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The Origami Fold: Nature as Organism in Schelling's Later Identity Philosophy

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From 1801–1807 Schelling continued to refine his early attempts at *Naturphilosophie* in the metaphysical framework of a transcendental Spinozism that he initially called Identity Philosophy. While mathematics and geometry provided the model for identity and its quantitative differentiation in early versions of identity theory, from 1804–1807, logic and theory of language offered a model of identity capable of unknotting persistent Spinozistic puzzles such as the connection between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*—the absolute and its potencies—and the ontological status of the individual. Schelling's initial concepts of identity as “indifference” or “the identity of identity and difference,” themselves the offshoot of meditations on polarity and repeating structure in the philosophy of nature, make way for logical concepts such as “expression” or “affirmation” and the propositional operator “bond” or “*Position*” found in the copula. The new essays approach ultimate reality through Spinoza's disjunction of God or nature, or productive and produced nature; so in addition to identity theory, a general metaphysics of nature prefaces treatments of specific natural phenomena. These dual metaphysics of God and nature inject a dynamic or expressive movement into identity that is not yet the unfolding of identity as grounding-and-division that Schelling will articulate in the 1809 Freedom Essay, but it carries a sense of motion and differentiation—or evolution and unfolding—not found in his earlier attempts. The entire identity philosophy period is best viewed as a step in Schelling's lifelong project of reworking Spinoza by adding life and spirit to nature.

The darkness of gravity and the radiance of light ... first produce together the beautiful appearance of life and complete it to the point of ... actual reality.

—*Treatise on the Relation of the Real and the Ideal in Nature* (SW II: 369)¹

Some ten years ago Milwaukee Country opened the final segment of the Hank Aaron trail, making it possible to bicycle from the shores of Lake Michigan to those of Lake Mendota, ninety miles inland. On a warm autumn afternoon, the reclaimed railroad bed was crowded with retirees. On one stretch of the trail, large origami cranes (*orizuru*) began to appear on the shrubbery bordering the trail every quarter mile or so. After fifteen cranes, one could finally see the benefactor, a frail man in his mid-eighties, hanging his work. The art that turns flat paper into a three-dimensional structure seemed an apt way to mark the bit of transcendence that the trail represented. Only later did I learn that the red-crowned crane is considered a mediator between the human and spirit worlds in Japanese culture. But why present the origami crane as a symbol of Schelling's later *Naturphilosophie*, itself a construct representing living nature? Both paper and nature are wholes that come to be articulated into dimensions and functions not by division into parts but by imposing structure or pattern upon them: the fold. The symmetry imparted by the fold mimics the organic body in the one case, giving the artifact the ability to mimic flight; in the other case, it suggests the polarity of forces that manifest in nature, and the ultimate unifying nonpolarity—or “null-point of difference”—that holds nature together. Will the paper crane fly? Will it fly us to the world of spirit?

While one can argue that *Naturphilosophie*'s “fold,” the repeating pattern of the *Potenzen*, arose early on in a commonsensical way from the factual dependence of biology upon chemistry and chemistry upon physics, Schelling's endeavor in the identity-philosophy era is to depict nature along the lines of Plato's *Timaeus* as a living totality, self-originating and self-sustaining. Where earlier versions employed static mathematical or geometric models for the ontological *Urgestalt*, in 1804 Schelling switches to a dynamic model of speech or expression to suggest a nature that is powerful, self-caused, self-sustaining—like Spinoza's substance—and self-directed and self-organizing—like Kant's organism. In the decade from 1797 to 1807, Schelling tries to capture this powerful/forceful character of nature by framing its agentless agency in various ways:

¹ F.W.J. Schelling, “Treatise on the Relationship of the Real and the Ideal in Nature, or the Development of the First Principles of the Philosophy of Nature and the Principles of Gravity and Light,” trans. Dale Snow, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2): 245.

- as a hierarchy of forms produced as a negative feedback loop of activity (1799–1800)
- as the identity or indifference of active and produced nature (1801)
- as speaking forth: expression or manifestation (1804–1805)
- and as all three at once: the bond or copula that is the (ontological) position underlying all proposition—the thetic move (1806–1807)

Schelling carefully reworked Spinoza’s *Ethics* for his 1804 lectures on the *System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular*, then distilled the new version into two collections of aphorisms that appeared in the 1805 *Annals of Medical Sciences*. Nature, as in Spinoza’s inclusively disjoined *deus sive natura*, is the subject of both the unpublished and published versions. Alongside *On the Relation of the Ideal and Real in Nature* (1806) and the 1807 oration “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature,” they present a nature more organic or internally articulated than the static versions of 1801/1802.

I can offer but a limited survey of *Naturphilosophie*, although based on its philosophical methodology I think three phases can be distinguished: *genesis* or transcendental deduction (1797–1800), philosophical *construction* (1801–1803), and metamorphosis or *organicism* (1804–1807). In the first, nature’s motion is a function of philosophical narration or the free act of the philosopher. In the second, narration is stilled and nature is viewed as a timeless or synchronic order. In the last, nature itself appears as incessant becoming or change, both in individual potencies and the unifying function of the copula. The evolutionary character of the 1804–1807 texts on nature prefigure some startling features of the 1809 *Investigations on Human Freedom*—its reinterpretation of identity as decision (emergence of consequent from ground), its portrayal of the basis or *Ungrund* as implicit will, and will’s self-affirmation as both nature and spirit (or intelligent self-direction). In bypassing familiar concepts and detailed topics in *Naturphilosophie*, my aim in the following remarks is mainly documentary—to point out new language or the more developed concepts of God and nature that these latter works present.

Nature in the Identity System, 1804–1807

Schelling’s 1804 lectures at Würzburg present his full system—identity metaphysics, *Naturphilosophie*, and philosophy of spirit. Nature gets a threefold treatment: general principles or a metaphysics of nature, then specific considerations of inorganic and organic phenomena. The identity-theory of this version expands the sparse propositions of the 1801 *Presentation* with arguments that frame its transcendental Spinozism with arguments against both causal realism and Fichte’s phenomenal idealism. By “transcendental

Spinozism” I mean a view of nature introduced by an analysis of the conditions of knowing, that makes nature the outcome of *agentless agency*. I use the latter term to cover a range of causal activities that culminate in organism or entelechy. In a *Propädeutic* to the system covering the history of philosophy, Schelling argues that despite his apparent Cartesian dualism, Spinoza stands inside the sphere of transcendental reflection on the possibility of experience, which is where philosophy must take its origin even if it goes on to discuss two distinct orders of phenomena (SW VI: 97–98).²

Schelling published two sets of aphorisms on this system in the 1805 *Jahrbüchern für Medizin als Wissenschaft: Aphorisms Introductory to the Philosophy of Nature*, and *Aphorisms on the Philosophy of Nature*. These treat the core of the lecture’s concerns, *Naturphilosophie* or *natura naturata*, prefaced by a “religious” metaphysics exploring the expressive character of *natura naturans*. The same view that the aphorisms present from a religious perspective finds a naturalistic voice in the 1806 “Treatise on the Relationship of the Real and the Ideal in Nature” and an aesthetic voice in the 1807 oration “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature.” In the former, Schelling explains the self-affirming copula whose affirmation is material nature:

[M]atter expresses no other or lesser bond than that which is in reason, the eternal identity of the infinite with the finite. We recognize in things first of all the pure essentiality itself, that cannot be further explained, but rather explains itself. We see this essentiality, however, never in itself, but rather always and everywhere in a wondrous union with that which could not subsist by itself and is only illuminated by being, without ever being able to become anything essential in its own right. We call this the finite or the form. (SW II: 360)³

Two things are noteworthy in this passage: essentiality or core reality (*Wesen*) is dynamic; and its “speech” or expression in nature is a bond of material and mental factors that mirrors its ontological makeup.

All these versions of identity- and nature- philosophy display two characteristics. The first is Schelling’s robust embrace of metaphysics. The 1801 *Presentation* followed an austere logical path to expounding the core of Spinozism, the duplicity of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, but in 1804 and thereafter Schelling does not hesitate to speak of the absolute as God, and God’s being as the affirmation (or explication) of the two orders. Formerly, explanation invoked the transcendental premise—the identity of knower with the known—to argue to a view of identity as an identity of relative identities,

² Schelling, *Propädeutik der Philosophie*, 97–98.

³ Schelling, “Treatise on the Relationship,” 239–40.

the orders of nature and perception structured by the potencies. Identity-theory was then distinctly conceptual. Now, however, identity was not just a matter of conceptual evidence, but a self-actualizing “position” that is ontically efficacious: dynamic connection, or *affirmation* as the identity of affirming and affirmed. Identity morphs into being: *God is self-affirming affirmation*.⁴

A second hallmark of these versions is the view, premised on an event-ontology or monadology, that nature is pervasively organic—a field of living expressions or an *ecology*. Schelling calls them “monads.” Nature unfolds ecologically as a series of *metamorphoses*, as does philosophy (SW VI: 113).⁵ Though many passages picture a top-down order of God’s affirmation as an unfolding, detailed discussions of the potencies suggest instead nature’s bottom-up or ecological organization. Leibniz’s term “preestablished harmony” seems rather mechanistic, but if we replace engineered design with *ecological integration* we get a processive order of self-arrangement and self-maintenance to model what even Spinoza called the “face of the universe” (SW VI: 109).⁶

Identity Metaphysics in the *System of Philosophy in General*⁷

The 1804 Würzburg lectures on the complete system and nature offer the fullest sketch of identity philosophy, and as the quiet counterpart of that year’s *Philosophy and Religion*, offer a deeper engagement with Spinoza’s *Ethics* than earlier essays that largely focused on the unity of substance or reason. Schelling crafts an account of finite individuals that is faithful both to Spinoza’s own account of attributes and modes and to Jacobi’s interpretive framework that prohibits any causal derivation for them.⁸

⁴ I use “God” and “the absolute” interchangeably, both synonymous with Spinoza’s “God or nature.” There is no suggestion of a personal God in these texts, much less of an existent “Lord of being.”

⁵ Schelling, *Propädeutik der Philosophie*, 113.

⁶ Schelling cites Kant’s remark that Leibniz needs to be understood better than he understood himself. See Schelling, *Propädeutik der Philosophie*, 109.

⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular,” trans. Thomas Pfau, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁸ Norris presents Spinoza as an “existence monist” whose system rides on the principle of sufficient reason, and who can secure the unity of substance in *Ethics* I only at the price of making his subsequent accounts of nature, ideas, affects, and liberation incoherent (underivable by the principle of sufficient reason). Norris draws on Dodd, Žižek, and Pfau to craft an account of Schelling’s view of particularity as nonbeing. See Benjamin Norris, *Schelling and Spinoza: Realism, Idealism, and the Absolute* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022), 123–25.

The key idea of the 1804 identity-metaphysics is “position” or affirmation: the concretion of the copula that is the identity of affirming and affirmed.⁹ Through a process of contemplation, the thinker comes to see identity as affirmation, which manifests as self-affirmation or the affirmation of being vis-à-vis the possibility of nothing. That *thinking’s self-affirmation is being* functions as a modal axiom, like Parmenides’ “being is and cannot not be.” Being comes on the scene with its foil or shadow, nonbeing, initially viewed as possible, just the way in all transcendental philosophy, self-identical reason asserts itself in the face of “reflection” that differentiates subject and predicate. For Schelling, identity is self-generated and self-validated, as Spinoza said substance was. It is self-originating, not produced, i.e., not abstracted from some prior self-identical being.

Let me briefly outline Schelling’s argument, which superficially seems to affirm both horns of a dilemma (I call it the *light and shadow* argument):

- (1) Skeptical analyses of reflection (or subject-centered cognition) refute both realistic views of causal influence and perceptual idealism. Reflection must be abandoned in favor of reason’s presupposition: cognition is the identity of knower and known. (SW VI: 139–40)¹⁰
- (2) Subjective reflection falls away when one *contemplates* identity: reason comes to recognize itself in the self-same. (SW VI: 142–43)¹¹ This is the inverse of the Cartesian *cogito*; “I” come to intuit the I’s nonexistence.
- (3) Only what is known within the law of identity exists in reason; the subject and object posited in reflection are derivative. (SW VI: 145)¹²

From this Schelling concludes that *identity affirms itself* and reason steps into being as the singular item *God* (SW VI: 148).¹³

⁹ Schelling scrupulously avoids using “*Setzen*” or “positing” for the ontological establishing he has in mind here. The English “position” that he borrows carries no note of hypothetical or subjective surmise.

¹⁰ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 142–43. In the detailed considerations of nature that follow, Schelling translates the metaphysical-epistemic standard of identity in knowing as nature’s basic figure of identity-through-change, or *metamorphosis* (SW VI: 299). Matter’s basic action is *metamorphosis*, while its second-potency manifestation is the dynamic process or the interplay of physical forces and chemical processes (SW VI: 321); both plant-propagation and fetal development in animals follow the law of *metamorphosis* (SW VI: 419).

¹¹ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 144.

¹² Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 147.

¹³ “[T]he absolute identity of subject and object can be affirmed *universally* only if the in-itself, the essence of *all* existence, is inherently and autonomously its own affirming and affirmed ... That which absolutely affirms itself and thus is its own affirmed, is only the absolute or

- (4) This affirmation takes expression variously, so if identity is viewed as the sameness of subject and object or concept and being, God is the immediate affirmation not of the idea of being, but of *being itself*.
- (5) If one contemplates this idea of God as self-affirmation, “(t)he *absolute* light, the idea of God, strikes reason like a flash of lightning and ... we recognize the eternal *impossibility of nonbeing* The absolute position of the idea of God is indeed nothing but the *negation* of nothingness.” (SW VI: 155)¹⁴

The term “position” is new to Schelling’s vocabulary; it is the *affirmation-eventing* that replaces Fichte’s positing, a hypothetical supposition of being made from the self-enclosed stance of subjectivity. The potencies follow from the idea of God, or God’s primal self-affirmation, except that in the case of God, being excludes “the nothing” while in the relative orders being and nonbeing contend. Hence, reflection shadows being. Even if in its self-affirmation, reason must say *nothing is not*, its identity is shadowed by reflection’s “What if?” or the abysmal question, “Why not nothing?” Consequently,

- (6) the simultaneous “being and relative nonbeing [*Nichtseyn*] of the particular in the universe constitutes the seed of all finitude.” (SW VI: 170)¹⁵

While reason views the particular’s life as a singular “idea” that mirrors the life of the whole universe, in appearance its being is dispersed over nonbeing (SW VI: 187–88).¹⁶ Earlier versions of *Naturphilosophie* floundered on Spinoza’s apparent acosmism, which viewed nature as both productive and produced but found no causal connection between them. In 1804, reason poses divine self-affirmation in the gap between *natura naturans* and *naturata*. But why should there be a doubling or a gap in the first place? Schelling speaks of a kind of reflection within the absolute, a vision simultaneously contemplative and contemplated, wherein a second lightning strike still illuminates the divine necessity but “leaves behind only the lifeless shape, like a shadow, the pure nothingness of the particular,” but where nonetheless the powerful substance of God is expressed (SW VI: 195–96).¹⁷ I find it intriguing, but not completely logical, that God’s self-expression secures not only its absolute being but the

God God is his own absolute affirmation; this is the only true idea of God” (Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 148. Original emphasis.

¹⁴ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 152.

¹⁵ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 170. Translation altered.

¹⁶ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 175.

¹⁷ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 181–82.

relative being-and-nonbeing introduced in the original question: Why not nothing? Why should the absolute wonder about its parentage and legitimacy—unless, as Schelling begins to explore in 1809, it has a past and faces a future?

Schelling offers two explanations, one Leibnizean in inspiration, the other rehearsing earlier analyses of identity as qualitative indifference overlaid by quantitative variations of subjectivity and objectivity. In the first, creative being manifests in what is affirmed both as affirming and affirmed, so that phenomena are not lifeless but a display of the divine affirmation (SW VI: 204–205).¹⁸ In the second, the potencies are said to express difference—though in each of the phenomenal orders, real and ideal—as a doubled manifestation of the God’s affirmation. As reflections of ectypal being, they express the nonreality (*Nicht-Wesen*) of things, their lack of expressive reality (SW VI: 210–11).¹⁹

Philosophy of Nature in the *System of Philosophy in General*

The initial theorems of the Universal Philosophy of Nature describe the monadological nature of beings, each one an identity of affirming and affirmed as idea, but a difference of those factors in appearances which, consequently, appear as “soul” and “body.” Each particular is ensouled, both expressive and expressed, a *monad* or world unto itself (SW VI: 215–18).^{20;21} In its difference from universal being, it displays its finitude or its distance from it as infinite lack of being—or *extension*. But intuiting its nonbeing vis-à-vis the absolute, it expresses its infinite aspect in the finite as endless negation, the order of *time*. Space and time thus reflect the difference between the universal and particular, while in their mutual reflection they form the basis of space. The bodily aspect is the antithesis of life, degraded and powerless unless it also incorporates the living or affirmative aspect (SW VI: 215–22).²² Inorganic nature is deficiently expressive, a distant reflection of the unity of affirming and affirmed in God.

Schelling turns to optics and to Goethe’s color-theory to explain the ontological mirage. When we view a particular substance, we do not see substance but only substance reflected in the nothingness of particularity; due to “incapacity to receive the divine,” we comprehend absolute identity only as indifference, like perceiving light refracted through a prism or as a rainbow.

¹⁸ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 186–87.

¹⁹ Schelling, “System of Philosophy in General,” 191–92.

²⁰ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie oder Construction der Natur der realen All,” *System des gesamten Philosophie und der Naturphilosophie insbesondere*.

²¹ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

²² Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

Investigated more closely, color is a function of perceptual edges, a bright speck displayed against a dark ground. Things are double-images, ontological illusions (SW VI: 228–30).²³ Similar alternative accounts confront the mechanistic view of matter, mass, rectilinear motion, and gravity. Gravity expresses the relation of mass to infinite substance and so of each body to every other, since each point of filled space is the midpoint and there is no empty space or action at a distance, as Kant had surmised (SW VI: 250–55).²⁴ Freed of connection to distinct regions or entities, gravity is the life of body in the infinite substance or the soul of matter. The motions of bodies in a gravitational system arise from a body’s double nature: *qua* mass, to depend on substance as its ground of reality, but as ensouled, to be a midpoint of the system—with each body relating to every other in reciprocal relationship, and changes of places being *coordinated* rather than caused by external forces. Viewed as the principle of this twofold being, *gravity* is deemed a universal and necessary attribute of substance (SW VI: 258–59).²⁵ Gravity’s counterpart, *light* (*Lichtwesen*), is the ideal principle, since while it is not the ground of motion, it is motion’s immediate being. “In nature ... the one real substance absolutely considered, light and gravity are one” (SW VI: 265).²⁶ Accordingly, light and gravity become general terms for the two fundamental natural principles and their various combinations constitute the frameworks of space and time. Subsequent discussions fall into facile analogies at this distance from concrete phenomena, but we note the prominence of the dyadic concepts of *ground and being* in these discussions in which Schelling rejects linear causality in favor of systematic interdependence.

Schelling prefaces specific treatments of inorganic and organic phenomena with twelve axioms for the metaphysics of nature. They alternate not only between Spinoza’s language of nature as a double expression, both creative and created, of infinite substance, on the one hand, and the new language of God/nature as an identity of affirming and affirmation, on the other; but also with Leibniz’s view of monads as producing and being produced by coordinated perceptions. While (1) from an ontological point of view, things both inhere in infinite substance and appear distinct from it as the ground of their existence, (2) from the viewpoint of physics, the universe is an equilibrium of motion and rest wherein individuals maintain their “identity” as constant ratios of motion and rest; yet (3) from an ideal point of view, the universe is a field of perception-entities adjusted to one another through

²³ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

²⁴ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

²⁵ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

²⁶ Schelling, “Allgemeine Naturphilosophie.”

universal reciprocal perception (SW VI: 278–81).²⁷ Discussing sensibility in the organism, Schelling contends that perception's occurrence in matter is not contingent, but a necessary display of its essence. Matter as matter is already perceptivity or a product of its relations to its environment (SW VI: 432–33).²⁸

God and Nature in the 1805 *Aphorisms*

The 1805 *Aphorisms Introductory to the Philosophy of Nature* and *Aphorisms on the Philosophy of Nature* set the new views of the Würzburg *System* before the public in the same general format—first metaphysics, then metaphysics of nature—but seem guided by the intention to present the Spinozistic view of *deus sive natura* from both sides.²⁹ The metaphysical or “introductory” comments sound four notes: (a) the single nature of God, (b) the sameness and equiprimordiality of nature and spirit, (c) the systematic nature of God/universe depicted in a table (SW VII: 184 n1),³⁰ and (d) a contrast between the absolute (potency 0) vis-à-vis the manifest potencies as *being* and *nonbeing* (SW VII: 196–97).³¹

Space will not permit a look at all themes, but for the first, Schelling puts the unity of God (and God's identity with the universe) in a striking fashion, with the new “affirmation” or “position” vocabulary giving God a narrative voice. “It is impossible to furnish anyone with a description of reason. Reason must describe itself in each one and by means of each one” (SW VII: 146).³² Reason can be satisfied only with itself, never within anything external or relative. It is, therefore, self-affirmation or the indissoluble identity of predicating and predication. “God is the realization [*Position*] of all things, that which in all things is equal to itself” (SW VII: 147).³³ Reason can never step outside God and affirm anything other; it is itself the being of God and is in God; “Reason does not *have* the idea of God, it *is* this idea and nothing else” (SW VII: 149).³⁴ There is no propositional cognition or conceptual knowledge of God, since in reason knower and known disappear as distinct items, as in

²⁷ Schelling, “Specielle Naturphilosophie, oder Construction der einzelne Potenzen der Natur,” *System des gesamten Philosophie*.

²⁸ Schelling, “Specielle Naturphilosophie.”

²⁹ Schelling notes that although he has expanded parts of *Naturphilosophie* and altered others, he stands by the first fifty theorems of the 1801 *Presentation of My System* (SW VII: 141–42); see F.W.J. Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction to Naturephilosophy [Extract],” trans. Fritz Marti, *Idealistic Studies* 14, no. 3 (1984): ¶ 18–21, 246–47.

³⁰ Schelling, *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturephilosophie*.

³¹ “The being of things in God ... is their nonbeing relative to one another, just as conversely their being relative to one another involves their not-being-in-God or their nonbeing relative to God.” Schelling, *Aphorismen zur Einleitung*. Translation mine.

³² Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 31, 248.

³³ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 37, 249. Translation altered.

³⁴ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 48, 250.

the restraint of will or self-forgetfulness that marks perfect morality (SW VII: 150).³⁵ The self-affirmation of God is infinite affirmation and so cannot be broken down into partial concepts like “God as self-affirming” *or* “God as affirmed,” unity *or* totality, acting *or* being. The idea of the absolute is indivisible, hence impervious to every abstraction or conceptual analysis. A circuit through all possible conceptual abstractions may suffice for a partial account of its being, but acting must be included among these, so that these attempts culminate in an absolute self-recognition of unity as totality (SW VII: 151–53).³⁶

With a shift from the absolute’s strict identity to its function as the identity of the subjective and the objective, we arrive at the *Aphorisms*’s second theme, the sameness of identity expressed in the real and ideal orders of potencies. Schelling asserts that God as infinite self-position is a union of predication and predicate, and so equivalent to the unity of the subjective and the objective (SW VII: 147, 153).³⁷ It is difficult to see how the latter follows, unless the subjective and objective are vectors or tendencies to a polar distinction not yet concretized as subjects and objects, since those items do not exist in their own right. Schelling hits upon an illustration for this “distinction which is clear enough in itself yet is not clear for most.” It is a negative illustration however, and suggests at best a relative identity of opposites *in a single point*, when what we require is the idea of an identity of opposites in all points:

The fulcrum of a lever represents the equilibrium of two opposite forces; it is what unites both, but it is not their absolute identity. It is what it is, namely a point of rest, but only in relation to the two forces, not by itself. The forces annul each other in that point, but the point as point is not the *positive nullity* of the two. (SW VII: 154–55)³⁸

With this idea of identity as the *positive nullity of distinguished items* we have Schelling’s core definitions of identity collapsed into a single point: identity, self-affirmation, position, and the nullity of nonbeing vis-à-vis the power of being. The *fulcrum represents the origami fold*: the engineered structure that somewhat represents a crane and permits an impoverished imitation of its flight. The living bird, living nature, is the positive nullity of all the broken formulas Schelling presents and all the broken understandings they evoke in Schelling’s readers. *Positive nullity* is the ultimate formulation for God’s being, of God’s position in every proposition. As self-articulating, it might be

³⁵ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 53–54, 251.

³⁶ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 55–63, 251–53.

³⁷ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 36, 63, 249, 253.

³⁸ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 68, 254.

implicitly pinned to a narrative, an origin story. It seems instead to be *implosive*, the abyss of all stories and representations. Since whatever is necessary is in God and nothing that is impossible, nothing can happen in God or evolve from God. There is no agency in God, nor any inclination. God does not come to be inside God’s self-knowing. Lacking any outside, there is no access to or departure from God. True knowledge of God is solely contemplative, literally speculative, vision (SW VII: 157–59).³⁹

The account of God in the *Aphorisms Introductory* is brief and conceptually deflationary, but this contractive vision is balanced by the expansive account of nature that follows. It considers first the metaphysics of finitude, or created nature, as an expression of creative nature; and then considers the metaphysics of infinitude. In the first perspective, finite beings appear as material, but must be accounted as ensouled, or at least produced. The latter perspective considers the finite body in terms of motion, connection, freedom, or infinitude; it is said to depict the “dissolution of gravity into the life circuit [*Lebenswechsel*] of all of nature” or its identity with the all-copula (SW VII: 229 n2).⁴⁰ While the overall structure of the potencies in nature is clear—the first being universal *metamorphosis* in nature, the second dynamic life, then organic life as the full expression of inner and outer life (SW VII: 244)⁴¹—the exposition is complicated by Schelling’s alteration between Platonic and Spinozist vocabularies as well as the introduction of theosophical vocabulary from Jakob Böhme; Schelling uses “*Temperature*” meaning the harmony of the seven original sensory qualities or motions for his own “*Indifferenz*” or “positive nullity.”⁴²

³⁹ Schelling, “Aphorisms as an Introduction,” ¶ 76–80, 256–57. James Dodd comes close to stating this in “Expression in Schelling’s Early Philosophy,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 27, no. 2, 109–30. Expression, connoting both *explication* and *involvement*, may characterize Spinoza’s attributes and modes, which are neither existents nor products but inhere in God as Idea or counter-image. God as reason is negative, the abyss of particularity.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie. Der Naturphilosophie erster oder allgemeiner Theil* (1805).

⁴¹ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*.

⁴² Böhme derived his theory of the seven properties or motions from Paracelsus: desire, pain, anxiety, light, warmth, sound, and substance or nature. Their “temperature” is said to be the divine harmony or *Ungrund*. <http://jacobboehmeonline.com/lexicon7.215210906.pdf>, 52, 42–45.

Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie’s contrast between the light (*τὸν ὄντος*, *das Seyendes*) and the darkness (*τὸν μὴ ὄντος*, *das Nichtseyenden*) and its talk of “the birth of things” as essence’s drive toward self-affirmation also reflect Böhme’s influence. See *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* III–V (SW II: 198–99) and XVI–XXI (SW VII: 201).

While Schelling typically speaks of God’s expression as “affirmation” (“*Affirmation*”), at the beginning of *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, he employs quasi-theistic language such as “existence’s desire to reveal itself” (“*Lust ... sich selbst zu offenbaren*”), the copula’s way of “[simultaneously] containing itself and affirming itself” (“*sich selbst in sich selbst habe und*

As Schelling explains it, there is only one existence, one *Position*, in the multitudes of finite bodies. Their being involves that of all in each and each in all. Through the divine in-forming or the “divine temperature,” all are co-present and express one another, even though each, as Spinoza says, appears to be determined by a previous one (SW VII: 200, 203).⁴³ The divine or creative nature abides in itself, eternally free or expressive just because in its finite expressions its creative light is translated into a dark web of interrelations—since each finite entity exists only insofar as it expresses multitudes (SW VII: 206, 207).⁴⁴ Nature displays itself not in individual things but in a seemingly “divine chaos”: the elements develop into plants, plants into animals and higher animals, life into stars, the stars into the cosmos; everything lower also pertains to the existence of a higher, and the latter to the existence of the “one-and-infinitely perfect” (SW VII: 211).⁴⁵

What changes has Schelling introduced into identity philosophy in 1804/1805? The 1801 definition of the absolute as the identity of *Wesen* and *Form*—altered in 1802 to “identity of identity and difference” and “idea” or the inscription of the infinite in the finite—gives way to extensive analyses of the complex nature of *Wesen* or core reality and its “expression.” A new ontological map locates both the absolute and the relative in the space of possibility and makes *being* a continuous overcoming of the possibility of nothing. The absolute makes its own being or secures its being against the possibility of nothingness. On the side of form or expression, the absolute is a creative disclosure of an inter-involvement of being and not-being—the infinite and the finite, or the ideal and real. Unlike the static, tabular character of earlier versions, the new Spinozism of 1804/05 finds incipient activity in God’s nature and expression of that activity as the core of nature.

Creative Being (*Wesen*) and Bond (*das Band*) in Nature, 1806–1807

Schelling penned the essay “On the Relation of the Real and the Ideal in Nature, or Development of the First Principles of Nature Philosophy from the Principles of Gravity and Light” in 1806 as a preface to a new edition of the 1798 *On the World-Soul, A Hypothesis of Higher Physics to Explain Universal Organism*. Its brief propositions are offered as a syllabus for further study and

bejährt); and “all existence is but the self-disclosure of a dynamic essential nature” (“*alle Existenz ist nur Selbstoffenbarung einer wesentlichen Natur*”). See *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* V–VIII (SW VII: 199). Schelling is clear that “self-disclosure” happens by necessity, not by arbitrary choice or decision. Böhme does not yet eclipse Spinoza.

⁴³ *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* XII, XXVII.

⁴⁴ *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* XXXVI and XLV.

⁴⁵ *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* LXII and LXIII.

to underscore the similarity of its philosophical organicism to the empirical theories of the Hungarian chemist Jakob Josef Winterl, who made the bond between acid and alkali the core structure of all elements (SW II: 352–53).⁴⁶ Except for its brevity and its references to Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Philebus* and to Goethe’s color theory, its content is largely the same as that of the second section of the 1804 *Complete System*, Universal Philosophy of Nature. The 1807 academy oration *On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature* uses themes from the 1804/05 essays on God and nature to argue that art must harness nature’s expressive vitality if it is to be genuine and to explain the double nature of *bildende Kunst*, ancient sculpture that embodies the principle of gravity and modern European painting the principle of light. The difference between these essays in “applied” *Naturphilosophie* and their more theoretical kin is more a matter of emphasis than content. Matter is not a defective ectype of the absolute, since “Nature is not merely the product of an inconceivable creation, but it is this creation itself” (SW II: 378).⁴⁷ The artwork is a second creation from nature’s basic energy, birthed in the depths of nature, growing into spiritual infinity and finally achieving grace and soul (SW VII: 322–23).⁴⁸ The salient difference is that individual items of appearance are no longer regarded as contaminated mixtures of being and not-being, but as tighter bonds of real and ideal energies than nature as such demonstrates; their development traces an arc of increasing freedom and ontological richness (SW VII: 303; SW II: 372–73).⁴⁹ Perhaps one can say that Schelling has dropped the “*sive*” from his double-sided consideration of God and nature in 1804/05 and now considers nature to be the entire field of being, but *this* nature is material only in its initial manifestation and endowed with will or self-developmental telos. “The Absolute is, however, not only a willing of itself, but rather a willing in infinite ways, that is in all forms, grades, and potencies of reality” (SW II: 362).⁵⁰

The metaphysics of the essay on the real and the ideal in Nature is a simplified version of the 1804 *Complete System*, with the interplay of being and not-being muted and the active or self-expressive character of nature

⁴⁶ Preface to the Second Edition, *On the World-Soul*. See H. A. M. Snelders, “The Influence of the Dualistic System of Jakob Josef Winterl (1732–1809) on The German Romantic Era,” *Isis* 61, no. 2: 231–40.

⁴⁷ Schelling, “Treatise on the Relationship,” 250.

⁴⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature,” trans. Jason M. Wirth, *Kabiri* 3 (2021): 154–55. This remark anticipates the developmental cosmogeny and psychology of *Human Freedom* (1809) and the *Stuttgart Seminars* (1810).

⁴⁹ “When art presents the being (*Wesen*) in that moment, it lifts it out of time. Art lets it appear in its pure being (*Sein*), in the eternity of its life” (Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 141); “The absolute copula of gravity and light is productive and creative nature itself ... From this springs all that we think of in connection with the idea of the reality of existence” (Schelling, “Treatise on the Relationship,” 247).

⁵⁰ Schelling, “Treatise on the Relationship,” 241.

emphasized. Schelling is no longer interested in Spinoza's complicated view of the double existence of the finitude mode, as idea in God and as the constrained power of striving inside the attributes. The absolute as bond or copula projects itself upon the screen of otherness, manifests a multitude of interrelated beings and so immediately displays the Böhmean "birth of things in God."

The bond's expressive nature is its infinite self-love, pleasure in self-disclosure, self-affirmation ("sich-selbst-Bejahen") or simply willing itself ("sich-selbst-Wollen"). Corresponding to its infinite expression is the bonded's nature as impression or ectype. The absolute therefore functions as unity in totality or connection in being-connected (SW II: 362–63).⁵¹ As the active ground of being ("das Wesende"), it both individuates and connects its manifestations, establishing the being of individuals, their limitations and their transient character. Each individual is the center of centerless space, its own reality, but only in relation to others. In their not-in-itself character, things annihilate space, produce the form of transience, time; and both forms of finitude stand in contrast to the absolute's eternity. "Therefore, the situation where the former (the bound, *qua* bound) expands beyond the eternal (or the bond) is a mere accident and limited in time" (SW II: 364).⁵² Schelling compares this to a point entering (or extending itself into) a line. The principle of gravity serves, therefore, both to establish and abolish individual being, but the alteration of the two shows up again in the organism, where but a knife edge can separate extreme liveliness and perishing (SW II: 367).⁵³

If gravity establishes finite individuals as limited and transient, light-essence establishes their unity, reality, necessity, and truth. Where gravity establishes the individual as the all-in-one, light-essence or the one-in-all dissolves them back into the one. The term light-essence might seem odd, but perhaps it can convey something like the ancients' notion of ether or *world-soul*. "The darkness of gravity and the radiance of light are that which first produce together the beautiful appearance of life" (SW II: 369).⁵⁴ Schelling's remark recapitulates the three main potencies of nature: gravity, light, and organism. In the last, what might appear to be the one unbroken line of the producing and perishing of things turns back upon itself and persists as the chain of life wherein each component is necessary for the whole, and none can undergo any alteration of this relationship without showing some sign of life or sensitivity (SW II: 373).⁵⁵ Nature as a whole betrays this same interplay of

⁵¹ Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship," 241.

⁵² Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship," 242.

⁵³ Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship," 243.

⁵⁴ Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship," 245.

⁵⁵ Schelling, "Treatise on the Relationship," 247.

conditioning and conditioned function, and so displays a plentitude of forms—an ecosystem of ecosystems.

The 1807 oration “On the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature” is more accessible than the laconic 1806 essay on the real and ideal, though the metaphysics (of bond and expressive being) they share serves more as a critical canon for the analysis of sculpture and painting in ancient and modern European cultures than as an explicit focus. Schelling’s speech foregrounds the achievements and critical lapses of Johann Joachim Winkelmann’s 1764 *History of Ancient Art*, adapting his four-phase schema of the rise and fall of Hellenic art—especially the middle two, “high” and “sensuous” art—to draw a distinction between “sublime beauty” and “grace.” But if he accepts Winkelmann’s historiography, he rejects his formalistic aesthetics that decreed that artists must return to ancient models and start from imitation of natural forms. “The magic circle is drawn, but the spirit that should be apprehended within it does not appear. The spirit does not acquiesce to the call of the one who holds that creation is only possible through mere form” (SW VII: 296).⁵⁶ For Schelling, the day’s artists find access to the expressive power of nature blocked, even if their aim is imitation, and collectors and critics instead generally turn their gaze to soul and the moral-aesthetic power of grace (SW VII: 292).⁵⁷

For too long, artists’ vision of nature and its power have been blurred by crude, materialistic, and distorted “naturalisms” that counsel aesthetic distance or abstraction from nature, or brutal wallowing in the ugly instead of a spontaneous immersion in nature’s energetic production. “The determination of form in nature is never a negation, but rather always an affirmation” (SW VII: 303).⁵⁸ Form conveys the energy of expressive being, not its restriction—so that expressive being seizes the finite moment or form and lifts it into its proper or eternal state.

Most of the oration’s lengthy text is dedicated to the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, and to the strange aesthetic classification of “plastic art” (*bildende Kunst*), which encompasses both sculpture and figurative painting. Greek sculpture directly embodies the natural principle of gravity that contracts the universe to a single point, abstracts from individuating detail, puts space under severe restriction, and produces an impression of solemnity or austerity (SW VII: 307–8).⁵⁹ In contrast, modern painting has adopted the universalizing style of the *Lichtwesen*—painting details of figure and historical subjects, incorporating feeling, and above all, in the spirit of *grace*, harmonizing the impulses of beauty and morality.

⁵⁶ Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 137.

⁵⁷ Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 134.

⁵⁸ Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 131.

⁵⁹ Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 143–45.

“We have seen,” concludes Schelling, “how the artwork emerges as if from the depths of nature, growing up with determination and limitation, and unfolding inner infinity and fullness, until it finally transfigures into grace and then ultimately attains soul” (SW VII: 322–23).⁶⁰ Art travels the same evolutionary path as the birth of freedom from nature that will be depicted in the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations* and the human psyche in the 1810 *Stuttgart Seminars*.

Conclusions

From 1797–1807, the project of *Naturphilosophie* did not change: to portray natural phenomena and their theoretical foundations in a nonmaterialistic framework also suited to explain consciousness, its biological basis, and its personal and social forms. Methodologically it derives its premises from Kant’s transcendental questioning, asking after the conditions for cognition, granted that we have *some* secure knowledge. Aiming for theoretical parsimony, it adopts the core of Spinoza’s metaphysics as its explanatory structure, i.e., the separate but complementary orders of creative nature and created nature, linked in a minimal story of “agentless-agency.” I argue that one could aptly call Schelling a “transcendental Spinozist.” Schelling’s deductions are sprinkled with arguments against empiricism, random experiment, and mechanistic physics; though we may regard them today as misguided asides, they seem integral to his argument.

I have summarily distinguished three phases in Schelling’s career as nature-theorist: In the initial phase, *Genesis*, or deduction from Fichtean premises of continuous alteration between action and inhibition, yields a hierarchy of increasingly complex forms. But since it collapses *explanans* (arithmetic structure) and *explanandum* (phenomena), the evolving order that the deduction discovers in nature comes from the side of its arbitrary origin, transcendental *narration*. In a second phase, Schelling claims he can extricate abstract theory-making from an anthropocentric basis and find a purely logical starting-point, a metaphysics of identity that displays a single structure: difference as a modification of indifference. The result is a tabular depiction of phenomena that eliminates activity and subjects nature’s organic teleology to two-dimensional depiction. *Construction* can anatomize nature but it results in a skeleton. In the third phase, which we have closely followed, Schelling restores life to nature by articulating a metaphysics of expression in which the absolute or God is reconfigured as the *copula* or *Band* joining objective and psychic orders; the “position” of being inside the proposition; or God’s self-affirmation as affirming and affirmed. These expressions suggest a pre-

⁶⁰ Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts,” 154–55.

subjective, pre-intentional, but self-referential movement probably best conveyed by the Leibnizean term *entelechy*. I call this third phase *Organicism*. Its three-part metaphysics—wherein *Wesen* or dynamic being is the indwelling basis of both nature and spirit—endures even as the story of onto- and theogenesis becomes more complicated in 1809 and philosophical interest shifts to the origin of agency as such.