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The Anguish of Nature

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Nature and the will to life is a topic of utmost urgency in times such as ours, times of 'planetary violence' against all forms of life: human and non-human life, natural and moral life, material and spiritual life, organic and the inorganic life; against the earth and even against the heavens. Planetary violence today knows no limits. At its core is the destruction of all limits and measures. Hubris is too kind, and even naïve, a word for addressing the vertiginous destruction of limits and measures in our times. The destruction is accomplished at a velocity and with an intensity that rivals volcanic eruptions. Indeed, fire burns everywhere: bombs, explosions; the heat of wars, devastations, invasions, occupations. Everywhere it is possible to hear 'a loud naked cry of Enough', to use the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) in the novel *Petroleum*.[1] Everywhere, an 'infinite scream (is) passing through nature!', to recall the words of Edvard Munch of his famous painting, *The Scream*. It is, in fact, uncanny to confirm that everywhere, the cybermachinery of the world makes the world more and more violently deaf to its own screams.

In the realm of the present issue on 'Nature and the Will to Life', I aim to contribute by departing from the hermeneutical situation in which this topic is addressed as an appeal to the responsibility of thought, and of a thought of responsibility for the scream of the world. Specifically, I try to show how Friedrich Schelling's philosophy leaves behind an organic view of nature despite the language of organism in his writings, and opens up for an experience of the anguish of nature which contributes, on a theoretical

1 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio*, trans. Ann Goldstein, New York: Pantheon, 1997.

level, to the recognition of responsibility before the screams of the world, as it lays the groundwork for a critique of organistic views on the relation between man and nature.[2]

The expression 'will to life' keeps awakening one of the central problems related to modern concepts of nature, namely the limit which unites and separates human life and natural life, the human rational technical and the natural. For centuries, 'will', in the sense of intentionality and purposiveness, has been conceived of as the human second nature *par excellence*. It is because of her willing capacity, and hence her capacity to deal with the future in a certain manner – in the manner of preparing and advancing oneself towards what is not yet here, towards what does not exist but might exist – that Modernity determined the human being as the abyssal separation from and opposition to nature. For centuries of Western culture and civilization, the will has defined not only 'human' nature, but the human as non-nature, as opposed to and separated from nature. The opposition between man and nature has been known since the ancients as the opposition between discursive, philosophical rationality and nature, between technique and nature. Reason versus nature, technique versus nature: these are key oppositions in ancient views. Modernity enhances it by means of the concept of the will, a concept inherited from Christianity, upon which the notion of subjectivity is grounded. Will, self-determination, self-reflection, autonomy, freedom: these modern intertwined notions, concepts, and feelings acknowledge freedom of the will as will to freedom, as capacity to act according to purposes set solely by reason, according to ends defined entirely by human understanding, according to a self-posited, self-defined, self-determined consciousness, which defines the modern meaning of subjectivity and its modern metaphysics. The human being is hence considered as the only subject in nature; the only nature capable of thinking and acting according to purposes, since reason is understood mainly from a teleological standpoint, as a rationality based on causality, and a causality justified and legitimised solely by itself.[3] The central role of the will in the modern definition of human nature explains why it is not enough to be capable of

2 A lot has been written about Schelling's organistic view of nature and about romantic organicism. See for instance Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012; Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism. From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Less discussed is however how Schelling's view on organism challenges rather than corroborates romantic conceptions of organic life. For a discussion about how romantic organicism contributes to contemporaneous thoughts on automation see Yuk Hui, 'Philosophy after Automation?', *Philosophy Today* 2 (2021), 217–233.

3 From a teleological standpoint, rationality is defined in terms of causality insofar as it is viewed as a movement from a cause or original (*archê*), to a finality or goal (*telos*).

technical rationality, to be the homo *technicus* in the middle of nature. Bees are also technical – and Plato and many other ancient philosophers were very aware of it. Human beings produce machines, but machines are not – at least not thus far – willing beings in the same sense as natural beings. No wonder human nature has been put in opposition to both animals and machines with the same gesture that has identified animals with machines.

Romanticism has challenged these traditional views and questioned the mechanistic separation of humans from animals and machines. With the rise of the Industrial Revolution and capitalistic modes of production, the Romantics, relying on Kant, developed an organic view of nature, aiming to reintegrate human nature into the whole of *nature* by means of art and the spirit, differentiating art and technique – opposing, above all, the modern opposition between human life and natural life. Moreover, the notion of organism as developed by romantic and idealistic philosophers aimed to challenge modern scientific views of nature deeply indebted to mechanism. It is a typical modern view, shared both by modern philosophers and scientists, that both nature and technique are deprived of subjectivity, of inner purposiveness and will. The modern concept of organism shakes this dogma, deeply rooted in the western conviction about the unique, exclusive, and outstanding place of human nature in the whole of nature.

According to Kant's philosophical definition, an organism is 'what through itself is cause and effect of itself'.[4] An organism is what forms itself by itself and not merely what moves itself by itself; it is more than pure self-motion. An organism is what forms and produces itself by itself in such a way that its parts are reciprocally dependent on each other and on the whole. A tree produces another tree: thereby, it reproduces itself as tree at the same time as it produces a new individual and unique tree. As such, the organism reveals the living identity of sameness and otherness. Kant recognises, in the second part of the Third Critique, that as organism, nature acts as if it were a subject, as if it had a self-determined will, as if it had subjective purposiveness to produce its products in the – for us unforeseen – ways that it does. The 'as if' does not deny nature's subjectivity but acknowledges that insofar as nature is the 'other' of the human – that is, the non-human – human understanding is uncapable of seizing nature's subjective purposiveness; it can only seize nature as if it acted as the human does, namely purposively, teleologically.[5]

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer & Erich Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, §64, 243.

5 This Kantian view is connected to the way Kant redefines the concept of *Bildungstrieb* in Blumenbach. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 292.

With the exception, perhaps, of Novalis, Schelling's revolutionary views on organic nature are unique in admitting a subjectivity and a will in nature – a view that many of his contemporaries and posterior commentators associate with mysticism, paranormality, animism, and exoteric practices of spiritism. Today, Schelling's recognition of subjectivity in nature has gained a newfound relevance. In 2008, Ecuador adopted a new constitution and became the first country in the world, followed by Bolivia, to adopt a set of codified Rights of Nature. Articles 10 and 71–74 of the constitution recognize the inalienable rights of ecosystems to exist and flourish, give people authority on behalf of nature, and require the government to remedy violations of these rights. Nature, or *Pachamama* in the Quechua language, is here recognized as a subject of rights.[6]

It is remarkable, albeit rarely considered, that romantic views on the organism are deeply intertwined with the capitalistic notion of *organization*; romantic and idealistic views of processual nature share the language of juridic and bureaucratic processes, as Kafka has masterly unveiled.[7] Furthermore, the vocabulary of production contaminates romantic aesthetics and the artistic understanding of *poiesis*, the making. As Kant observes in a footnote to the *The Critique of the Power of Judgment,* natural organisms and political organization are correlated by means of analogy.[8] If, to a certain extent, it seems that we are approaching today a more Schellingian view on nature's subjectivity – herein finding the conceptual resources to problematize the centrality and supremacy of human nature in the whole of nature – this view cannot be dissociated from another view: namely, what emerges in our time as a revolutionary view of the machine. Intelligent and recursive machines, AI, are increasingly blurring the distinction between human nature and the machines. As Gilbert Simondon points out, technological devices are becoming organic and natural objects.[9] Intelligent machines

6 Nature, mother earth, is called *Pachamama* in Quechua, also meaning earth, life, harvest, farming, crops, or fertility.

7 See for instance Kafka's novels *The Castle* or *The Trial* in: *The Collected Novels of Franz Kafka*, London: Penguin, 1988.

8 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 246–247: 'One can, conversely, illuminate a certain association, though one that is encountered more in the idea than in reality, by means of an analogy with the immediate ends of nature that have been mentioned. Thus, in the case of a recently undertaken fundamental transformation of a great people into a state, the word organization has frequently been quite appropriately used for the institution of the magistracies, etc., and even of the entire body politic. For in such a whole each member should certainly be not merely a means, but at the same time also an end, and, insofar as it contributes to the possibility of the whole, its position and function should also be determined by the idea of the whole.'

9 See amongst other books by Gilbert Simondon, *Information, Technology and Media*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016.

strive to become more and more like natural objects to a point that it would be possible to recognize in them a kind of will to life which could be shared with organic beings.[10] The development of recursive machines is driven by the incentive to enable them to act according to their own will. Technical objects are becoming more and more subjects. What has previously been designated as non-human – animal nature and technique – appears today as willing subjects. It is on the basis of the concept of organism and organic nature that the limits between human life and natural-animal life, as much as between nature and technique, are blurred.

In light of these general observations regarding how artificial intelligence and recursive machines become more and more organic, it is important to ask whether the concepts of organism, organic nature, and life are really capable of providing an ethical-political response or alternative to the threats of destruction enacted by the cyberworld, if it is the organicity of these machines that destroys the very sense of the organicity of the life of nature. We could even ask if Schelling's philosophy of nature and Hans Jonas' philosophical biology have something to contribute at all, as we face the destructive power of the blurring of the limit between human and natural life accomplished in our cyberworld. In fact, we are facing here difficult aporias and ambiguities: it is the very opposition between human life and natural life, between human and nature, that is blurred when machine intelligence becomes more and more organic. The entropic character of this ambiguity is clear when considering, for example, the compelling view that only human actions can save nature, knowing that nature has been destroyed precisely by human actions.

What our hermeneutical situation shows is that every attempt to think a sort of 'political naturalism' (which might, in Heideggerian terms, argue that 'only nature can save us' – or 'God', *natura sive deus*) should depart from the aporia resulting from the blurring of the limit between nature and technique, through the limit imposed by this opposition. Indeed, the blurring of the limit that unites and separates human life/nature and natural life/nature reveals the ambiguous path of the present: on the one hand, the need to blur this limit for the sake of experiencing the belonging together of man and nature; on the other, the need to set a limit by which nature can find the right to belong to itself, and human existence can learn from what it is not, can learn to exist beyond itself, despite itself, and thereby to coexist.

10 See the special issue on 'Philosophy after Automation' in *Philosophy Today* 2 (2021), guest editor Yuk Hui.

The question that seems crucial is, hence, that of the *belonging* of human life to natural life. It is the question about the very limit, understood as the line which unites and separates at the same time human life from natural life, a line that in fact remains continuously being drawn. For this purpose, a thinking dialogue with Schelling's philosophy can bring, if not clarity, perhaps some clairvoyance.

Schelling's philosophy of nature was, as already mentioned, quite revolutionary, because he admitted subjectivity in nature. Considering that nature has a will, has subjective purposiveness, Schelling rethinks the relation of identity and difference between nature and humans, between life and human life, in a very challenging way. Human life is and is not life; it is the whole life not being the whole life. The question that arises, then, is why and how human life separates from nature, or why despite 'naturally' belonging to nature, humans separate from nature to such a degree that the human opposes nature, building a realm of interiority, extracted from nature, which becomes, for humans, pure exteriority? Sameness and otherness, interiority and exteriority: these are all concepts that arise from this abyssal separation. Schelling rethinks and even leaves behind the concept of organism, which is indeed a concept of the vital force, of the life of nature, rather than of the nature of life. The mystery of the life of nature remains for Schelling the rise or emergency of singularity, which is for him the emergence of lines of limit, of lines of finitude from out of infinite life. Leibniz' metaphysical question: 'why is there something and not nothing?'[11] is rephrased in Schelling's thought into 'why is there *this* something and not nothing?', *this* something that could not be otherwise? Because Schelling thinks of singularity as limit and finitude emerging from unlimitedness and infinitude, and this emergence as the very life of nature and the nature of life. He does not rely in dialectics; there is, in fact, no opposition between finitude and infinitude, limit and unlimitedness, there is merely a *belonging* together which Schelling thinks of rather in terms of rhythm and pulsation, one being already the other, a kind of non-otherness; *non-aliud* to use a concept from Nicolaus of Cusa. Rather than speaking of organic belonging, it would be more appropriate, despite Schelling's romantic language of organism, to speak of a pulsative and rhythmic belonging. In this rhythmical and pulsative sense of emergence, what emerges is not something 'formed' within a linear development or process, but itself a 'forming', a trembling line, a whirlpool.[12] As an extension of the organicist idea of a living relation

11 G. W. Leibniz, 'Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison', § 7, *Œuvres choisies*, ed. Lucie Prenant, Paris: Garnier, 1940, 320; G. W. Leibniz, *Vernunftprinzipien der Natur und der Gnade: Monadologie*, Hamburg: Felix Mainer, 1960.

12 I thank Krystof Kasprzak for insightfully drawing attention to the importance of

between parts and a whole, when both the parts and the whole are 'alive' (meaning, forming themselves both in relation to all other parts and to the whole in vivid reciprocity), views anchored in Kant's definition, Schelling, adding to Kant a Fichtean and Spinozist perspective, inaugurates in romantic philosophy the viewpoint of the forming as whirlpool and restlessness. With another expression, he refers to this forming *while* forming as anguish or anxiety, the anguish or anxiety of life.

The expression 'anguish of life', *Angst des Lebens*, is an expression used by Schelling in the *Freedom Essay*.[13] There, he says that it is 'the anguish [fear] of life which drives man out of the centrum into which he was created'. The genitive formulation, *Angst des Lebens*, anguish 'of' life, implicates both the anguish before life and the anguish felt and experienced by life itself. To say that life is anguished, would that be a mere metaphor, a matter of speech, a figure of thought? For Schelling, not at all. Life, immemorial life, anguishes. It is not about fear, which some translations of this passage have proposed. Here the distinction made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* between anguish and fear should be kept in mind. It is about anguish, understood as becoming narrow, as straightness and tightness. Anguished, tight, narrow life: this means breathless life. This means life without spirit. The becoming narrow of immemorial life belongs to it. It is indeed the way immemorial life remains infinite and immemorial; thus, according to Schelling's philosophy of nature, expansive propagation. Immemorial life is the movement that passes through everything, being nothing, nothing that could not be otherwise. Indeed, it is the narrowness which enables the open infinity of immemorial life to become not only *something* but *this* something. 'Something' is the narrowing of the openness of a becoming: it is the tightness of the finite determination of infinite indetermination, the finite product of infinite production. Ocean reducing into straits and throats: constriction and, as rivers swim towards oceans, expansion. Infinite immemorial life lives in a way that it must narrow itself for the sake of becoming *this* individual, particular, singular, for becoming finite lives. It is by narrowing itself into infinite finite lives that infinite life infinitizes itself.

In the passage on the 'anguish of life' in the *Freedom Essay* here referred to, the word anguish does not, however, solely designate the 'organic' rela-

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the figure of the whirlpool in Schelling's philosophy of nature, as the figure of what emerges. Hence, not a formed form but rather a forming as a whirlpool. See F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson, New York: State University of New York, 2004, 18.

13 F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, New York: State University of New York, 2006, 47. The translators preferred 'fear' over anguish to say the German angst. I insist that anguish or anxiety are better translations.

tion between the infinite productivity of nature and the infinite finite products of nature. The anguish of life is for Schelling the driving force which expulses man from the centrum of creation, the driving force of human eccentricity. Human life is a product of nature's infinite productivity, but a product that is driven out of the circle of infinite life, becoming apart, exiled from the life of nature and the nature of life. Human finite life is eccentric, it is ex-sistence, a kind of second nature, a second life or, to recall an old expression by Aristotle, a life-room of its own. In the biological terminology inaugurated in the 18th century, it is a form of 'epigenesis', mutation, and not only transformation. As mutated life, human finite existence exists as 'anguish of life' expanding and propagating everywhere. In this sense it is in fact not a 'product', but a trembling line. Alexander von Humboldt, the famous scientific explorer and natural philosopher, deeply influenced by Schelling's dynamic account of nature, wrote once that 'the world is perfect anywhere/if human anguish has not entered there'.[14] Driving man out of the centre of creation, the anguish of life becomes a life of its own, becomes a life in anguish, the shaking lines of a whirlpool. What could be called 'Schelling's existentialism' is not about throwing existential categories over natural life or the other way around, but rather about the difficult question of the birth or becoming of consciousness in the world of nature, about the emergence of a form of life capable of abandoning life, of exceeding and destroying it, of living without life and de-naturating nature, aiming to destroy creation through the creation of so many forms of destruction, therefore existing as thrown in openness, as trembling line, as a drawing.

For Schelling, the 'anguish of life', life's infinite finitization, has human finite existence as its scene. Anguish is a vibrating vestige of the whole of nature in human nature, indeed the vestige of how the whole, understood as a process of infinitization, remains or rests vividly in finitude: human existence, says Schelling, is the 'veil of melancholy that is spread over all nature, the deep indestructible melancholy of all life';[15] a rest or remnant of the infinite pulsating in finite existence.

Infinite has for Schelling the verbal meaning of infinitization, as defined in the *Erlanger Vorlesungen* from 1821/22, with the formulation 'which goes through all things and is nothing, namely, to be nothing such that it could always be otherwise'.[16] In this sense, it is spirit, the breath of life, passing and

14 Alexander von Humboldt, *Views of Nature*, paperback ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

15 The translator used 'dejection' for melancholy, but in Schelling's original we read Schwermut: 'der Schleier der Schwermut, der über die ganze Natur ausgebreitet ist, die tiefe unzerstörliche Melancholie alles Lebens'. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 62–63.

16 Originally 'durch alles durchgehen und nichts seyn, nämlich nichts so seyn, daß

circulating transitively, everything, everywhere. The bond of spiritual infinity and material finitude is a huge theme not only in Schelling's philosophical thought but in all romantic and idealistic philosophies. In the beautiful dialogue *Clara*, written during 1810–11,[17] Schelling challenges the common way of thinking, since the dialogue is not only about the bond between nature and spirit, but about the bond, tie, ribbon, between nature and the world of spirits in plural. In this dialogue, which is also a dialogue about what constitutes a philosophical dialogue, a dialogue which is also a critique of the artificiality of philosophical language, Schelling relays, through Clara, a history of the philosophical loss of the bond to nature when in Modernity metaphysics turns into hyperphysics when nature is rendered as an object for appropriation – both economic-politically (for instance, in John Locke's philosophical writings on private property) and scientifically – and when, facing modern man's hatred and fear of nature, philosophy, due to this horror, becomes a 'void space', dissolved in pure subjectivity, a bodyless and de-naturated philosophy. The dialogue reflects on how the denaturation of nature is connected to understanding nature as mere productive force, and the spirit, *qua* human existence, as bodyless subjectivity, disembodied consciousness, detached from the sensual world. That is what made possible that 'today', recalling the beginning of the dialogue, 'the true ruins are not those of ancient human splendor that the curious seek out in the Persian or Indian deserts; the whole Earth is One great ruin, where animals live as ghosts and men as spirits and where many hidden powers and treasures are locked away as if by an invisible strength or by a magician's spell'.[18] *Clara* sets out a path from the understanding of nature as hyperphysis – pure exterior object of appropriation – to an understanding of how nature is in the spirits, in the plurality of spirits, which includes disembodied lives. There is a doubleness of meaning to the word spirit in the dialogue. On the one hand, it denotes disembodied modern human existence: walking in the large ruin of the earth, sharing this ruin with the ghosts of animals and of animality. On the other hand, the spirits are the dead, those who have left the world, witnessing in their absence the transitivity and transitiveness of life. These two extremes of the spirit – the unmeasured appropriation of nature (which denaturates it) and the measure of detachment of life and of the body which renders life more alive, when assuming its infinite finitude (life as a passing through everything which is nothing, nothing that could not be otherwise)

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es nicht auch anders seyn könnte'. F. W. J. Schelling, *Initia Philosophiae Universae: Erlanger Vorlesung WS 1820/1821*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1969, 10.

17 F. W. J. Schelling, *Clara or, on Nature's Connection with the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp, New York: State University of New York, 2002.

18 Schelling, *Clara*, 43.

– these two extremes add a sense of *not being* which, far from negation or lack, turns the philosophical attention towards the 'there is being'. In other words, it turns the philosophical attention to the *daß* of Being, to *quoddity* (away from what something is, from *quiddity*) and thereby to another sense of temporality, in the attempt to seize the forming *while* forming, the happening *while* happening.

In *Clara*, we can read that '… any knowledge that doesn't develop purely from what is present and real is one that is superficial and that has to lead to fanciful imagination and error'.[19] *Clara*, a dialogue about clairvoyance into the deep mystery of afterlife, which dares to speak of spirits in the plural, of invisibilities, traces, and vestiges, of the nocturnal realm of death and disappearance, assumes as its starting point the urgency to depart from 'what is present and real'. This short phrase conveys that it is the present and real, the actual, and its visibility which present a philosophical task, the task to show the invisible trembling lines of past and future, of no longer and not yet, of the energy of the spirits, of the unknown touching the unknowable. It is finitude that unveils the infinite lines of life. In the same dialogue, real life [*wirkliches Leben*] is pictured as a river, which, I quote, 'draws our imagination along with it into unrestricted bounds, as into a distant future'.[20] As a river in a landscape, the present and real, quoting further, 'becomes visible in places as if it were only a thin, silver ribbon [*Band*]'.[21] The picture of the river of the present and real awakens a different insight about the nature of the present and real. Rather than as a transition from past to future, or the blending massive light of the immediate, the river of the present and real emerges here as the trace of a tracing which draws our imaginative attention to its being traced. The river of the present and real, the river of a trace being traced, is the river of the happening while happening.

The critical potential of Schelling's philosophy of nature regarding the aporias and threats of an organicist understanding of nature is to be found in his immanent critique of organicism which deflagrates from his organic presuppositions. It is utmost actual when considering that our times of 'true ruins' expose how the organic has been thought, in fact, as 'organization', a thought that has laid the grounds for the blurring of the limits between nature and human existence to the point that the urgency to reset human life's belonging to nature can hardly be separated from the automation of nature, and hence from exacerbated appropriation of nature by the humans. The critical potential of Schelling's immanent critique of organism lies in

19 Schelling, *Clara*, 5.
20 Schelling, *Clara*, 67.
21 Schelling, *Clara*, 10.

his rhythmic and pulsative comprehension of the belonging together of the infinite force of nature and its finite forms, when he thinks of the anguish of life and nature. In this comprehension, finite life and forms are emergences, meaning trembling lines of formations. What emerges are formations rather than forms, whirlpools in the stream of life or of nature. Its decisive contribution resides in reviewing the notion of what the idealistic-romantic tradition has conceived of as organism, turning philosophical thinking towards another sense of the present, toward the is-being of what is; that is, showing how the is-being is the real bond of nature rather than with nature. ▲

SUMMARY

This paper begins by asking whether a philosophy of nature that takes the organism as its point of departure still possesses critical potential today, at a time when technology itself is becoming increasingly organic – a development that renders the classical dichotomies between physis and techne, and between natural and human life, obsolete. In spite of this development, the article makes a case for the continued relevance of F. W. J. Schelling's philosophy of nature. Specifically, it shows how Schelling, in his late works, abandons his systematic concept of the organism and his investigations into the "life of nature" in favor of a philosophy that explores the "nature of life." To elucidate this shift, the article focuses on two central figures in Schelling's thought: on the one hand, the depiction of "real life" as a river in the essay Clara; on the other hand, Schelling's differentiation of human life from the rest of nature through the figure of the whirlpool – a pulsating formation that imbues life with an intrinsically restless, unsettled, or anxious character.