spinoza', p. 231). Indeed, even if the Spinozist environmentalist were to persist by adding that Spinoza might permit the earth to be a finite, local mode within nature *qua* the universe's greater totality, this would still not satisfy Schelling. For, as we shall see in the final section, Schelling also envisions the entire extended cosmos as arising and evolving within a historical process.

and anterior nature only to actively ‘negate’ it by reshaping it in conformity with our own will. As Schelling formulates the problem, ‘nature, it seems, would exist, even if there were nothing that was aware of it. Hence the problem can be formulated *thus*: how does intelligence come to be added to nature, or how does nature come to be presented?’³² To grasp how Schelling’s solution differs from those of Fichte and Spinoza, it is necessary to note that both Fichte and Spinoza share a classical ‘Cartesian dualism’ to which Schelling is opposed. Both idealism and dogmatic realism view nature and spirit as separate, and even contradictory beings. Consequently, Fichte’s critical philosophy affirms the primacy of the subject over nature as the plaything of its free activity. On the other hand, Spinoza’s dogmatic realism asserts the primacy of nature by reducing subjective agency to all but a lullaby. As Bowie encapsulates Schelling’s critiques of both Spinoza’s dogmatism and Fichte’s idealism:

The danger is that one will either fall into the materialist trap of thinking that by explaining the mechanical functioning of nature we will finally explain ourselves, thus making self-consciousness and freedom epiphenomenal, or into the idealist trap of thinking that self-consciousness is wholly self-grounding, thus making its relationship to nature of simple domination.³³

What Schelling’s basic philosophical project thus involves is to have his cake and eat it too by synthetically unifying the falsely opposed nature and spirit through a single, higher principle:

Right from the start nature was explained only as one side of the universe, with the spirit world opposed to it. [...] The central role of philosophical science resides in scientifically explaining the contradictions and connections between nature and the spirit world.³⁴

Contra both Fichte’s idealism and Spinoza’s mechanical tendencies, Schelling maintains that it is only when nature and spirit are incorporated into a larger concept of being without disavowing the brute fact of one or the other that philosophy can fulfil its historic mission of furnishing a science of the All.

To this end, Schelling appropriates something from both Spinoza and Fichte while leaving behind another aspect of their respective systems. Apropos Spinoza’s realism, Schelling also aims to make room for nature—but in a way that can account for nature’s own negation with the emergence of the free subject, rather than reduce subject to substance and freedom to mechanism as per Spinoza’s instrumentalism. At

³² Schelling, F.W.J., *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath, Charlottesville, University of Virginia, 2001, p. 5.

³³ Bowie, Andrew, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 45-6.

³⁴ Schelling, F.W.J., *Clara, or On Nature’s Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp, New York, Suny Press, 2002, p. 4.

the same time, Schelling wants to maintain Fichte's idea of our freedom, but transpose it beyond the things for us onto nature in itself, rather than reduce the object to subject as per Fichte's idealism. Putting two and two together, what Schelling seeks to do is transcend the opposition between Fichte's idealism and the mechanical aspects of Spinoza's philosophy of nature by reconceiving nature as itself free, active and self-organizing. Here, Schelling's solution to the 'hard problem' essentially consists in seeing nature as always-already structured by the same *dynamics*, *negativity* and *contingency* as the free subject while remaining *anterior* and *distinct* from it. As Schelling writes:

The task that I had first set myself was, then: to explain the idea of an objective world which was absolutely independent of our freedom, and indeed which limited this freedom, by a *process* in which the I sees itself as unintentionally but necessarily engaged, precisely through the act of self-positing.³⁵

Put otherwise, Schelling's solution to the problem of spirit's emergence out of nature is to reconceive nature as teeming with inner contradictions, antinomies and antagonisms similar to those of the subject, rather than as operating according to structurally invariant laws. Schelling continues: 'to philosophize about nature means to have it out of the dead mechanism to which it seems predisposed, to quicken it with freedom and to see in it its own free development'.³⁶ After all, if humanity is to be conceived as a part of nature, its dynamism, freedom, contingency and self-organization must be traceable back to its cause. However, the only way that human dynamism could emerge from nature as its cause is if nature is always-already structured by the dynamics of freedom, self-organization and contingency. By fusing Spinoza's philosophy of nature with Fichte's philosophy of human freedom, Schelling is able to develop a concept of nature that actually honours spirit with an even greater ontological standing than it receives in Fichte's idealism by showing how nature's essence requires that it negate itself through spirit.

Therein lies the *realist* signification behind Schelling's ostensibly idealist contention that nature must be conceived along spirit's anthropic lines. Contrary to the classic misreading of Schelling as an idealist, Schelling is *not* advocating an idealist reduction of nature to the human subject's objects of intuition. After all, such a dependence of the object on the subject would simply recapitulate Fichte's own idealism, which is only one of the two philosophies that Schelling seeks to reconcile along with the Spinozist realism to which he remains firmly committed, albeit without its mechanical hang-ups. What Schelling denotes by labelling his philosophy an 'absolute idealism' is certainly a

³⁵ Schelling, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 111.

³⁶ Schelling, F.W.J., *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson, Albany, SUNY Press, 2004, pp. 14-5.

realism, but one which holds that trans-human nature is distinct and anterior, yet structured in the same way as the free subject. Far from affirming a subjective, solipsistic idealism, Schelling shows that we can only arise to think nature in itself if it is always-already structured as per our own subjectivity. Seen in this light, it is not that nature is reducible to the subject's ideas, but rather that nature must always-already harbour a radically negative force if such a free subject can arise from it by negating its own ground. In Schelling's terms:

It is by no means adequate to claim that 'activity, life and freedom only are the truly real' with which Fichte's subjective idealism can coexist; rather, it is required that the reverse also be shown, that everything real (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground.³⁷

For Schelling, it is only such a concept of nature as free, active and contingent that can account for the emergence of the subject's freedom to negate the nature from whence it arose.

At the same time, Schelling is also not putting his lot in with the pantheists or panpsychists by claiming that nature is literally alive or sentient. To say that nature is spirit rather means that nature is structured by the same dialectical logic of freedom and negation as spirit while being anterior and distinct from (human) spirit. Against this reading, all Schelling is saying by the claim that 'nature is spirit' is that nature must itself be 'free' and self-organizing if we are to elucidate how it could have given rise to free human beings with the power to renounce it in a way which simultaneously affirms it *qua* free, negative force. Such is the proper signification of Schelling's anthropomorphization of nature: to conceive of nature as still anterior and separate from the subject, while also being structured by the same dynamic process, if not exactly by the subject's particular manifestation of the process in the guise of self-reflexivity.

3.2. The contingency principle

What does Schelling's answer to the hard problem of the subject's emergence from nature have to do with developing an environmentally ethical conception of nature? My thesis is that we can extract two environmentally ethical principles that Schelling's anthropomorphization of nature entails. The two principles can be seen as inverting the excesses of both Fichte and Spinoza's approaches to nature. On the one hand, what I call the 'dependency principle' affirms, contra Fichte and with Spinoza, that we are

³⁷ Schelling, *Freedom*, p. 22.

radically reliant upon an anterior and external nature rather than that nature being reducible to our instrumental use-values. On the other hand, what I term the ‘contingency principle’ holds that, while external nature is separate from human spirit as per Spinoza’s realism, it is nonetheless, contra Spinoza’s instrumentalism, equally precarious, contingent, and hence in need of a careful use of its resources to preserve it.

We can better detail these two principles by looking at the threefold natural history that Schelling traces over many of his works. While the first two stages articulate the contingency principle, the third stage permits us to discern the dependency principle. I shall therefore address the contingency principle first.

Schelling begins by recapitulating his basic insight that inorganic nature is always-already a negative and dynamic force: ‘the beginning really only lies in negation.’³⁸ Now, given that primordial nature exhibits a negative power, the question arises as to what it is that it first negates. That is to say, since there is nothing in the beginning except nature, how is it that nature can affirm itself as a negating power? Schelling’s wager is that the only way that primordial nature can affirm itself is by paradoxically negating *itself*. Since there is nothing in the beginning except inorganic nature, the only being that nature can negate to posit itself *qua* negative force is by negating or alienating itself. Here as elsewhere, Schelling’s model for nature’s negativity is the free human spirit: ‘nature is already, within and in itself, not a corporeal, but a spiritual-corporeal being.’³⁹ Schelling thus describes nature as a ‘pure’ non-sentient subject that nonetheless performs the essential act of subjectivity by rendering its own being contingent in negating itself: ‘the subject which is at first a subject, which is pure and not present to itself—in wishing to have itself, in becoming object to itself—is tainted with contingency.’⁴⁰ For Schelling, then, primordial nature is not some immutable, monist Whole; on the contrary, nature is always-already generating its own immanent self-negations and self-positings.

In the second age of the world, Schelling goes on to describe how nature concretely negates itself, and hence affirms itself *qua* negative force, through various inorganic processes. For instance, Schelling argues that the movement of the elementary building blocks of all matter is guided by dual, conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion. It is these basic building blocks’ gravitational collisions and constellations with each other that eventually composes composite matter, and ultimately large-scale structure formations like the planets and stars. Nature’s negative push and pull continues through various electromagnetic and chemical reactions between the newly formed material

³⁸ Schelling, F.W.J., *The Ages of the World*, Albany, Suny Press, 2000, p. 16.

³⁹ Schelling, *Ages*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 116.

elements. Ultimately, this complex network of gravitational, chemical and electromagnetic constellations and reconstellations negates so-called 'brute' matter to beget living organisms on our own planet earth. As Schelling encapsulates the triadic dialectic of gravity, chemistry and electromagnetism, which culminates in the creation of organic life: 'one and the same universal dualism diffuses itself from magnetic polarity on through the electrical phenomena, finally even into chemical heterogeneities, and ultimately crops up again in organic nature'.⁴¹

It is at this point that Schelling most clearly affirms nature's contingency principle by modelling seemingly invariant inorganic laws and processes on finite, organic life. The living organisms that Schelling depicts are radically finite in that they do not contain their existence in their essence. Rather, they feel hunger, thirst, cold and pain. They are thus forced to adapt by changing or 'negating' themselves and their environment if they are to satisfy their needs in a hostile external world. As Schelling puts it, 'life consists precisely in the freedom to negate its own being as immediate, posited independently of itself, and to be able to transform it into a being posited by itself'.⁴² Here, Schelling intends this definition of life to not only hold for sentient creatures, but also for inorganic objects and processes. That is to say, for Schelling, there is little difference between organic life's struggle for survival by negating and being negated by its environs, and gravitational, chemical and electromagnetic collisions and compositions of inorganic bodies. For instance, the collision of matter's basic building blocks betrays their contingency as they lose their old form when combined with each other to assume new large-scale structure formations, such as planets and stars, as well as mountains, rivers and forests. So, it is not that inorganic processes generate a living organism that is contingent only insofar as it can starve, age and ultimately die; rather, the inorganic processes that give rise to the living are always-already contingent in the sense in which they form a history of new and forever emerging (and emergentist) corporeal bodies, forms, and interactions. As I already explained, the contingency principle attests to the fact that Schelling is not strictly anthropocentric in the sense of literally transposing human qualities like sentience and consciousness onto nature. Since humans are contingent, Schelling's anthropomorphization of nature rather consists in conceiving nature as sharing the subject's general structure of self-relating negativity, of which sentience and consciousness are but two arbitrary acceptations. To cite Schelling in long on this difficult point of inorganic nature's paradoxically 'organic' contingency:

⁴¹ Schelling, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 184.

⁴² Schelling, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 55.

The irrational and contingent, which shows themselves to be bound to that which is necessary in the formation of being, especially the organic ones, prove that it is not merely a geometric necessity that has been active here, but rather that freedom, spirit and self-will were also in play. Indeed, everywhere where there is appetite and desire, there is already in itself a sort of freedom; and no one will believe that desire, which determines the ground of every particular natural being, and the drive to preserve oneself not in general but in this defined existence, are added onto an already created being, but rather they are themselves that which creates.⁴³

Seen in this light, each of nature's creations is not the actualization of some final teleology, but merely the negation of the anterior contingent product. Moreover, the new creation is but the means for another future creation to emerge by way of negating the former creation, and thereby revealing its contingency in turn. As Wirth explains how Schelling sees natural history as co-extensive with human history in that nature is always-already undergoing different transformations from one contingent manifestation to the next:

For Schelling all history is ultimately natural history, that is, all nature is radically historical and expressive of what Schelling called the unprethinkability of its temporality. This consequently subverts the common bifurcation of history into human (or cultural) history and natural (or nonhuman) history.⁴⁴

Far from the mechanical vision of nature as a structurally invariant system, natural history in Schelling's day, and even more so in our own, unequivocally attests to the contingency of all creatures, ecosystems, structures, processes, and formations.

3.3. *The dependency principle*

In the third age of the world, Schelling describes how organic nature's negating of and negation by its environs results in the emergence of the human being's rational consciousness. More precisely, self-consciousness emerges as our ancestors' adaptation to the environs by positing themselves and their will as separate from their external *welt*. At this juncture, Schelling makes an important caveat that brings to the fore his second dependency principle contra Fichte's idealism: even the human subject's successful adaptation and satisfaction of needs by reconfiguring itself and its environment only leads to a transformation of its needs and environs upon which we are ineluctably dependent. We have already seen that Schelling's contingency principle

⁴³ Schelling, *Freedom*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ Wirth, Jason M., *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination*, Suny Press, Albany, 2015, p.5.

states that each created being, species or formation that negates a previous contingent product of nature to assert itself must itself be contingent in order to be negated in turn. Given that Schelling does not see humans as transcending nature, his principle of nature's contingency thus amounts to seeing ourselves as radically reliant upon nature's dialectical processes. That is to say, if we are an immanent part of nature's process of contingent formations and negations, we must ourselves be contingent. In *The Sixth Extinction*, Kolbert explains how the idea of species extinction only really arose by building on Cuvier's studies of mastodon fossils in the late eighteenth century, precisely when Schelling was developing his own natural history.⁴⁵ It is no accident that Schelling draws on the then newly discovered notion of species extinction to make the case of our dependency upon a larger exterior environment, which is itself highly precarious. As Schelling explains how every species, including our own, are dependent upon a thoroughly contingent nature's historical unfolding: 'nature goes to the trouble to develop qualities, aspects, works, and talents to their pinnacle, only again to bury them for centuries in oblivion, and then start anew, perhaps in a new species'.⁴⁶ We are therefore at the mercy of a nature in which we reside as larger than us. This thought is all the more traumatic given that this nature is itself contingent, and hence subject to change, or even complete destruction.

So, not only does Schelling's natural history depict nature as contingent; it also depicts us as utterly reliant upon the caprices of natural history. In light of contemporary climate science's portentous forecast that we are living in the age of a new mass extinction, any reconceptualization of nature would do well to heed Schelling's call, as much as we might wish to deny it, that it is only the thin tightrope of nature's whims which we must navigate if we are to prevent the Anthropocene from not only marking the apotheosis of man's dominion over nature, but also nature's dominion over the end of man.

4. CONCLUSION

I began by stipulating that any attitude towards nature that can adequately incorporate the insights of contemporary climate science has to conceive of humans as radically reliant upon nature, and nature as itself contingent and precarious. We can now see why Schelling proffers the earliest and best approach to nature through his critique of two still all too pervasive approaches to nature. On the one hand, Schelling critiques Fichte's idealism for subordinating nature to an economic means of our self-assertion.

⁴⁵ Kolbert, *Sixth Extinction*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Schelling, *Ages*, p. 21.

On the other hand, Schelling equally criticizes the mechanical aspects of Spinoza's philosophy for disavowing nature's contingency, dynamism and 'freedom'. Finally, I showed how Schelling's third way of anthropomorphizing nature inadvertently provides us with the very two fundamental principles we need to reconceptualise nature. Firstly, Schelling's notion of a subjective substance or spiritual body entails that we envision man as at the mercy of an external nature. Further, it requires that we think of trans-human nature as subject to the very same contingency, negativity, and even outright destruction as spirit. Only such a counterintuitive anthropomorphization of nature can invert both the modern economic and denialist approaches to nature by obliging us to protect the limited resources of a fragile nature upon which we depend for our survival.

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