kabiri
The Official Journal of the
*North American Schelling Society*

# Dead Mirrors: Nature, Ideology, and the Intellectual Intuition

Robert O'Shea Brown

In his essay "Constructing the Natural: The Darker Side of the Environmental Movement" (1985), cultural ecologist Neil Evernden questioned what he described as the use and abuse of ecology. The growth of a popular or vulgar environmental movement—from which the first signs of a bourgeoning neoliberal environmentalism emerged—was proof enough: the conceptual organon of ecology and its associated natures could be used to serve a wide variety of ends, few of which had anything to do with social and ecological justice. The ecological turn could not be relied upon to provide a principle capable of securing and maintaining the ideological intent of a left-leaning academic holism. Ecology was just as equally a means of rebranding the status quo. Ecology was both the "mask" and "blunt instrument" for certain kinds of societies, a kind of "institutional shaman that [could] be induced to pronounce natural anything we wish to espouse."[1] Indeed, and in retrospect, Evernden's critique exposed a tendency within environmentalism, as many of the Deep Ecologists surrounding him started openly expressing misanthropic tendencies that allied them with radicalizing forms of neoconservatism.[2] As it

[1] Neil Evernden, "Constructing the Natural: The Darker Side of the Environmental Movement," *The North American Review* 270, no. 1 (1985): 19.
[2] See, for instance, Blair Taylor, "Alt-Right Ecology: Eco-Fascism and Far-Right Environmentalism in the United States," in *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication* (London: Routledge, 2019), 275–292.

turned out—as the legacy of Deep Ecology should teach us—creating an environmental movement capable of critiquing the failures of the neoliberal project while remaining free of crypto-fascist tendencies was harder than it first seemed. In Evernden's words, our recourse to ecology and nature "justifies nothing, or anything."[3] All ecology was ideology—all ecology was an ecologism.

Though the connection was largely unknown to environmentalists of his generation, the conclusion that Evernden arrives at had already been reached by Schelling in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797/1803). There too the conception of nature has been debased and bent to serve the ends of a society that actively worked to conceal both the power of nature and its entwinement with the social. The early Schelling, however, was not stricken with the same sense of hopelessness present in Evernden's essay. In the revelation of a nature overwrought by the play of competing and conflicted ideologies, Schelling sees the fragile hope of unity not behind or before modern society, but rather outside of it entirely. The ideological construction of nature does not end in relativism, but rather reveals the means by which the social might be reconstructed—by, in Schelling's philosophy, a mode of practice that thinks contradiction and crisis manifested between competing ideologies as an attempt to reveal the source of their shared or common germ. Recalling the work of Evernden may provide insight into the present moment in Schelling scholarship. As the North American literature comes ever closer to producing a rigorous understanding of his politics and his nature philosophy, it might be possible to reground radical ecological thought with the study of Schelling. Care, however, must be given to the ideas we put into the carrier bag of history. Both Schelling and environmentalism demand a sensitivity to the past that is often extended to the former and denied to the latter.

The strangeness still perceived in Schelling's nature philosophy—a strangeness that surpasses the oddities of post-Kantian idealism—testifies to a conception of nature lost, forgotten, or otherwise repressed within modern intellectual history. A work like Habermas's "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism" is symptomatic of this intellectual loss. When Habermas grounds his reading of Schelling on the existence of a biblical fall narrative and the creation of first and second natures, any conception of the political has already eliminated an entwined nature-history that no measure of materialism can restore. Following Étienne Balibar, if politics is defined by a conception of natural sociability that holds a vision of society instituted "*after*, if not *against*, the spontaneous impulse of nature," then the essential conception of politics is premised on its constitution as an antithetical form of social engagement.[4]

---

[3] Evernden, "Constructing the Natural," 19.

[4] Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowden (New York: Verso, 2008), 77.

Whether its foundation is the *philia* of the Greeks, the concord of Christianity, or the discursive democracy of the late Frankfurt School, politics marks a social nature that is explicitly unnatural.[5]

Schelling saw this repression of nature at work in his own age, namely and most prominently, in the rejection of Spinoza's nature philosophy and the attempt therein to overcome the conception of natural sociability that eliminates spontaneous creation while situating the logic of antithetical production. Schelling's nature philosophy is a repetition of the political theory that grounds Book I of the *Ethics* (1677). Read as such, a work like *Ideas* displays many of the signature elements that led Louis Althusser to position Spinoza's practical philosophy as the foundational expression of ideology critique. For both Spinoza and Schelling, entry into the conception of nature is figured through a comparative political anthropology—a mode of situating and analyzing the cultural representations of competing political realities at play. What Schelling takes from Spinoza is the depth of violence made real by the naturalistic fallacy at work in ideology. There is much that is unnatural in nature; so much so that the truth of nature is its untruth. From this vantage, the argument for holistic natures and their supposed naturalness is posited as the ground of all ideology. Schelling's nature philosophy becomes an explicit social-political philosophy that calls into question the ways in which the ideologies of nature are used and abused to meet the ends of dominant social systems. Indeed, the intellectual intuition, what Schelling will describe as the non-faculty of the idea, is a mode of consciousness with the explicit purpose of denaturalizing the naturalization of ideology. The intellectual intuition is posited as a dynamic social consciousness intended to realize and address the workings of ideology. While Schelling and Spinoza reserve a space for direct participation within nature, this experience is also distorted by a false conception of nature. The experience of nature is given, but also effaced and reconstructed as a means for domination, the creation of social hierarchies, and the conditioning of subjects.

## First Nature

Schelling's introduction to *Ideas* displays an understanding of ideology positioned between the enlightened ideology of the Revolution and a more modern conception of ideology closer to our own. In keeping with French ideologues like Destutt de Tracy, Schelling's attempt to reconstruct the conception of nature marks a desire to reorient the organization of social-scientific ideas and thus prepares the way for an expansive conception of communal life. Schelling does not believe that changing the empirical

[5] Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 77–78.

functions of one's mind can alter one's social environment for the better; far more radically, he believes that the study, centralization, and revision of immanent ideas—ideas as constructed through the crisis, conflict, or contradiction of their real–ideal or natural–historical composition—holds the key to revealing both their power and the meaning of their social operation. Early modes of ideology, as Terry Eagleton argues, are acts of mental rupture that work in parallel with the physical toppling of Priests and Kings.[6] And yet, whether as expressed by the Reign of Terror or by the drive to reconstruction, the rupture itself is often repressed by a search for unity that thinks itself as the necessity of a determinate whole.

Troubled by the violent outcome of ideology in France, Schelling organizes his thought to militate against the secular-rational treatment of ideology otherwise inseparable from the logic of the Enlightenment. In no uncertain terms, the ratiocinative understanding of the enlightenment *lacked* reason and was, for Schelling, driven on by a callous morality devoid of immanent ideas.[7] Social life is not a mechanism to be altered by the great engineers of the Enlightenment. What is more, adding insult to injury, the reaction leveled against enlightened ideologies only further delayed revealing the significance of philosophical critique. After Napoleon was installed, it was not just the enlightened philosophy of the Revolution that became a scapegoat for all of France's social ills; it was widely held that philosophy *as such* was responsible for the failure of the New Republic. In Schelling's interpretation, the Revolution was not guided by philosophy at all. The Revolution was a criminal atrocity that had paved the way for a new slavery under Napoleon. The French ideologues were not *philosophes*, they were *raisonneurs* "with empty notions of the understanding."[8] Already displaying something of our own understanding of ideology, the French ideologues were entrapped by false consciousness and preyed upon by illusions.

Given the ties between the French Enlightenment and the empirical natural sciences, it is clear why Schelling was eager to develop a dynamic philosophy of nature. With his nature philosophy, Schelling rewrites the dominant standards of knowledge in and through the Spinozism that enlightened thought had rejected as rote fanaticism. Schelling sees, as Spinoza did, that the conceptualization of nature is constructed and deployed to ground material and libidinal organization in social structures. Our conceptions of nature are so convincingly real that citizens will happily reproduce servile cultural practices on their basis, all the while thinking themselves as a free nature.

---

[6] Terry Eagleton, "Introduction," in *Ideology* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1994), 2.
[7] F.W.J. Schelling, *On University Studies*, trans. E. S. Morgan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 52.
[8] Schelling, *On University Studies*, 52–53.

With the introduction to *Ideas*, Schelling channels Spinoza to rewrite the political anthropology of his day. Taken from Hume and Rousseau, the idea that reason emerges in and through the separation of humanity from nature grounds the *zeitgeist* of the age and is reproduced quite prominently in influential popular works like Kant's "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786) and Fichte's *Vocation of Man* (1800). In each case, new social life is forged through the construction of a history that divides consciousness and nature. In Kant, the stirring of reason prompts the subject to draw a contrast between itself and the world and, thus, to chart a sovereign path free from nature's heteronomy. In Fichte, the cunning of reason frees humanity from the violence of nature. Fichte's watchwords are calculation, regularity, order, conquest, and, finally, peace. In either case, the bond that comes to define the social is delineated by the authority to abstract one's existence from nature. Socialization is based on the repetition of this scission that figures society as a perpetual act of separation that sets the subject in opposition with its nature, and thus, in opposition to itself.

Differentiating himself against his peers, Schelling's political anthropology begins in the here and now of phenomenal life and through a thoroughly sentimental expression of a natural unity on par with the French writer Romain Rolland's oceanic feeling:

> Whoever is absorbed in research into Nature, and in the sheer enjoyment of her [sic] abundance, does not ask whether Nature and experience be possible. It is enough that she [sic] is there for him; he had made her [sic] real by his very *act*, and the question of what is possible is raised only by one who believes that he does not hold the reality in his *hand*. Whole epochs have been spent in research into Nature, and yet one does not weary of it. Some have devoted their entire lives to this avocation and have not ceased to pray to the veiled goddess. Great spirits have lived in their own world, untroubled about the principle of their discoveries; and what is the whole reputation of the shrewdest doubter against the life of a man who has carried a world in his head and the whole of Nature in his imagination? (SW II: 12)[9]

Both the form and content of this passage delineates nature as a first or primordial state. Nature is abundant; it is not given, but nevertheless can be possessed, held, as it is, in one's hand, carried in one's mind, providing unity to one's imagination. Nature is real, an idol of devotion, and a wellspring of wealth and certainty in the face of radical doubt. Nature offers a sphere free

[9] F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9–10.

from alienation. Nature portends a state of placid and secure existence seemingly prior to the labor of reflection and interrogation. Where a mere two years prior, Schelling had committed himself to, in Daniel Whistler's words, "a 'two-world' metaphysics in which reality and the ground of reality exist as qualitatively opposed realms," with *Ideas* there is no doubting Schelling's desire to articulate a bond between thought and nature that is mediated by the idea.[10]

Schelling will not invalidate or condemn the legitimacy of the sentimental portrayal of nature he leads with, nor will he allow this nature to be positioned as a halcyon first nature from which humanity has divided itself or has otherwise fallen. Following Schelling's narration, while there may very well be some form of first nature where proto-humanity exists as undifferentiated from itself and the world—what Schelling will name a "(philosophical) state of Nature"—this state would exemplify a condition that eradicates the realization of any real unification (SW II: 12).[11] Making an argument congruent with his interpretation of consistent dogmatism in the "Letters," to be one with one's self and the world is to exist as undifferentiated—without reflection and without consciousness of the self. If primordial nature is an *a priori* unity, that nature cannot be known as an object of experience by virtue of the fact that it cannot be known otherwise. The predication of nature is dependent on the allocution of a subject that reflects on that nature as an experience of qualitative alterity. Without such a difference the philosophical state of nature is not an object of natural historical reality. It is, as Schelling argues, an "obscure recollection" floating before "the most wayward thinker" (SW II: 12).[12]

If the "philosophical state of nature" is unimaginable or delusional, there can be no going back to nature; in fact, there is no first nature for experience to return to. Despite his consistent allusions to primordial truths, *Ur*-forms, dark, unconscious, barbarous, and chthonic principles, Schelling immediately bans any conjecture that would allow for the constitution of a nature that exists as independent of its idea. The production of first nature is fantastical. The culture of "wayward thinking" wants to create a qualitative distinction between first and second nature. It wants to position the break from nature as the evolution and climax of a human exceptionalism, rather than to concede its existence as one derivation among others, all of them subject to a greater set of forces (SW II: 12).[13] There are, says Schelling, "no native sons of freedom" (SW II: 12).[14] The idea of an (in)organic nature is the

---

[10] Daniel Whistler, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72.
[11] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.
[12] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.
[13] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.
[14] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.

product of a historical-material shock that breaks the philosophical state of nature into differentiated identities, each calling into question the reality of their present existence, and, thus, expressing a drive to actualize a harmony between thought and nature. "How a world outside us, how a Nature and with it experience, is possible—these are questions for which we have philosophy to thank; or rather, with these questions philosophy came to be" (SW II: 12).[15] The world begins not with the freedom to be; it begins with the freedom to reflect on what might be—through a freedom, in Schelling's words, that "strives to make itself free," that disentangles "itself from the fetters of Nature," that abandons "itself to the uncertain fate of its own powers," and that, in the end, returns to the same place it had spent the "childhood of its reason" (SW II: 13).[16] Schelling articulates a historical separation, but this distance is not a divide. Nor is the construction of sociality predicated on necessary degrees of enmity. Following the refrain that orients all of Schelling's early works, that which is real is that which is known. It is not enough for Schelling that the workings of nature are unconscious to thought.

Humanity sets itself in opposition to the external world and in doing so initiates a reflective mode of being that works toward a true philosophy of nature. Humanity separates "from now on what Nature had always united, separates the object from the intuition, the concept from the image, finally (in that he becomes his own object) himself from himself" (SW II: 13).[17] Reflection, when held within rational limits, is figured as a means of fulling the intuition of unity that initiated the drive of freedom. Reflection is a means of uniting freedom and nature in a shared practice of existence; it is a means of anticipating an equilibrium of forces that has been delegitimized and repressed as the expression of an infantile proto-history.

Strictly speaking, we do not find a second nature in Schelling that confirms any commonplace conception of society that is defined by a shared language, range of cultural practices, territory, or even state. The idea of a capital "N" Nature—the fulfillment of a realized subject–object unity—remains a heuristic to be fulfilled. Modern culture has not arrived at such a Nature and Schelling is deeply skeptical concerning when or if it will. The system of nature is not yet a system of thought. As sporadic remarks between the "Oldest Systematic Program" (1797) and the "Stuttgart Seminars" (1810) indicate, the state stands in for the nature we lack. The creation of the state is symbolic of societal resignation. When we posit the state, we speak to the inherent lack of a real unifying principle. The state stands in for the force that we fail to comprehend; it is a placeholder for a sovereign union yet to be

[15] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.
[16] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.
[17] Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.

realized. The state is a grand admission that the system of nature is not yet the system of the mind.

In fact, it is worth questioning whether we find any formal conception of nature in *Ideas* at all. Adrian Johnston gestures toward this sentiment when he characterizes Schelling's nature as a mode of denaturalization in Lacanian terminology, as *antiphusis* or *contre-nature*.[18] And yet this oversteps the intent of Schelling's early nature philosophy and is already too wrapped-up in the particular unconsciousness of psychoanalysis; it is already too committed to a nature conceptualized vis-à-vis Freud's dead mothers or Lacan's crocodilian mother. Johnston's conceptualization is not unlike Timothy Morton's ecology without nature—it is too committed to its own iconoclasm. If Schelling's nature is an anti-nature, counter-nature, or a nature without nature, it ceases to be speculative; it ceases to be properly philosophical when it commits itself to the continuous division of its idea.[19]

Contrastingly, Schelling's nature and the power of its productivity is closer to the work of Claude Lefort in its original form.[20] When Schelling evokes nature as "the unconditioned," he gives an account of something close to Lefort's empty place of power.[21] The French Revolution, Lefort explains, marks a break in social life that was perceived as constituting a time and space separate from history. Lefort discerned that when the rule of the mass was thought to have entered the stage of historical development, it was, at that very moment, haunted by the sentiment that the power to make history was never present in any objective sense, and could not be conceptualized and accounted for. Indeed, whether this belief is retained, repeated, or revealed, the struggle to overthrow Christian power and its incarnation in corporeal rule had revealed at least one aspect of demagogic authority. The ability to assert, wield, or clearly direct power attested to the Christian belief in a power that rests elsewhere—in a God external to the world and only ever approximated and represented in corporeal rule. What post-revolutionary thought comes to realize is that religion portends an expression of power that outstrips representational logic to define a mode of social engagement and organization that is not contained

---

[18] Adrian Johnston, "Ghosts of Substance Past: Schelling, Lacan, and the Denaturalization of Nature," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2006), 34.
[19] Walter Cerf, "Speculative Philosophy and Intellectual Intuition: An Introduction to Hegel's Essays," in G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), xvii.
[20] Psychoanalysis post-Žižek takes up Lefort's theory of power and makes it its own, albeit under the pretext outlined above. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 191–94.
[21] Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 17.

or fulfilled by or in empirical space and time.[22] Contrary to a state founded on the principles of reason, society organizes itself through the passions. As Lefort summarizes, humanity arrives at an opening in being that is not a simple product of empirical creation, and thus constitutes an involvement with and through an "excess of being over appearance."[23] Returning to the central refrain of Schelling's nature philosophy, the power of nature is that it is everywhere and nowhere.

## The Science of Subservience

With the emergence of reflective rationality, Schelling pauses his political anthropology in order to treat the ideology at work within the effacement of nature. Unlike "Of the I" or his "Letters," with *Ideas*, Schelling is no longer playing the young proctor that treats the division of subjects from objects as a lapse in knowledge that requires correction. The contextualization of division has changed to acknowledge a logical system of forced separation.

Though at times mystifyingly, Schelling begins undermining and inverting the concepts he is thought to hold most dear. Where previously Schelling had argued that reflection was a means of unifying nature and freedom, reflective consciousness is now posited as a tautological form of knowledge.[24] If freedom and nature (or the ideal and the real) are the polarities of a singular force, why is reflection employed to structure and coordinate subjective identity through the logic of discriminatory difference? Schelling will not pose a definitive answer until about 1806, but his intimacy with Spinoza aids him in conceptualizing how the reality of nature is transfigured to elicit a seemingly free mode of activity that disavows the realization of freedom. Paraphrasing Spinoza, when nature is effaced, this social fantasy that replaces it allows servitude to be reconceptualized as freedom.

The appendix to Book I of Spinoza's *Ethics* is a critique of the "anthropo-theological fantasy" of early modernism.[25] Having explained his conception of God and the necessity of a divine nature, Spinoza concludes Book I by reflecting on the reasons his philosophy has been met with so much hostility. In Spinoza's account, it comes down to a single point of human exceptionalism that has engendered a multitude of prejudices. Humanity is

---

[22] Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 223.
[23] Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," 223.
[24] While Schelling's tendency to invert his terminology poses a challenge for the reader, I believe it is worth preserving this ambiguity in an attempt to elicit the concomitant presence of both participations in manifold.
[25] Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 60.

born into the world with and without forms of knowledge. Subjects know that they identify themselves through the effects of their appetites and their conscious attempts to secure advantage for themselves. Simultaneously subjects struggle with the knowledge that they do not know the causality that orients and orders their relationship with the objects of their desire. Thinking themselves free of a first principle, the touchstone of human freedom is understood by subjects as their consciousness of individual volition and appetite. Men, writes Spinoza, "believe that they are free, precisely because they are conscious of their volitions and desires; yet concerning the causes that have determined them to desire and will they do not think, not even dream about, because they are ignorant of them."[26] Freedom is the freedom to desire, not a freedom determined by knowledge of the causality that defines freedom. More so and relatedly, insomuch as humanity is defined by the attainment of advantage, personal action and social engagement are oriented by the fulfillment of individual ends and the expectation that others will be driven in kind. Formally organizing existence around the logic of causal experience—once the social contract is constituted through the freedom of desire and the fulfillment of the subject as an end in itself—both individual and world are degraded as a series of means ruled by no other causality than the end that is fulfillment. Exhibiting the fundamental refrain of instrumental reason, everything is rendered a means for one's advantage: "eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, cereals and living creatures for food, the sun for giving light, the sea for breeding fish."[27] Nature has no other causality than as a linear existence in a teleological drive that registers the corporeal through the fulfillment of an order predetermined to serve the advancement of humanity.

Transforming prejudice into a worldview, when the subject of the state thinks a world that is concomitantly not a subjective creation yet nonetheless created for the attainment of individual ends, it follows that such a world was offered up by a providential ruler or rulers—a God or Gods—to worship, like subjects that worship themselves as an end to themselves: a God that might love the temperament of their worship above all others and "direct the whole of Nature so as to serve [humanity's] blind cupidity and insatiable greed."[28] What remains is a fractured existence that cannot be thought without the predication of a higher or more perfect consciousness, but also a world that can only be known through its consumption and assimilation as an object for fulfilling innately teleological desire. It is a world that is given and prefigured, that denies the necessity of critical reflection, that perpetuates a fantastic state in which final causes are human fictions that invert the conditions of reality.

---

[26] Spinoza, "Ethics," in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 239.
[27] Spinoza, "Ethics," 239.
[28] Spinoza, "Ethics," 239.

Repeating Althusser's now famous interpretation, the appendix to Book I of the *Ethics* contains "the matrix of every possible theory of ideology."[29] What is traded as the immediate truths of the world are the illusions of an imagination codified by the perception of the world as lived. As Althusser stresses, it is not that the world of the imagination dominates life from above, but rather, "that the immediate world such as we perceive it is strictly indissociable and inseparable from the imagination and its construction of its essence."[30] Or, in the words of Warren Montag, the subject that is the free cause of itself is an illusion disciplined by the system of the imagination, and yet, this falsity is made true when it is produced and lived as a material reality.

Spinoza, in Althusser's interpretation, defines the logic of individualism. Thinking itself unconditioned and undetermined in ground and principle, the subject reverses the causality of its existence by convincing itself that it orders the cause and effect of the world with will and desire. In the course of contemplating this unlimited freedom—what Schelling would describe in his "Letters" as the horror of freedom—one is free to enact a freedom that includes one's own servitude. As Hasana Sharp explains, the subject is free in thought while still limited and constrained by conditions placed on thought and action. In this regard, that fantasy is not an illusion.[31] By way of action and practice the life of fantasy is structured into the system of existence and lived out as that which is necessary to one's life. Ideology presupposes a new object of life: a life that is its own object.

## The Fiction of Principles

The faculty that Althusser would come to name the imagination already appears in at least two significant forms across the two editions of Schelling's *Ideas*. In the 1797 edition of *Ideas*, Schelling uses the term *speculation* to describe what Althusser would later identify as the illusory imagination at work in the ideological state apparatus. In this sense, speculation is used as a heuristic that allows for a critique of a particular vision of philosophy that is satisfied with logical argumentation, the creation of dichotomies, and the abstract analysis of concepts. Mere speculation, writes Schelling, is a scientifically and socially degenerate understanding that kills the creative imagination, effaces the intuition of (in)organic unity, and then hails itself as an exemplar of self-actualized human nature (SW II: 222).[32] When Schelling publishes the second

[29] Louis Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition," in *The New Spinoza*, eds. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.
[30] Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition," 6.
[31] Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 60.
[32] Schelling, *Ideas*, 177–78.

edition of *Ideas* in 1803, much has changed. Most prominently, while the drive of his criticism remains the same, Schelling has revised *Ideas* to remove every significant mention of mere speculation and replaced it with the notion of reflection (SW II: 14).[33] Mere reflection, as Schelling comes to call it, represents this kind of topological imagination that cleaves existence into isolated conceptual fragments to be rendered whole by a version of the understanding that is incapable of reason. Reflection radicalizes and materializes the Kantian blockage against thinking beyond reason. It acts as a systemic rampart, halting the application of "pure intuition" or "creative imagination."[34] As Schelling describes across the two editions of the text:

> *Mere speculation*, therefore, is a spiritual sickness of mankind, and moreover the most dangerous of all, which kills the germ of man's existence and uproots his being. It is a tribulation, which, where it has once become dominant, cannot be dispelled—not by the stimulation of Nature (for what can that do to a dead soul?), nor by the bustle of life. (SW II: 14)[35]

Or, by Schelling's repetition:

> *Mere reflection*, therefore, is a spiritual sickness in mankind, the more so where it imposes itself in domination over the whole man, and kills at the root what in germ is his highest being, his spiritual life, which issues only from Identity. It is an evil which accompanies man into life itself, and distorts all his intuition even for the more familiar objects of consideration. (SW II: 13–14)[36]

Instead of privileging one edition over the other, counterposing the two versions of the text speaks to Schelling's struggle to encapsulate the paradoxical ways in which a fantastical notion exerts itself as matter and force, developing itself as a simulacrum of reality, all the while effacing any mode of thought capable of challenging it.

On one hand, the critique of mere speculation stresses the association between fantasy and abstraction. The "speculative chimera" turns nature upside down (SW II: 21).[37] Like Spinoza, Schelling's critique of false ends

---

[33] Between the two editions of *Ideas*, Schelling and Hegel have been working in parallel to recuperate the idea of speculative philosophy. For the time being, it suffices to say that the 1802 presentation of speculation is used to describe an authentic philosophy.
[34] Schelling, *Ideas*, 35.
[35] Schelling, *Ideas*, 11. Italics mine.
[36] Schelling, *Ideas*, 11 n4. Italics mine.
[37] Schelling, *Ideas*, 16.

expresses the *zeitgeist* of a theoretical praxis that misconstrues the relationship between cause and effect. The experience of phenomena is made manifest through a fundamentally inseparable experience of the object and idea.

> In that I envisage the object, object and idea are one and same. And only in this inability to distinguish the object from the idea during the envisaging itself lies the conviction, for the ordinary understanding, of the reality of external things, which become known to it, after all, only through ideas. (SW II: 15)[38]

In this account, mere speculation can only ask "how do ideas of external things arise in us (SW II: 15)?"[39] Speculation can only pose the question through the displacement of a thing external to the self and thus engages in a tautological process whereby the structure of the question predetermines the appearance of the answer. Opposed to one another in this way, object and subject are relatable, but only as a matter of cause and effect—only as two desperately alienated points held in manifold by the will of the self. When the individuated self asks how it is that it has ideas, the structure of the inquiry has been prefigured: The I becomes a being that has raised itself "above the idea and become, through this very question, a being that feels itself to be free *ab origine* with respect to all ideation, who surveys the ideation itself and the whole fabric of his ideas beneath himself" (SW II: 16).[40] The force that orders the world is the same force that expresses the existence and being of the in- and of-itself. The I is a being unto itself, a being that removes its self from the generation of ideas, that rises above the power of nature and separates and organizes the world as it sees fit.

Echoing Spinoza's plea, both the understanding and causality must be recast. The question is not "how that assemblage of phenomena and the series of causes and effects, which we call the course of Nature, has become actual *outside us*," but rather, how that nature is being constructed, implemented, and made "actual *for us*, how that system and that assemblage of phenomena have found their way to our minds, and how they have attained the necessity in our conception with which we are absolutely compelled to think of them (SW II: 29–30)."[41]

Pointedly, Schelling asks his reader a question that becomes a metaphor for causality as envisioned by Leibnizian fulguration.[42] Why is it that

---

[38] Schelling, *Ideas*, 12.
[39] Schelling, *Ideas*, 12.
[40] Schelling, *Ideas*, 13.
[41] Schelling, *Ideas*, 23.
[42] G. W. Leibniz, "Monadology," in *Philosophical Texts*, trans. and eds. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 274.

"lightning precedes thunder?" Why is it that "we must think of a succession of phenomena, which is absolutely necessary?" (SW II: 30)[43] Why is it that when succession is objectively necessary it is concomitantly subjectively necessary? At their most salient, phenomena are inseparable from their succession, just as succession is inseparable from the phenomena. The common explication is, in turns, either dogmatic or critical: either succession and phenomena "arise together and inseparably outside us" or they "arise together and inseparably inside us" (SW II: 31).[44] By the first example, the relationship between succession and phenomena is a testament to the productivity of a consciousness that animates things in themselves. Succession, independent of finite ideas, is posited as working outside the understanding to express a unity independent of consciousness, or one that portends a mode of succession that can exist independently of its foundation in and through a being that can only come to know the relationality of existence through the discursivity of the presentation. As opposed to expressing how the I comes to think succession, the thing itself maintains a presentation of causality that is quite literally unthinkable—it is causality that exists beyond the conditions of thought. Alternatively, with the second example, as an orientation over and against the illusory causality of things in themselves, the presentation of succession becomes a product of one's self. The idea of relationality and causation is a product of a self that knows itself only through the objectification of its subjectivity through the categories. All representation originates in a mind with the capability of knowing things in the world through an idea of succession derived from that mind. "The succession of our ideas arises in us, and indeed a necessary succession; and this self-made succession, first brought forth in consciousness, is called the course of Nature" (SW II: 34).[45]

The question concerning succession is unanswerable when both lines of argumentation attempt to construct a vision of relationality meant to enforce the barriers of categorically distinct entities. The only possibility that remains, argues Schelling, is "to derive the necessity of a succession of presentations from the nature of our mind, and so of the finite mind as such, and, in order that this succession may be genuinely objective, to have the things themselves, together with this sequence, arise and come into being in it" (SW II: 35).[46] Schelling's summation is remarkably simple. "Already the first look at nature teaches us what the last one does" (SW II: 360).[47] The experience of lightning precedes thunder when "all beings like ourselves perceive the

---

[43] Schelling, *Ideas*, 23.
[44] Schelling, *Ideas*, 24.
[45] Schelling, *Ideas*, 26.
[46] Schelling, *Ideas*, 27.
[47] F.W.J. Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship of the Real and the Ideal in Nature," trans. Dale Snow, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2015): 239.

phenomena of the world in the same necessary serial order," which is made "conceivable only and solely from our common nature" (SW II: 38).[48] The causal order of the phenomena matters little. Lightning could precede thunder or thunder could precede lightning; either way, the causal order of this relationship is secondary to the fact that all like beings perceive the phenomena in an identical order and thus occupy a shared world. Lightning precedes thunder because the conditions of our existence all share a common environing of existence.

On the other hand, Schelling's critique of reflection reveals the ways in which fantasy is materialized as a simulacrum of reality structuring a subservience that convinces the individuated self that it is free. To rephrase the critique developed in Spinoza's *Ethics*, once the self has been divided from its object, the individual can either understand its separation from itself as a means or as an end. As a means, division marks a methodological principle of striving for unification. The self divides itself from nature, so that it may know the reality of nature as well as its own relationality in and through that nature. Division is the foundation of an epistemological affirmation that leads humanity to assert itself as truly human by demanding a relationality between itself and nature. In Schelling's words, "[o]riginally in man there is an absolute equilibrium of forces and of consciousness. But he can upset this equilibrium through freedom, in order to reestablish it through freedom" (SW II: 13).[49] Or, more radically still, the sociality that enters into the philosophical state as a means does so in order to eliminate the demand and the disciplinary construct of philosophy altogether. To enter into the state of philosophy preserves the desire to be released from it. By enacting freedom as a means, Schelling preserves the radical alterity essential to the perpetuation of a will that is free. This, however, is distinct from separation as an end. In the latter case, freedom is granted to the social body when first nature is positioned against a second nature that manifests social organization through a systemic logic that naturalizes quantitative discrimination. The state of philosophy, as a state of being and a state of thought, is maintained by a "*mere* reflection" that fetishizes the labor of dissection to defend and perpetuate permanent separation (SW II: 13).[50] Each and every thing is an identity unto itself; each is a quantitative difference that can only be understood when arranged as isolated identities known through the organization of perspicacity.

The crux of the issue, for Schelling, is the belief that what is separated in thought can also be separated in fact (SW 11: 192).[51] Reflection as means can be actualized as will. Confirming external nature as a collection of

---

[48] Schelling, *Ideas*, 29.
[49] Schelling, *Ideas*, 11.
[50] Schelling, *Ideas*, 11.
[51] Schelling, *Ideas*, 154.

mechanical laws, while at the same time, working from a perspective that has eliminated any metaphysical reserve, be it dogmatic or otherwise, reflection can divide the conceptual manifold of objectivity in two. There is a kind of subject-object, i.e., the objectivity determined by the will of free subjects, as well as a material object that does not confirm the dynamic, subjective, or human nature that reflection conceptualizes through the objectivity of the self. This relationship between the self and other allows for the self to cast the objectivity of itself without having to rely on the heteronomy of an external cause or agent. As such, it follows that other subjects populate perception with the traces of their own objectivity to form a stratum of subject–object representations capable of approximating the synthetic activity of consciousness to evoke the conditions of self-consciousness. The individuated self no longer fears that its association with a heteronomous world will condition or otherwise contort the drive of its freedom if and when that world is constructed as a product devised by the collective labors of reason. The object checks the efficacy of the subject; it still bars access to the in-itself of being, but now, because the subject-object is itself a product of a free and rational agent, the reflective content of alterity positions itself as an affirmation of free choice.

The reflective block that placed limits and boundaries on the reach of reason is institutionalized in the individuated self as a ban on thinking otherwise. Reflection actualizes the creation of a transcendental *nomos* that is expressed *ad infinitum* with every evocation of the individuated self. The self is the necessity of an identity that defines the authority of itself by repulsing alterity. Or, as a practical expression, the self manifests its sovereignty by making the decision to effectuate itself through the free expression of its will. To be self-conscious is to manifest oneself and one's community by participating in a developmental paradigm that actively eliminates the being of things by transforming them into objects capable of affirming a rational nature—a rational nature that learns this right by objectifying its own body, that extends the realm of its authority by determining things as objects and objects as property. Though reflection may begin as a mode for the integration of the phenomenal world, it comes to dominate the entirety of the individual. Reflection is an evil, says Schelling, "that accompanies man into life itself," distorting the most basic intuition of objects, misrepresenting the phenomenal world with a chimerical intellectual world, and thus, at its most violent, separating the individual from the most basic spiritual principles. Freedom, as expressed by the reflective state, is a search for perpetual foreclosure—tirelessly cutting short its interaction with the world, policing borders for the exclusion of difference, and abandoning a conception of subjectivity that finds what is highest through communion.

Mere reflection, says Schelling, is self-referential, converting "the world into play of concepts" and "the mind within you into a dead mirror of things (SW II: 19)."[52] Mere reflection may reflect, but it never captures the vitality of its figure. The mirror that is the self is no longer a reflection of the good—it is no longer a reflection of the absolute. The subject is a dead object of vanity reflecting a self-same social condition that continues forward, unchallenged by a philosophy that is content to posit the reified as the standard of the philosophical state. Recontextualizing what Montag describes as the "vicious theological/anthropological circle" of Spinoza's *Ethics*, in Schelling, this becomes a vicious reflective/anthropological circle. "The mirror mirrors another mirror mirroring it: there is no origin in this relation in that what is reflected is itself a reflection of what reflects it."[53]

## Common Knowledge

The climax and resolution of Schelling's political anthropology in the *Ideas* comes by way of a conceptual reversal. Up until this point in his introduction to *Ideas*, Schelling has been leading his reader with an ambiguous treatment of unity and freedom somewhere between the tenets of dogmatism and criticism. While there are hints and suggestions that Schelling has a few figures in mind, the reality is that the history of philosophy, with the exception of Spinoza, is the history of mere reflective thought. Taking this sense of ambiguity further, Schelling recasts his previous anthropology by circling back to his original evocation of an unreflected nature now mediated through its connection with an empirical object. The object and idea that are one and the same, says as much about the reality of the external things as it does the constitution of the ordinary understanding (*gemeinen Verstand*) in itself. Schelling centralizes the unity of thought and the object, but figured through the capacity of ideas and a presentation of the understanding like the *experientia vaga* that Spinoza would conceptualize as an ordinary, common, or vague understanding. In this moment, it becomes abundantly clear that Schelling is inverting the conceptualization of common knowledge.

Embracing the naïve experience of nature that merely reflective philosophy condemns as vague, common, or enthusiastic preserves the legacy and potential of a true philosophy; at the same time, Schelling will contend, what is traded in the schools as true philosophy must be ousted as the base expression of a broken understanding. As he spelled it out in *On University Studies* (1803), the common understanding is not solely or primarily an

---

[52] Schelling, *Ideas*, 15.
[53] Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (New York: Verso, 1999), 39.

understanding that is crude or uncultivated. On the contrary, "the common understanding is one nurtured by false and superficial education, taught to be content with hollow, empty ratiocination and to think of itself as highly cultured—the sort of understanding that has expressed itself in modern times chiefly by deprecating everything that rests upon Ideas" (SW V: 258).[54]

When the ordinary understanding is figured as the common understanding, the respective wellsprings of Spinozism, pantheism, dogmatism, and the vulgar consciousness are raised to the status of true philosophy, while the logic that posits separation as unity held in such high esteem marks the formalization and institutionalization of the mere or relative knowledge that Schelling's readers thought they were fighting against through the adoption of reflective philosophy. Toying with an increasingly sophisticated inversion of the transcendental and diminutive notion of the common, Schelling suggests that what is common is philosophical while what is often held as philosophical is merely the product of primitive accumulation. Observing that they are no different in holding the "mythology" and "poetic fictions" of the ancients, Schelling suggests that his readers are still attached to a social body founded on the "conflict between spirit and matter (SW II: 19)."[55] They are still ignorant of the fact that philosophy only reached its becoming, with Spinoza's description of concepts capable of holding mind and matter as two duplicitous forms of knowledge in unity (SW II: 20).[56] Mere speculation is no longer speculative when the creative imagination is no longer an experience capable of grasping the metaphysical whole of being and mind in their coming to be. The reversal of common and reflective knowledge initiates a desire to rearticulate nature by fundamentally redrawing the historical horizon of the Western philosophical project. Schelling notes something of this in *Ideas* when he suggests that the illusion of nature is conceived and concretized by religious cultural paradigms founded on the supposed conflict between spirit and matter.

While it is impossible to extricate Schelling from his inherent classism and his attachment to theories of genius, the reversal of the common understanding speaks to a similar thread that appears in the fragment "Oldest Systematic Program." The end of ontological and political delusion is not realized through "charts and indices"; it is a matter of cultivating an aesthetic sense, an idea of beauty in its "higher platonic sense," or what the fragment describes as a "sensual religion."[57] To cultivate this sense, the fragment

---

[54] Schelling, *On University Studies*, 52.
[55] Schelling, *Ideas*, 15.
[56] Schelling, *Ideas*, 15.
[57] Anonymous Author, "The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism," trans. Diana I. Behler, in *Philosophy of German Idealism: Fichte, Jacobi, and Schelling*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 2003), 162.

abandons its defense of the estates and the monarchy to argue that society will only be liberated—the "great multitude" brought to their realization as a "people"—once they are freed from the tyranny of their rulers, and knowledge is constituted across and through the bounds of class.[58] To cite what are inarguably the most provocative set of passages from the "Oldest Systematic Program":

> [W]e so often hear that the great multitude should have a *sensual religion*. Not only the great multitude, but even philosophy needs it. Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of the imagination and art, that is what we need.
>
> Until we make ideas aesthetic, i.e., mythological, they hold no interest for the *people*, and conversely, before mythology is reasonable, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus finally the enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands; mythology must become philosophical, and the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make philosophy sensual. Then external unity will reign among us. Never again the contemptuous glance, never the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then does equal development of all powers await us, of the individual as well as of all individuals. No power will be suppressed any longer, then general freedom and equality of spirits will reign—A higher spirit sent from heaven must establish this religion among us, it will be the last work of the human race.[59]

The fragment still bows to a sovereign force that comes from elsewhere—though not a monarch that occupies the head of the social body. Sovereignty is a higher power brought down to earth to manifest social space extensively and thoroughly as the first and last realization of a mediated social conflict. While the "Oldest Systematic Program" argues for the freedom and equality of the great multitude, the realization of the people is not figured or founded on a preexistent unity. The idea of freedom does not cohere with the reality of freedom. The idea and reality are bonded by an internal crisis of meaning. A free people exists as a question, refusing certainty and engendering anxiety, an anxiety that allows its self-definition to remain as a site of contention. Thus, the people as elicited by the fragment are continually being composed between poles. In order to actualize any political, ontological, or epistemological conflict, the fragment evokes the truth of an ideal social space as an absolute outpouring of difference in manifold. The people are composed of antithetical

---

[58] Anonymous, "Oldest Systematic Program," 162.
[59] Anonymous, "Oldest Systematic Program," 162–63.

ideological drives: the enlightened reticulated through the unenlightened, the absolute meted by the masses, and philosophy made inseparable from mythology. When refined to its ideal expression, each lies between the one and the all. The one that is the "ideal I" must be inextricable from the reality of the all that is the multitude. Against an interpretation of post-Kantian idealism that prioritizes the power and sovereignty of an *a priori* absolute, what the "Oldest Systematic Program" suggests is what Schelling describes in the "Letters" as a "canon" *for* the all—that is, a canon *of* the all, a canon for and by the collectivity that comes to compose the idea of the absolute.

Schelling's unconditional or absolute nature is known, understood, and felt as and through the products of an existence flung into a state of unrest and ever attempting to create a social space capable of actualizing an unassailable people. At a point in time when enlightened philosophy was put into the service of despotism and the revolutionary mass expressed themselves as if they were unruly hordes directed to action by the jeers of modern-day Sophists, the "Oldest Systematic Program" fragment refuses to abandon the promise of either. Where both have failed to realize a sensual religion, it is the alienation of philosophy from the mass and the mass from philosophy that is the germ of this miscarriage.

## Youthful Ideas

Schelling's evocation of fulguration in *Ideas* reaches beyond a critique of causality. Schelling will make the same allusion in the Würzburg lectures (1804). "The absolute light, the idea of God, strikes reason like a flash of lightning, so to speak, and its luminosity endures in reason as an eternal affirmation of knowledge" (SW VI: 155).[60] This light, this strike, notes G. Anthony Bruno, is the light of the intellectual intuition.[61]

In *Ideas* the intellectual intuition is not present by its proper name. Nor does Schelling invoke the intellectual intuition introduced in "Of the I" or the one he arrives at in his identity philosophy. With *Ideas* and in response to J. B. Erhards's criticism, Schelling suspends the formal vestiges of the intellectual intuition and allows the practice to become something more than itself by becoming something less than itself. In its dehiscence, the intellectual intuition becomes the "collective intuition" that unites mankind in the "contemplation of the absolute." The productive intuition presents the whole "communal

[60] F.W.J. Schelling, "System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular," in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 152.

[61] G. Anthony Bruno, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the Intellectual Intuition in Schelling's Philosophy," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 5 (2013): 7.

product of objective and subjective activity (SW II: 228)."[62] It is what Schelling will call a state of intuition, a state of being drawn between two points or poles, pulled forwards and backwards, reversed and reversible, as it were (SW II: 229).[63] Schelling will name a productive intuition that presents the whole through its parts and its parts through the whole (SW II: 238–39).[64] It is direct intuition that provides the real and demonstrates the dynamism of living matter. This is an intuition that grasps past and future as succession as such (SW II: 31–32).[65] This is an intuition that is terminated when opposed forces are pulled out of conflict, where the unresolved dialectic has been deadened and brought to a standstill, when the gap or empty space of power has been foreclosed (SW II: 221).[66] It is the pure intuition of subject and object, ideal and real, all of which it understands as "originally one and the same"; an intuition that had "long since the discovered the symbolic language" by which "Nature speaks" (SW II: 47).[67] It is also and most importantly an intuition that is capable of conceiving nature in particular and the philosophy of nature in general. This is perhaps a "mere" intuition, but only if it is possible to read what is "mere" as portending a necessary reversal—casting the lowest level of knowledge as the highest and the highest as the lowest. In this reversal, and in its multiplicity of types, roles, and uses, intuition surpasses itself. In part, Hegel, Marx, and to a lesser extent, Lukács are to blame for a certain inherited understanding of this generative incoherence, as Schelling's intellectual intuition becomes a watchword for enthusiasm and irrationalism. And yet the theoretical definition of the intellectual intuition is not nearly as important as what it does in practice.

When figured as mode of practice—when figured both socially and naturally, the intellectual intuition is the organ of ideology. The advancement and realization of culture is dependent on liberating social systems from ideological illusion and reconstructing an expression of these systems founded by a natural-historical understanding. This is precisely why Schelling evokes the aspect of intellection: "*the nature of intuition, that which makes it intuition, is that in it absolutely opposite, mutually restricting activities are united*" (SW II: 221).[68] The intellectual intuition is a proto-dialectical synthetic judgment that expresses not the singular identity of things, but rather, the identity of difference—the identity of the mutual in difference. It is an ability to apprehend the transhistorical nature of an identity effaced across history, and yet, that

---

[62] Schelling, *Ideas*, 183.
[63] Schelling, *Ideas*, 184.
[64] Schelling, *Ideas*, 190.
[65] Schelling, *Ideas*, 24.
[66] Schelling, *Ideas*, 177.
[67] Schelling, *Ideas*, 35.
[68] Schelling, *Ideas*, 177. Original italics.

nonetheless persists through history. Rephrased, intellectual intuition is not just an ability to think through difference in the creation of thought, but rather, the ability to think thought in and through the process of thinking. Such a thought is the thinking of the unconditioned or the thought of the empty space. Removed from its near-mystical trappings, the intellectual intuition is knowledge of the idea. It is the methodical deconstruction of ideological force that works to realize the reality of ideas.

In saying the intellectual intuition is the organ of ideology critique, it can be argued that Schelling provides a decisive example of what Slavoj Žižek describes as the "slide into ideology." Denouncing merely reflective philosophy as an ideological fantasy that must be banished by figuring a nature capable of liberating social life, the attempt to remove oneself from the flux of ideology expresses the ideological gesture par excellence.[69] The attempt to attain a reality that raises itself above the fictions of ideology turns the ideological drive over. It seems unlikely, however, that Schelling thought it possible to remove one's self from ideology, even if the drive to do so is essential to the system. When the power of nature is taken as unconditioned space, as an empty space, as a gap or rupture in the social, the conception of ideology changes. It is no longer a question of separating the fantasy from the real. The real role of ideology is to conceal, as Lefort says, the enigma of the political form. The aim of ideology is to disempower the social by reducing "the indetermination of the social."[70] With his critique of ideology, Schelling is charting the structure of ideas, displaying their relations and codependencies, and tracing the ways in which they work to occlude the work of freedom. *Ideas* is an attempt to make a social system that has been stabilized and settled dynamic again—to make its passions and motivations visible again. To reground existence in the identity of its difference. It is a desire to reground the nature of the social as the unthing (*Unbedingt*).

---

[69] Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), 17.

[70] Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interrupting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 187.