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## **Rekindling Nature: Freedom, Time, and the In-Itself**

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In the *Freedom Essay*, before formulating what he considers to be the central philosophical problem concerning human freedom—the capacity for good and evil—Schelling unpacks some remarks about logic and the uses of the copula as well as a very brief comment on Kant’s use of the concept of the in-itself within the domain of practical philosophy:

It will always remain odd, however, that Kant, after having first distinguished things-in-themselves from appearances only negatively through their independence from time and later treating independence from time and freedom as correlate concepts in the metaphysical discussions of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, did not go further toward the thought of transferring this only possible positive concept of the in-itself also to things; thereby he would immediately have raised himself to a higher standpoint of reflection and above the negativity that is the character of his theoretical philosophy. From another perspective, however, if freedom really is the positive concept of the in-itself, the investigation concerning human freedom is thrown back again into the general, in so far as the intelligible on which it was alone grounded is also the essence of things-in-themselves (SW VII: 351-352).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY, 2006), 22.

Schelling's move from the exclusively human to things, to nature, when it comes to matters of freedom, seems like a direct challenge to Kant, while still pursuing the latter's most popular motto: "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" (Ak. VIII: 35).<sup>2</sup> Instead of presenting Schelling's efforts within this enlightened frame of daring and courage, I will try to present it as a matter of care, of asking difficult questions that escape any preconceived answer,<sup>3</sup> of thinking the unspeakable that is latent in the present—this is how the task of rekindling nature begins.

The intrusion of freedom into nature deviates from the actual issue of the *Freedom Essay*. It is precisely because of that move that Schelling halts that course of discussion, tackling instead the specific problem of human freedom. It is also precisely because of that move that I would like to revisit Schelling's beginning in order to pursue a different direction. The conceptual network that he outlines with freedom, the in-itself, time, and nature, invites us to retrace the different ties that bind them together. I would like to address the formation of such an entanglement with two questions: What kind of time could make sense of freedom? And what are the implications of acknowledging the positive concept of the in-itself in nature? They will make us roam about the past, a subject that famously haunted Schelling, to find in the productivity of nature the expression of its freedom. Furthermore, once the positive in-itself has come into nature, human freedom can no longer look the same. Another intrusion, that of the Anthropocene, disrupts and thwarts those assumptions, making space for another history and, lastly, for a consideration of responsibility and politics that remains within the threshold of an insinuation.

### Freedom and Time in Kant's Critical Approach

Freedom is quite an interesting research subject in Kant's critical period. It appears in each one of the three *Critiques*. In the first one, it is the opposite of mechanical causality, hence of nature. In the second one, it is what makes possible human agency. In the third, it is what needs to be reconciled or linked with nature in order to guarantee the possibility of a system of philosophy. Given these three different, though interconnected, approaches to freedom, it is noteworthy that Schelling chose the second one to point out the possibility of bringing together nature and freedom when it was actually used by Kant to perform the opposite task. The concept of freedom deployed in the second *Critique* marks its ultimate divergence from nature—freedom is not bound to temporal determinations.<sup>4</sup>

Kant's engagement with freedom begins with a blunt assertion: "The moral law is given, as it were, as a fact of pure reason of which we are a priori conscious and

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>3</sup> See Juan Felipe Guevara-Aristizabal, "Care to Ask," *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 1, no. 1 (2018): 147-149.

<sup>4</sup> For Schelling, in contrast, the possibility of an active nature relies precisely on this issue.

which is apodictically certain, though it be granted that no example of exact observance of it can be found in experience,” to the point that, “even if one were willing to renounce its apodictic certainty, it could not be confirmed by experience and thus proved a posteriori; and it is nevertheless firmly established of itself” (Ak. V: 47).<sup>5</sup> For Kant, freedom is a *fact of pure reason*, a notion that is given for any rational finite being, hence unquestionable and incontrovertible. In as much as freedom is nowhere to be found in experience, it is not mediated by sensibility, rendering reason alone capable of privileged and direct access to it.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is a fact of experience that free actions take place in nature. This is the context where the “metaphysical discussions of the *Critique of Practical Reason*,” mentioned by Schelling in the previously quoted passage, develop. The discussions deal with the compatibility of understanding a moral deed as an action happening in time, hence as a succession of events that could be traced back to a specific cause in the past, and, at the same time, as a free action independent of time and susceptible of being judged as good or bad. In other words, the problem concerns how an action that takes place in nature, thus a phenomenon, could have a moral ground for judgment that belongs to freedom, a noumenon. What is at stake is the actuality of freedom: if moral actions were just phenomena and their causes were naturally or lawfully determined, then human agents would be subjected to fatalism and there would be no freedom at all.<sup>7</sup>

The discrepancies between freedom and causality, freedom and time, could be summarized in the following statement:

For, from the first [natural necessity] it follows that every event, and consequently every action that takes place at a point of time, is necessary under the condition of what was in the preceding time. Now, since time past is no longer within my control, every action that I perform must be necessary by determining grounds that are not within my control, that is, I am never free at the point of time in which I act (Ak. V: 94).<sup>8</sup>

There is no *control* over the past—freedom *must not* have a past. Being past-less does not amount to an utter rejection of the empirical apprehension of an action. We are supposed to acknowledge, following Kant, that making sense of free actions empirically only renders them mechanical or psychological, but such an approach can never get to the ground of what makes them free. The experience of an action and its rational ground coexist, yet they inhabit very different planes. Kant’s solution begins by uncoupling the causes of the action that could be identified in nature, in

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>6</sup> See Lewis Beck, *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 166-170.

<sup>7</sup> A deeper and further development of this subject could be found in Juan Felipe Guevara Aristizabal, “Tensiones temporales. Vida y organismo en el criticismo kantiano,” *Estudios Kantianos, Marília* 7, no. 2 (2019): 33-54.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Practical Reason*, 77.

time, from the ground for moral judgment. This uncoupling is best seen in the human feeling of repentance. Despite actions having taken place in time, despite them being in an inaccessible past that seals them from being changed, the moral ground that makes possible the judgment from which repentance arises is available at any time:

Reason, when it is a question of the law of our intelligible existence (the moral law), recognizes no distinction of time and asks only whether the event belongs to me as a deed and, if it does, then always connects the same feeling [of repentance] with it morally, whether it was done just now or long ago (Ak. V: 99).<sup>9</sup>

Its availability collapses the past, turning it into a point of no dimensions: the rising of repentance is indifferent to the moment in time in which the shameful action occurred. In a way, the moral ground of an action—freedom in its critical garments—is simultaneous with the moment in which the action is being judged. When it comes to freedom and moral judgments, there is an uncertain and uncanny feeling that present and past might be simultaneous. The moral ground of a judgement, however, is not part of the past because it belongs to freedom. The possibility of the temporal paradox, of the simultaneity of past and present, is discarded with Kant's characterization of freedom.

The independence from time that the feeling of repentance attests signals to freedom's main feature, its timelessness—freedom is out of time. This result is in turn possible thanks to Kant's unfolding of man into a natural entity, the *homo phenomenon*, and a rational and moral agent, the *homo noumenon* (Ak. VI: 239).<sup>10</sup> Hence, Kant's understanding of freedom is only valid for man. In stark contrast, Schelling's investigation on freedom, even though it concentrates on human freedom, does not begin with a consideration of it as a fact of reason, which allows him to highlight that freedom could also be transferred to things, despite the claim not being further developed. Like Kant, however, the extraction of freedom from a temporal matrix marked by succession also plays a key role in Schelling's discussion of human freedom.<sup>11</sup>

Two conclusions can be drawn from this brief exposition of Kant's notion of freedom. First, the divide between nature and freedom depends on time: everything

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<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Practical Reason*, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65. It is also true that the differentiation between the sensible and the supersensible substratum of man conforms to Kant's commitment to the kind of freedom described above. Because the critical stance on freedom, as well as on many other concepts, starts by acknowledging the actuality of what is being asked, it ends up drawing a circle where the separation between the transcendental and the empirical prevents it from being vicious.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Alderwick, "Atemporal Essence and Existential Freedom in Schelling," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2015): 115-137, has advanced an interesting take on this issue: freedom is atemporal because it implies an essence unable to fully determine a form—the form, the act, whose essence is freedom, may always diverge from that essence itself, which means that something that is in eternity may become temporal.

pertaining to the domain of nature is to be set in relations of succession and temporal order, while freedom is atemporal. Second, freedom pertains exclusively to that rational entity that can be unfolded following the axes of the sensible and the supersensible. Nature is relegated to necessity, to inertia and lifelessness [*Leblosigkeit*] (Ak. IV: 544).<sup>12</sup> After all, “*life* is the faculty of a being to act in accordance with laws of the faculty of desire,” (Ak. V: 9n)<sup>13</sup> that is, life relies on will as a peculiar faculty of human reason. It is clear, then, that with Kant man has quenched the nature of its life.

### The Past and the Abyss of Nature

Rekindling nature means repeating Schelling’s beginning without retracing his very same steps. The repeated yet new beginning follows the aforementioned remarks from the introduction of the *Freedom Essay*, right before it dives into the problem of human freedom as such. There is one particular statement that I would like to turn into a question: How is it possible for Schelling to claim “that everything real (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground?” (SW VII: 351)<sup>14</sup> Observations about Fichte and Kant flank this claim within the text, raising the stakes and risks. The kind of unity that forms the real and the ideal can follow neither Kant’s critical model nor Fichte’s synthetic model; it has to dwell within its own tensions and contradictions, keeping the tension between the two poles, nature and freedom, and without the possibility of resolving it into one or the other.

The previous section showed the importance of time when defining the actual place of freedom. It makes sense, then, to think that for freedom to be the ground of nature, something has to be done with time—a kind of time capable of articulating free actions without preventing the past from being active after it has passed is required. With Kant, the timelessness of freedom was uncovered, but that does not imply that there is no temporal mode for it. The temporality of freedom embraces the tensions and paradoxes that Kant tried to dismiss. But we have to be cautious: if past and present become simultaneous, they cannot be conflated or synthesized into one. Past and present need to remain differentiated in their simultaneity. To keep this difference at work, the past might be formulated in a manner that reflects the contemporaneity of past and present while signaling that if the past ever becomes or is synthesized in a present, or vice-versa, then this past is no longer the past—the past I am striving for is a past *yet to come*.<sup>15</sup> The question, hence,

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, trans. Michael Friedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, *Practical Reason*, 7n.

<sup>14</sup> Schelling, *Freedom*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006), 205, ends his book with this formulation: “Schelling is not a forerunner of anything, but a precursor of philosophical solutions, or ‘experiments in dynamic physics,’ yet to come.” The distinction that he introduces between a forerunner, someone who has already done what is at present in development, and a precursor, someone whose activity might set the course towards novelties that have not still been unfolded, is important for understanding the past that is yet to come.

that will set the course for the following exploration of Schelling's ideas could be stated as follows: What kind of temporality can render the past as always yet to come? Perhaps there is no better place to wonder about this question than in *The Ages of the World*, a project whose primary importance "lies in its collapse ... for precisely that indeterminacy [of a future that was not thematized] obscures the final meaning of the past."<sup>16</sup> It is a work marked by Schelling's constant efforts to rewrite it and is yet unfinished, a work that speaks only about the past and was left to never get over it.<sup>17</sup> The past described by the *Ages* moves in a rotating fashion, as a result of the constant tension between an expansive and a contractive force or principle that struggles to break the rotation and begin something. However, the three versions emphasize different aspects of the tension. Following Tilottama Rajan, I will refer to the 1815 version of the *Ages* throughout because it "recasts the will as compulsive rather than voluntaristic,"<sup>18</sup> so that the darkness of the contractive force is ever-present and acting.

One of the earliest tracks of the kind of past I am looking for in the *Ages* appears linked to epigenesis. In the "Introduction," before any discussion of a particular age, Schelling faces the difficulties arising from the uneasiness that a finite being experiences when dealing with the infinity of the absolute or, for the matter at hand, eternity. In the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling had already referred to this problem in relation to nature: "In nature, therefore, the whole absolute is knowable, although appearing nature produces only successively, and in (for us) endless development, what in true nature exists all at once and in an eternal fashion" (SW II: 342).<sup>19</sup> The *Ages* would follow a similar formulation: for finite beings bounded to vision, like us, everything goes through a "series of processes, one following the other, where the later always meshes with the earlier, brings it to maturity" (SW VIII: 203).<sup>20</sup> The link to epigenesis is more palpable in the *First Outline of a System of the*

<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Lawrence, "[Weltalter-Fragmente]." *Review of Metaphysics* 57, no. 2 (2003): 438.

<sup>17</sup> There are, of course, a few fragments of the transition and introduction to the second book, the book of the present, collected by Manfred Schröter. It is interesting that in languages like Spanish and French, where the three extant versions of the *Ages* have already been translated, these fragments have not. Bruno Vancamp, "Avant-propos du traducteur," in *Les Âges Du Monde. Versions Premières 1811 et 1813*, de F. W. J. Schelling (Brussels: Ousia, 1988), 36, the French translator, argues that those fragments are "so incoherent and, at the same time, crossed out to be of any use for the present translation." Fortunately, the new English translation of the 1811 version includes these fragments. Even though they constitute the beginning of the present, Schelling is quite insistent on thinking the past, another form of the past: "The past that belongs specifically to the earth has not been touched on in the previous discussion of the universal past. To comprehend its particular nature and destiny and thereby also the nature and destiny of humanity, we have to extend our story back to the remote beginnings of the earth." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World: Book One: The Past (Original Version, 1811) plus Supplementary Fragments (1811-1813), Including a Fragment from Book Two (the Present) along with a Fleeting Glimpse into the Future*, trans. Joseph P. Lawrence (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 234.

<sup>18</sup> Tilottama Rajan, "The Abyss of the Past: Psychoanalysis in Schelling's *Ages of the World* (1815)." *Romantic Circles*, December 2008, § 10, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/psychoanalysis/rajan/rajan.html>

<sup>19</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 272.

<sup>20</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), xxxviii.

*Philosophy of Nature*, where it resonates with Schelling's theory of the graduated series of stages in nature: "all formation occurs through epigenesis" (SW III: 61).<sup>21</sup> The conceptual appeal of epigenesis lies in its recourse to a formative drive, a concept that contains freedom: "Freedom is in the organic product because no simple productivity operates here, but a compound one, through which the appearance of freedom comes in the process of production" (SW III: 61n)<sup>22</sup>—thanks to the limitations exerted upon it by an antagonism with the process of production itself. Freedom has thus made its ingression into nature through the concept of epigenesis, which means, in turn, that epigenesis may designate a different form of time as well. The concept of epigenesis already hints at the past yet to come: the past is not left behind because it has already passed; it is retained and brought to maturity. But maturity is neither a final point or stage of development nor a synthesis in which the past becomes the present, attaining a higher order while concealing its very own essence—there is no possibility to "sublimate [*aufheben*] all duality" (SW VIII: 203).<sup>23</sup> The past is never fully determined; it remains simultaneous with the present by means of an indeterminacy that allows it to act without ever becoming present.

Epigenesis and its time pave the way for understanding the freedom that acts within nature. However, epigenesis is not a concept that Schelling uses in the *Ages*—it comes from the *Naturphilosophie* that precedes the whole project of the *Ages*. This is the result, I would venture to say, of a telling difference between the two undertakings. The *Ideas* and the *First Outline* posit the problem of the dynamic between the finite and the infinite in terms of a grasping, intuitive understanding trying to apprehend how the two are related. Epigenesis responds to this exigence. The *Ages*, in contrast, wonders how to express that dynamic—it is a struggle to express the inexpressible, whether it is expressed in the form of a narration of the known (the past), a presentation of the discerned (the present), or a prophecy of the intimated (the future). And so, Schelling asks: "Why cannot what is known in the highest knowledge also be narrated with the rectitude and simplicity of all else that is *known*?" (SW VIII: 199).<sup>24</sup> Despite the apparent divergence of efforts, *Naturphilosophie* and the problem of expression run hand in hand:

The farmer, for example, sees the progression in the plant as well as the scholar does, and yet the farmer cannot actually contemplate the plant because he cannot hold the moments apart from each other and cannot consider them separately and in their reciprocal opposition (SW VIII: 203-4).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Schelling, *First Outline*, 48n.

<sup>23</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, xxxviii.

<sup>24</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, xxxv. Immediately after this question, he also asks about the future: "What holds back that intimated golden age in which truth again becomes fable and fable again becomes truth?"

<sup>25</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, xxxviii.

There is a Heideggerian lure in this contrast between the farmer and the scholar: the temptation to take the farmer as the representative of a more originary form of life opposed to the derivative theoretical mode of the scholar. I shall refrain from adopting that position and remain within Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. The farmer and the scholar stand for two different ways of approaching continuity in nature. For the farmer, continuity is a matter of forces unfolding throughout the development of the plant, a process that takes place in an intensive field where no discrete components could be set apart, not even the subject from the object. The scholar, on the other side, conceives an aggregate of isolated and independent parts, yet in mutual interconnection. Schelling's speculative physics, though it endorses a task no less theoretical than the one of the scholar he portrays, strives toward the farmer's vision. Hence, the question is not, whose approach is more originary, for the subject is a constitutive part of nature: "As soon, however, as I separate myself, and with me everything ideal, from nature, nothing remains to me but a dead object, and I cease to comprehend how a *life outside* me can be possible" (SW II: 47-8).<sup>26</sup> Rather, it is a matter of rekindling nature, of expressing what cannot be expressed in words.

The enigma of expressibility runs through the whole of the *Ages*, even if we are only left with fragmentary vestiges of it: "The fragment," states Joan Steigerwald, "thus becomes the projection of what it incompletes ... But the individuality of the fragment also suggests an organic wholeness."<sup>27</sup> The fragment suggests, but it can never complete or be completed. Hence, the fragment endures, as well as the past, the fate of remaining always a beginning: "But the beginnings are precisely what is essential. One who does not know them can never come back to the whole" (SW VIII: 271).<sup>28</sup> Schelling's remarks on the beginning are, as a consequence, also important for understanding the kind of time I am looking for. There are two types of beginnings: actual and true beginnings. An actual beginning has no relationship to that which it began, it is severed from the process that follows it. Actual beginnings obey a logic of instants, of aggregates, like the scholar aforementioned. A true beginning is "one that does not always begin again but persists. A true beginning is that which is the true ground of a steady progression, not of an alternating advancing and retreating" (SW VIII: 229).<sup>29</sup> A true beginning never ceases to be a beginning because it is not subjected to a succession of ordered moments in time but inscribes itself in a time based on simultaneity and reciprocity. More importantly, "to begin something is precisely not to actually be doing it yet. The beginning of anything must therefore involve the actualization of something that is not yet what is beginning."<sup>30</sup> The beginning, a paradigmatic figure of the past—of a 'chronological past,' to use Welchman and Norman's expression—extends itself over the whole process that it

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<sup>26</sup> Schelling, *Ideas*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Joan Steigerwald, "Epistemologies of Rupture: The Problem of Nature in Schelling's Philosophy," *Studies in Romanticism* 41, no. 4 (2002): 571.

<sup>28</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Alistair Welchman and Judith Norman, "Creating the Past: Schelling's *Ages of the World*," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4, no. 1 (March 2010): 31.



starts without ever becoming what it started. Contrary to a vision of the beginning as that which exhausts itself in the instant of its happening, like the exhaustion of the cause in the effect in a mechanical framework, the true beginning hovers over the present that apparently moves away from it. The beginning might be an instant, the exact instant that signals the event of the coming of time, the point from which the line extends and grows indefinitely, but it is an instant that lasts eternally. This characterization of the beginning rejects the idea “that the past is a past present—something that used to be a ‘now’ but no longer is. For Schelling, the past was never a present or a ‘now,’ it has always been the past, it is always already past.”<sup>31</sup> Since the beginning is no longer determined and fixed in the past, it is concealed within everything that is, nay, it retreats into everything that is.

Time is no longer an excluding relationship between before and after, but “a joint and intertwined continuing” (SW VIII: 253),<sup>32</sup> where the beginning becomes the lowest part of it. If we consider the beginning of nature—of a visible and expressed nature—it becomes clear that the beginning cannot be discerned from what nature has become. The past of nature is no longer distinguishable from nature itself; it has contracted within nature, but there is no way of uncovering it or bringing it to light. In fact, Schelling is emphatic about how nature, left to itself, is always what retracts, what takes everything into negativity. Here lies the answer to the question that opened this section: How is it that life, activity, freedom are the ground of nature, the world of things? Because without life, activity, and freedom nature would never become visible or actual. But, at the same time, nature is what freedom has to overcome—it is the *Ungrund* of the *Freedom Essay*.<sup>33</sup> The *Ages* offers a similar way of expressing the peculiar place and role of nature: “Nature is an abyss of the past. This is what is oldest in nature, the deepest of what remains if everything accidental and everything that has become is removed” (SW VIII: 243).<sup>34</sup> Taking a look into the depths of nature, even into its deep time, will not reveal anything determinable about its past; rather, it is a bottomless pit grounded by the indeterminacy of the past, by what the past is always yet to come: “Nature is eternal yet still commencing and it retains the nature of the initializing” (SW VIII: 249).<sup>35</sup>

The kind of time that I have been talking about is capable of making sense of freedom because it does not leave the past behind, even though it is a time at work within nature. Kant’s great divide is unmade in Schelling’s treatment: time is no longer relevant for distinguishing nature from freedom. The separation, moreover, relied as well on the split made between the phenomenal and the noumenal components of man. This could also mean, then, that the distinction between phenomena and

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<sup>31</sup> Norman and Welchman, “Creating the past,” 37. For this same reason, they also argue that the *Ages* “is a narrative of the creation of time.” As attractive as this idea is, it goes well beyond the scope of the present text.

<sup>32</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> See Joan Steigerwald, “Ground and Grounding: The Nature of Things in Schelling’s Philosophy,” *Symposium* 19, no. 1 (2015): 176–197.

<sup>34</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Schelling, *Ages*, 35.

noumena is not tenable following the features of Kantian critique, which could, in turn, mean that they conflate. Instead of rushing into this sort of conclusion, allow me to slow down the argument. After all, Schelling's proposal is not a flattening or homogenization of everything that is, of the material and the ideal. Although there is a time that works for both nature and freedom, that does not mean that nature and freedom are the same; neither are phenomena and noumena the same thing just because freedom is compatible with time. They are different expressions of a common tension. With this in mind, I will continue my examination with the in-itself and what it could mean to bring its positive concept into nature.

### The Concept of the In-Itself and the History of Nature

Schelling identifies the positive concept of the in-itself with Kant's free man as a thing-in-itself, as it was developed in the second *Critique*. It seems to be positive because it contains the essence of what it is to be human—to be free. In other words, freedom means to be in the constant state of self-realization, and that is the distinctive mark of the human condition. For it seems not to convey anything about the essence of things, the theoretical thing-in-itself remains a merely negative account in contrast with the positive determination of the practical. The success of Kant's critical approach, nonetheless, depends upon representations of objects not conforming “to these things as they are in themselves but rather that these objects as appearances conform to our way of representing” (B XX).<sup>36</sup> The theoretical in-itself thus concerns a major criteria for assessing the development of the critique. It is a concept that springs out of the transcendental aesthetics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where it refers to something that can only be thought, never experienced, a concept that Kant's transcendental system requires in order to fully develop the consequences for metaphysics of a sensibility restrained to pure receptivity, thus having no agency over what impinges upon it. At some point, Kant refers to the thing-in-itself as the “true correlate” of sensible representations, although it “is not and cannot be cognized through them, but is also never asked after in experience” (A30/B45).<sup>37</sup> Hence, the theoretical thing-in-itself allows the subject to think that there is something that affects her sensibility without determining what that could have been because once sensibility is affected all a subject can grasp is phenomenal. In a way, it makes possible thinking about something in isolation, a thing that is not related to, yet available for, a cognizing subject. Paradoxical and oxymoronic as everything related to the thing-in-itself,<sup>38</sup> however, the sense of essence conveyed by the concept can only be grasped

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<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112.

<sup>37</sup> Kant, *Pure Reason*, 162.

<sup>38</sup> Thing-in-itself, *Ding an sich*, is actually an oxymoronic expression. The word *Ding* is also in *bedingt*, conditioned, which means that to be conditioned is to be held as a thing. Grant, for example, has translated *unbedingt*, the unconditioned, as *unthinged* (Grant, *Philosophies*, 27). The thing-in-itself, thus, cannot be properly called a thing because it is not conditioned, it has no empirical relation to a cognizing subject.

as the negative and undetermined counterpart of that which appears in sensibility and is rightfully determined by the understanding. The theoretical thing-in-itself can never be determined as something in particular: there are no tables or chairs in themselves behind the phenomenal tables and chairs located in a particular room. It is a vague concept, incapable of being determined as something, unlike all the objects of experience, nor of determining some kind of relation, unlike the pure concepts of the understanding. On the contrary, the positive concept of the in-itself, following Kant's reflection, can be determined as something, a finite rational agent, a human being, involved in a determined relation with itself, that of self-realization, even though the deeds that the agent is going to perform throughout her life are not predetermined.

What happens, then, when Schelling takes the positive concept of the in-itself into nature, into the domain that was meant to hold only a negative concept of it? So far, this question has been partially answered: acknowledging the positive in-itself in nature uncovers its freedom and a kind of temporality that holds the dynamic between nature and freedom in constant motion. There is another question derived from Kant's exposition of the theoretical and practical in-itself: is it possible to bring the positive of the in-itself, its freedom, into the vagueness of the theoretical, of nature, without surrendering to the latter's negativity, to a mere epistemological relation of being unknown for the understanding? If for practical purposes alone, like in Kant, the positive concept of the in-itself determines the essence of one specific kind of entity, one that does not pertain to nature, then it would not be compatible with the vagueness proper of the theoretical in-itself. When Schelling claims that freedom is also the essence of the thing-in-itself of theoretical philosophy, he cannot ascribe freedom to an exclusive entity, he does not determine a particular, yet it is possible to get a glimpse of what it means for nature to be free: it means falling into the abyss of the past, discovering the positive at the heart of nature's vagueness. The intrusion of the positive in-itself in nature is accompanied by a metamorphosis of the way in which nature's matter is conceived. For matter to be vague, it needs to be dynamic in a manner that mere inertia cannot make sense of. Matter is inert, lifeless when its essence is reduced to extension, to occupying space. When matter is active, it is made up of forces and powers. Hence, matter is not only what moves in space, but also a form of sensibility, irritability, and reproduction.<sup>39</sup> And powers are inseparable from opposition:

The abyss of forces down into which we gaze here opens up with the single question: in the first construction of our earth, what can have been the ground of the fact that no genesis of new individuals is possible upon it, otherwise than under the condition of opposite powers? (SW III: 323n)<sup>40</sup>

The conception of matter retrieved from the abyss renders the unknowability of the theoretical in-itself as a consequence of the vagueness of nature, of the impossibility

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<sup>39</sup> See Violeta Aréchiga, "La teoría de la materia de la *Naturphilosophie*," *Metatheoria* 5, no. 1 (2014): 7–20.

<sup>40</sup> Schelling, *First Outline*, 230.

to determine nature as something when it is a perpetual beginning, always yet to come, instead of a failure of the understanding to determine an entity that is not given in sensible intuition. The vagueness of nature, the trace of its freedom is none other than its productivity: “The product of productivity is a *new productivity*” (SW III: 324).<sup>41</sup> If nature is to be rekindled, we shall live up to the task of a paradox: though everything empirical is natural, nature itself remains vague and indeterminate.

Schelling’s variations on the in-itself and freedom highlight an important feature of his own philosophy. It has become a common place in Kantian scholarly controversies to depict the theoretical in-itself torn apart between two poles: a primarily idealist reading, like Henry Allison’s deflationary account, where the thing-in-itself cannot be said to be a real existing entity,<sup>42</sup> and an overtly realist approach, like Rae Langton’s epistemological humility, where the thing-in-itself exists and is what causes phenomena, yet it keeps certain intrinsic properties away from any cognitive relationship.<sup>43</sup> Schelling’s in-itself, on the contrary, intertwines the ideal and the real in nature thanks to a passage through freedom. The vagueness of nature expresses the ideal in the real that is continuously becoming in productivity. Following Iain Grant, the conditions for the genesis of an object always exceed the object itself, hence what grounds the genesis of a mountain is not exhausted in the mountain, but it continues to be at work in things as disparate from it as fever-dreams.<sup>44</sup> The sense of disparity brings forward, once again, the free activity of nature. In the case of human freedom, disparate actions can be interwoven in history,<sup>45</sup> thus, in a narration, which leads us to another question: is there a history of nature?

Schelling’s most direct and vivid exposition of the relation between nature and history appears in an early text entitled “Is a Philosophy of History Possible?” [*Ist eine Philosophie der Geschichte möglich?*]. From the outset, the influence of Kant’s critical scruple is notorious—the question itself is framed in a transcendental tone. The division between the theoretical and the practical, moreover, is still superlative and there is an epistemological constraint cutting through the whole essay. However, it offers some telling reflections for the argument I am trying to advance. From the beginning, Schelling considers both nature and history as modes of organizing experience, hence there is a basic empirical aspect that cannot be dismissed. History is defined as knowledge of what has happened, of the past (as commonly understood). From here, he introduces a slight variation in the way he defines nature, departing

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<sup>41</sup> Schelling, *First Outline*, 231.

<sup>42</sup> Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 50-73.

<sup>43</sup> Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, “Mining Conditions. A Response to Harman,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 41–46.

<sup>45</sup> Kant, alongside many other thinkers from the diverse Enlightenments of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, considered that only freedom could engender history. As a consequence, history is only possible when there is a free agent at work. Nature could be part of the scenery or, at best, a motivation, a trigger of some actions, like fighting over the control of a resource. There were, of course, voices of dissent, like Buffon in France or J. G. Herder in Germany.

from Kant: if, for the latter, nature is the sum total of phenomena, for Schelling it is the whole of what *happens*. Nature, thus, would qualify as the proper object of history (SW I: 466).<sup>46</sup> There is, nonetheless, one reason to be cautious about this feature of nature: occurrences that are observed repeatedly, in a regular or periodic fashion, are not part of history, because a rule for their regularity is presupposed—history is not subjected to an *a priori* calculation (SW I: 467).<sup>47</sup> This means, in turn, that anything mechanical in nature is not historical—mechanism is just the endless repetition of the same. The mechanism of nature, borrowing a term from Grant, is ‘historyless,’ “that is, there is only a cyclical repetition of events, with no ‘has happened’ that is not also necessarily a ‘will happen.’”<sup>48</sup> Anything lying outside an *a priori* determination, one that depends on the cognizing subject, then, pertains to history. The epistemological constraint becomes relevant at this point: that an occurrence may be weighed as historical depends on our incapacity to contemplate it as a mechanism and grasp the laws that underlie its unfolding (SW I: 472).<sup>49</sup> For history concerns the infeasibility of an *a priori* determination, Schelling concludes that a philosophy of history, given that philosophy since Kant must be *a priori*, is impossible.

The issue at hand does not concern a philosophy of history, but the concepts of history and nature and their entanglement. Hence, his characterization of history is quite relevant for my argument, considering the many points of convergence and resonance. That history is concerned with what has happened is an idea that keeps appearing in the *Ages*, where Schelling characterizes the past as the known, the narrated. But it can only make a narration insofar as it is not subjected to a predetermination—the narration is a product of the free productivity of nature. This also means that nature is not only subjected to a mechanical determination that renders it inert and lifeless; rather, its activity and life denote a dynamic between the real and the ideal that expresses its freedom through the infinite and motley deviations from an ideal type that becomes actual—like in the case of organisms—hence a subject for history (SW I: 468-9).<sup>50</sup> The abyss of the past, of a past yet to come, shows that the positive concept of the in-itself, freedom, makes a history of nature possible. Taking the positive concept of the in-itself from a strictly practical dominion into that of the theoretical reveals the historical constitution of nature.

The past yet to come not only makes a history of nature possible; it also transforms the usual outlook of human history, disclosing the natural *Ungrund* of freedom in another form of history.

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<sup>46</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, “Sobre la pregunta de si es posible una filosofía de la experiencia y, en particular, una Filosofía de la Historia,” in *Experiencia e historia. Escritos de juventud*, ed. and trans. José Luis Villacañas (Madrid: Tecnos, 1990), 149. He then adds that not all natural occurrences have a historical form because history does not record them as natural phenomena [*Naturerscheinungen*], but as natural episodes or sequels [*Naturerfolge*] that have had some impact on human life, e.g., an earthquake or the passing of a comet. <sup>47</sup> Schelling, “Sobre la pregunta,” 149-150.

<sup>48</sup> Grant, *Philosophies*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Schelling, “Sobre la pregunta,” 153.

<sup>50</sup> Schelling, “Sobre la pregunta,” 150-151.

## Anthropocene or the Other History

The movement of the positive in-itself into nature means that freedom also possesses a degree of vagueness. In other words, the positive in-itself cannot continue to be determined as an essence peculiar to a rational finite agent, like man. The freedom of man, as Schelling argued in the *Freedom Essay*, has its own singularities, but they do not exhaust the whole of freedom, as I have tried to show. There is a general form of freedom: “If freedom really is the positive concept of the in-itself, the investigation concerning human freedom is thrown back again into the general” (SW VII: 352).<sup>51</sup> A question remains: were the general form of freedom to express itself in humanity, *what would it look like?* I think the Anthropocene might hint at it. The Anthropocene has become a concept that signals the intrusion of historical time into geological time, of the ‘human’ into the ‘natural.’ In a sense, it is a form of anthropocentrism gone wild: we, human beings, are responsible for a series of geological and climatic changes that signal the end of the Holocene, alongside a deep ecological crisis that leaves no part of this planet untouched, hence, we deserve to name this epoch after ourselves.<sup>52</sup> Yet, in another sense, it is a deeply non-anthropocentric concept, indeed it is “*the first truly anti-anthropocentric concept*,”<sup>53</sup> one that could actually transform the face of humanity: “The human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been. Humans now wield a geological force.”<sup>54</sup> This is the main thesis that, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, climate scientists are positing, and the phrasing is striking, especially the temporal marks, ‘always has been’ and ‘now wield.’ It seems to imply that there was a transformation in the history of humanity that took it from a biological entity to a geological force. But then again, this linear narrative of what has been and now is poses other kind of problems. Whether we believe the Anthropocene to have started ten millennia ago with agriculture, two centuries ago with the steam engine, 70 years ago with atomic energy, or the last time you used a plastic bag, its beginning is quite elusive and keeps troubling discourses that try to fix it to a determinate point in the past that has passed. The effects of the Anthropocene do not wear down those forces that have come all along from that past.

Alongside the indeterminacy of the beginning, what makes the Anthropocene so compelling for this discussion is that it “has doubled the figure of the human—you have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the nonhuman-human.”<sup>55</sup> This assertion runs parallel to the fissure between the positive and negative concepts of the in-itself. The Anthropocene, then, points to the

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<sup>51</sup> Schelling, *Human Freedom*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> For a critical and historical approach to this kind of discourse, see Libby Robin and Will Steffen, “History for the Anthropocene,” *History Compass* 5, no. 5 (2007): 1694–1719.

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Morton, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Term Anthropocene,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2014): 262.

<sup>54</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 206.

<sup>55</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 11.

vagueness that is also part of humanity: “A geophysical force—for that is what in part we are in our collective existence—is neither subject nor an object.”<sup>56</sup> It comes from a place or moment previous to the rupture between subject and object, previous to consciousness: “Its generation had unintentional or unconscious dimensions.”<sup>57</sup> The intrusion of history, of human history, into nature, as well as the other way around, the intrusion of the geological into human agency, entails a reconceptualization of humanity as a geological force, which in turn means that humanity has to give up the conscious control of all of its actions. The idea that the ecological crisis, a prominent feature of the Anthropocene, could be solved with a few technofixes and public policies based on the will of individuals, as the Ecomodernist movement argues,<sup>58</sup> is called into question and troubled. Because of the doubling of the human, the cause and the effects are no longer part of the same register or plane. Hence, if we truly believe that we have been the cause of climate change, it does not imply that its effects are still under our control.

The sense of imminent ecological crisis and emergency that features in any discussion concerning the Anthropocene, throws us into a state of anxiety and uneasiness about what the future holds, what is yet to come. However, that the past is something yet to come, as I have tried to argue here, does not amount to conceiving the past as equivalent to a form of radical futurity. The latter constitutes the temporal structure of apocalyptic discourses, of a passivity surrendered to waiting. In the words of Claire Colebrook, this is not quite the case of the Anthropocene:

The sense of the Anthropocene era, the sense of man as a bounded species within time, is given not in the possibility of a sudden end that would bring to light—as nuclear annihilation might do—‘our’ fragile dependence on an archive and technological formation that might be wiped off the face of the earth, but more in a slow unwitnessed and ugly decay (a whimper, not a bang). Unlike the nuclear age, we do *not* foresee our own end.<sup>59</sup>

The sense of the yet to come, a paradigmatic figure of the future, of the utterly unknown and unexpected, is embroiled when it is proclaimed of the past.<sup>60</sup> As Schelling so decisively repeats throughout the three versions of the *Ages*, the past is known and it is therefore narrated. Instead of making past and future the same, of closing the apparent circle of time in a misleading representation of repetition, the

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<sup>56</sup> Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies,” 13.

<sup>57</sup> Morton, “How I Learned,” 260.

<sup>58</sup> See John Asafu-Adjaye et al., “An Ecomodernist Manifesto” ([www.ecomodernism.org](http://www.ecomodernism.org), 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change Is Not Really Human,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 206.

<sup>60</sup> Jason Wirth, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *The Ages of the World*, by F. W. J. Schelling (Albany: SUNY, 2000), xvii, uses a similar expression, *still to come*, with respect to the future: “The intimation, or inkling, *die Ahnung*, is the lost and irrecoverable ground of the past suggesting itself as what is still to come, but in such a way that its coming does not preserve the present but rather overturns it.” This relation between past and future, between the fragment and the totality from which it has been severed, even if that totality was never actual, is part of what I am trying to convey with the past yet to come.

past that is yet to come transforms what it means to be known, what it is to narrate. The known and narration remain open and indeterminate to the different modes in which they could be presented and performed. Hence, to know is not equivalent to determination (a feature of Kant's criticism), and to narrate is an act incapable of exhausting the past, of attaining a single, total story. The past yet to come, far from being akin to radical futurity affirms its kinship with the untimely—the creative potency of the past. Following this course of inquiry, Elizabeth Grosz proposes, in close alliance with Friedrich Nietzsche,<sup>61</sup> that the untimely is what disrupts our expectations, “that which is strong enough, active enough, to withstand the drive of the present to similarity, resemblance, or recognition, for the untimely brings with it the divergence that portends the future.”<sup>62</sup> With a resembling tone, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa uses the untimely to “invoke innovative ways of knowing that will seem inevitably backwards or pre-technoscientific to the progressive spirit [of the present].”<sup>63</sup> The untimely—a recurring past, a past that comes again, the repetition of the known, but differently and with new and creative effects.

The Anthropocene has thus operated a double disarticulation: on the side of freedom, it sets in a vague and uncertain motion an unconscious flow of human geological forces; on the side of nature, it banishes the cherished symmetry between cause and effect, the exhaustion of the former in the latter, setting causality into a vague and wandering state. This double disarticulation forces us to try “to listen to that which insists, obscurely.”<sup>64</sup> That obscurity is very reminiscent of the Schellingian abyss of the past, of a free and unconscious productivity that cannot be said to have a determinate end. In this indeterminacy, the Anthropocene also takes the form of what Isabelle Stengers has named the intrusion of Gaia: “Gaia, she who intrudes, asks nothing of us, not even a response to the question she imposes.”<sup>65</sup> Gaia imposes a question, yet she asks for no response—it cannot be determined nor expressed.<sup>66</sup> Gaia might as well be the past yet to come, the past in which a beginning remains always a beginning, the past that was never present, but instead points to the untimely, not so

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<sup>61</sup> Judith Norman, “Schelling and Nietzsche: Willing and Time,” in *The New Schelling*, ed. Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004), 90–105, has argued that Schelling and Nietzsche used a notion of will capable of creating a past that avows an interest for the present. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two: while Schelling tries to bury the past in the inaccessible, Nietzsche wills that the past returns. For Norman, this means that Schelling emphasizes the inaccessibility of the past, while Nietzsche postpones the project into an unknown future. I do not share her idea that these two approaches are at odds. After all, Schelling affirms that the whole is in the fragment—that is the past yet to come.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 11.

<sup>63</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 212.

<sup>64</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Open Humanities Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>65</sup> Stengers, *Catastrophic Times*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> This indeterminacy leaves no place neither for a gloomy pessimistic future nor for an enchanting optimistic one. An example of the latter, in relation to Schelling, is found in Bruce Matthews, “Schelling in the Anthropocene: A New Mythology of Nature,” *Symposium* 19 (2015): 94–105.



as to elicit a firm and definitive response but “so as to question the protagonists of a situation from the point of view of what they may become capable of, the manner in which they are likely to respond to this situation.”<sup>67</sup> Response is no longer a matter of solving a problem, getting rid of it; it is a question of responsibility. Gaia, the Anthropocene, the past yet to come, opens a crack in the continuous tissue of time, a hiatus for creativity, a rift for the political<sup>68</sup> that could be approached through the mismatch between general freedom, the productivity of nature, and human freedom, the capacity for good and evil, a gap that raises anew the question of responsibility. Let that be a subject for another intervention, a task for insisting on the rekindling of nature.

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<sup>67</sup> Stengers, *Catastrophic Times*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> See Mario Rufer, “La temporalidad como política: nación, formas de pasado y perspectivas poscoloniales,” *Memoria y sociedad* 14, no. 28 (2010): 11–31, as well as Chakrabarty’s postcolonial commitments.