

Life at the Margins of Matter

‘Circumcising’ Schelling’s Organicist Philosophy with Hans Jonas

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There are many affinities between Friedrich Schelling’s philosophy of nature, with its winding investigations into the interplay between organic and inorganic matter, and Hans Jonas’s philosophical biology, with its locos in the metabolic process of living bodies. Schelling and Jonas both treat topics such as freedom, will, origin, and continuity, and they are both advocates of what, in broad terms, could be referred to as asubjective teleology. Protocols reveal that Jonas was acquainted with Schelling’s work, as he attended Heidegger’s seminar on the freedom essay in Freiburg in 1927/1928.¹ When in 1971 Heidegger sent him a copy of his famous *Schelling’s Abhandlung Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), Jonas concedes in a return letter that Schelling’s treatise ‘made a deep impression’ on him in his youth, although it ‘gradually slipped away’ from him over the years, and now promises to reread it under Heidegger’s guidance.² Yet among the plethora of names that Jonas keeps returning to in his philosophical-biological writings (such as Spinoza and Whitehead), Schelling is conspicuous by his absence.

¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe. IV. Abteilung: Hinweise Und Aufzeichnungen: Seminare: Hegel – Schelling*, ed. Peter Trawny, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2011, 49–54; Peter Trawny, ‘Nachwort des Herausgebers’, *Seminare: Hegel – Schelling*, 895; Martin Heidegger, *Heideggers Schelling-Seminar (1927/28): Die Protokolle von Martin Heideggers Seminar zu Schellings ‘Freiheitsschrift’ (1927/28) und die Akten des Internationalen Schelling-Tags 2006*, eds. Lore Hühn & Jörg Jantzen, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 2010, 331.

² ‘Ich sehe seinem Studium in einem jetzt beginnenden Urlaub mit Spannung entgegen. In meiner Jugendzeit hat Schellings Abhandlung mich einmal tief beeindruckt, ist mir aber in den langen Jahren allm[ählich] entglitten. Nun werde ich sie also unter Ihrer Führung neu lesen.’ Rudolf Bultmann & Hans Jonas, *Briefwechsel mit Hans Jonas 1928–1976: mit einem Anhang anderer Zeugnisse*, ed. Andreas Grossmann, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020, 123.

Nowhere in Jonas's published works, not even in his presentation in Heidegger's Schelling seminar – which focuses instead exclusively on Augustine – does Schelling's name come up.³ What could be the reason for this?

In a notebook found in the Hans Jonas Collection at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, in a file gathering Jonas's poems and translations from 1919 to 1926 – that is, a few years before he attended Heidegger's Schelling seminar – a brief note suggests that Jonas was reading Schelling's 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study'.⁴ The note reads:

Schelling 4. Vorlesung
d. Vorlesungen über d. Methoden des akademischen Studiums 1802 d.
Ersten Seiten lesen

This is followed by what appears to be an internal joke with his student friend Günther Anders, whom he had met in a Spranger course in Berlin in the winter of 1921/1922.⁵

Hans Günther
Kommanditgesellschaft auf Aktien
Wesensontologie auf Aktien

Could this ostensibly nonsensical joke – a wordplay, insinuating the existence of a stock company called 'Hans Günther partnership limited by shares, for an action-oriented ontology of essence' – give us a clue to Jonas's reception (or, as it is, non-reception) of Schelling's writings on the organism? In this article, I propose that it does. Having highlighted and discarded other possible answers to our question, I trace Jonas's persistent circumvention of Schelling's work to a disparity in their respective attitudes towards the anorganic – and, ultimately, towards action. Moreover, I argue that something is at stake in the tension between Jonas and Schelling: an issue related to suns, planets, atoms, and the fear of deep, dark waters.

³ Hans Jonas, 'Das Freiheitsproblem bei Augustin', later published as *Hans Jonas, Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem: Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 1930. Cf. Trawny, 'Nachwort des Herausgebers', *Seminare: Hegel – Schelling*, 895.

⁴ The Hans Jonas Collection, Leo Baeck Institute, New York, Box: 1, Folder: 17, 'Poems and Translations – Ich halte Zweisprach mit meinem Gott: ein Zyklus', 1919–1926, AR25645. F. W. J. Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study', *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*, eds. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, & Chad Wellmon, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, 84, .

⁵ Christophe David & Dirk Röpcke, 'Günther Anders, Hans Jonas et les antinomies de l'écologie politique', *Ecologie politique*, 29/2 (2004), 1, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ecopo.029.0193>.

The Ontological Unicity of the Organism

A central aim of Jonas's philosophical biology is to restore the distinction between organic and inorganic matter and to reaffirm the unique ontological status of organic bodies. Just as Heidegger once criticized Western metaphysics for its *Seinsvergessenheit*, Jonas accuses modern Western philosophy of having forgotten the meaning of life. In the first formal outline of his philosophical biology from 1965, he proclaims that Occidental thought fails to recognize life as something more than just the opposite of death; that is, as equally real and equally natural as death, and not merely a temporary or accidental exception:

[T]he lifeless has become the knowable par excellence and is for that reason also considered the true and only foundation of reality. It is the 'natural' as well as the original state of things. Not only in terms of relative quantity but also in terms of ontological genuineness, non-life is the rule, life the puzzling exception in physical existence.⁶

In response to this poor understanding of life, which he partly attributes to Descartes and Hume, and partly to Darwin, Jonas outlines a philosophical biology centred on the unique prerequisites of the organic body.⁷ As critical as he is of Cartesian dualism (later reinforced by what he calls Hume's 'de-casualization' of life, and Darwin's 'complete extrusion of teleology from nature'), he is equally critical of both idealist and materialist accounts of life, none of which, in Jonas's estimation, succeed in untying the dualistic knot.⁸ As for animistic or 'panvitalistic' philosophy that advocates a return to pre-Cartesian monism, there is simply 'no returning to this', in Jonas's view: no monism that can 'undo the polarity'.⁹ Accordingly, a possible explanation for Jonas's neglect of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is that he dis-

6 Hans Jonas, 'Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 19/1 (1965), 6.

7 See, e.g., Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001, 6: '[T]he organic body signifies the latent crisis of every known ontology and the criterion of any future one which will be able to come forward as a science'. Cf. Jonas, 'Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being', 15, 22. For Jonas's critique of Hume, see Hans Jonas, 'Causality and Perception', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 47/II (1950), 319–24.

8 Jonas, 'Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being', 22: 'Materialism and idealism, each from its end, try to smooth it out but get caught in it. The central position of the problem of life means not only that it must be accorded a decisive voice in judging any given ontology but also that any treatment of itself must summon the whole of ontology.'

9 'There is no returning to this: dualism has not been an arbitrary invention, for the two-ness which it asserts is grounded in reality itself. A new, integral, i.e., philosophical monism cannot undo the polarity: it must absorb it into a higher unity of existence from which the opposites issue as faces of its being or phases of its becoming. It must take up

cards it as abstract and panvitalistic – as a system that fails to recognize the uniqueness of organic bodies.

To be sure, rejecting Schelling on such grounds would be possible only on the basis of a highly reductive interpretation of his work. While Schelling indeed holds that the whole of nature, and not just organic life, is in some sense animated, he is neither an idealist nor a monist pure and simple – and the pantheistic tendencies encountered in his thought are far from as simplistic as the pre-dualistic animism that is the object of Jonas's critique. When, in his *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (division 3.II), Schelling sets out to deduct the organic function from the concept of excitability, he does, *de facto*, distinguish between the forces at play in organic matter, and those at play in all matter – that is, between life and nature, respectively – describing the former as a 'whirlpool' in the 'stream' of the latter.¹⁰ Moreover, the critique he levels here on the one hand to voices reducing the organism into chemical physiology, thereby depriving it of its subjective agency, and on the other, to any vitalist account 'that posits in the organism an absolute activity' or 'life force' (conversely depriving it of its unique receptivity), ultimately leads him to a third, synthesizing definition of the organism that comes remarkably close to Jonas's.¹¹

At the heart of Jonas's theory resides the stipulation of life as metabolism imbued with a fundamental claim to remain.¹² This grants him something of a middle position between German 19th century biology, which emphasizes the spatial or environmental nature of the living (specifically, the way the unity [*Ganzheit*] of a living being is continuously formed in relation to its environment [*Umwelt*], and of the various vitalistic currents that promote a dynamically oriented concept of life (accentuating its teleological character). In Jonas's philosophical interpretation, the metabolic process combines a geometrical ideal with a teleological pattern of causality, causing the organism to change while retaining its identity.¹³

the problem which originally gave rise to dualism.' Jonas, 'Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being', 13.

¹⁰ Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004, 113. '[A] stream flows in a straight line forward as long as it encounters no resistance. Where there is resistance – a whirlpool forms. Every original product of nature is such a whirlpool, every organism. The whirlpool is not something immobilized, it is rather something constantly transforming – but reproduced anew at each moment. Thus no product in nature is fixed, but it is reproduced at each instant through the force of nature entire.' Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 18.

¹¹ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 60–63.

¹² Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 4.

¹³ That is, an idea for which modern science, in Jonas's interpretation, has no room. Jonas, 'Organism and Freedom. An Essay in Philosophical Biology', 29.

Schelling also finds that the activity of the organism is determined by its receptivity, and that its receptivity is conditioned by its activity.¹⁴ In the first part of section 3.II, he describes the excitation of the organism as the result of a continuous struggle with its surroundings to remain alive – a struggle through which the organism dissociates itself from an-organic nature. ‘The whole mystery’ of life, in Schelling’s meaning, ‘rests on the opposition between inner and outer’, between irritability and susceptibility; this ‘must be admitted if one admits anything individual in Nature at all’.¹⁵

Next, he shows how this dual activity is inextricably bound to the form of the organism, being that through which the organism individuates from the whole:

The organic shape and structure is the single form in which the inner activity can assert itself against the outer, e.g., the form to which also belongs the manifoldness of individual organs, each of which adopts its particular function. [...] The beginning of life is activity; it is a tearing loose from universal Nature. But that activity is itself again receptivity, for receptivity is only the minus of activity.¹⁶

Combining these arguments, what emerges here is a dual gesture of propulsiveness and self-individuation more or less identical to the one that Jonas attributes to the living: a continuous process through which the living keeps alive, in movement, ever changing, yet separate.¹⁷

This affinity has not gone unnoticed in previous research. In her 2020 article ‘The Paradox of the Living: Jonas and Schelling on the Organism’s Autonomy’, Francesca Micheli argues that Schelling’s incessant insistence on the complex and unique function of the organism is likely to have appealed to Jonas.¹⁸ In slightly bolder terms, Philipp Höfele maintains that *The Phe-*

14 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 61f: ‘The proposition: The receptivity of the organism is determined by its activity is, therefore, the principle of a physiological immaterialism.’

15 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 64.

16 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 64f.

17 Cf. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 75f.

18 ‘At variance with physiological materialism, which takes life merely as chemical process, and at variance with physiological idealism, which takes it instead as absolute activity and subject, Schelling draws emphasis on the fact that the organism is an activity that combines both sides, that means a productive product, a subject-object. This latter point is for our purposes undoubtedly the most insightful and interesting among Schelling’s bio-philosophical remarks, as its message is one Jonas could have easily looked upon with favor.’ Francesca Micheli, ‘The Paradox of the Living: Jonas and Schelling on the Organism’s Autonomy’, *Rivista Di Estetica* 74 (2020), 20, <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.7101>.

nomenon of Life exhibits ‘traces’ of Schelling’s philosophy.¹⁹ Jesper Lundsryd Rasmussen advocates the reception of Jonas as an autonomous ‘co-poet’ (*Mitdichter*) of Schelling.²⁰ Lore Hühn and Jörg Jantzen, in the preamble of their 2010 edition of Heidegger’s Shelling Seminar, goes so far as to suggest that Jonas’s philosophical biology heavily relies on Schelling’s groundwork:

The line of tradition of modern natural ethics and critique of technology that originates from Schelling, extends through Heidegger, and is mediated by the latter to his students Hans Jonas, Hannah Arendt and Günther Anders, only to find its ultimate actualization in modern natural ethics today, has hardly been taken note of. / It is especially noticeable that essential aspects of Jonasian ethics of responsibility, such as his critique of classical metaphysics’ forgetfulness of the body and nature, cannot be understood without the Schellingian background [...].²¹

In summary, Jonas’s *Schellingsvergessenheit* could stem from the impression that Schelling’s philosophy of nature is panvitalistic; yet a closer analysis reveals that such a reading cannot be sustained. In fact, as Michellini, Höfele, Rasmussen, Hühn, and Jantzen have argued, Schelling’s account of organic nature – in linking the complexity of life forms to the complexity of their bodily organization – fits the description of what Jonas yields as ‘an

19 Philipp Höfele, ‘Becoming as Formation of Boundaries: Schelling’s Philosophy of Nature and Whitehead’s Process Philosophy’, *Kabiri* 4 (2024), 23.

20 Rasmussen primarily stresses a methodological kinship, arguing that Jonas and Schelling both ‘read the philosophy of nature [...] through a mythological lens’, this being ‘a scientific and rational myth, where freedom is the central vehicle’. Jesper Lundsryd Rasmussen, ‘Freedom as Ariadne’s Thread Through the Interpretation of Life: Schelling & Jonas on Philosophy of Nature as the Art of Interpretation’, *Kabiri* 1 (2018), 91. He presents an affiliated thesis in *Res Cogitans* in 2016, arguing, following Robert Spaemann and Reinhard Löw, that ‘Schelling’s problem area and early philosophy find a representative in Jonas’ philosophy’, i.e., that ‘parallel movements of thought’ can be found between the two, although Schelling ‘only *incognito* can be found in Jonas’s environment’ (my transl.). Jesper Lundsryd Rasmussen, ‘Hans Jonas’ Philosophische Biologie und Friedrich W. J. Schelling’s Naturphilosophie. Einleitende Bemerkungen zu einer Affinität’, *Res Cogitans* 11/1 (2016), 63, 67, 86, <https://doi.org/10.7146/rc.1127246>; cf. Robert Spaemann & Reinhard Löw, *Die Frage Wozu? Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des teleologischen Denkens*, München: R. Piper & Co., 1981, 139, n. 75.

21 Hühn & Jantzen, *Heideggers Schelling-Seminar (1927/28)*, 35f (my transl.). Cf. Lore Hühn, ‘A Philosophical Dialogue Between Heidegger and Schelling’, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 6/1 (2014), 29f, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1757063814z.00000000029>; Lore Hühn, ‘Ekstase und Gelassenheit: Schelling und Heidegger im Gespräch’, *Journal of the Faculty of Letters, the University of Tokyo, Aesthetics* 42–43(2018), 32.

organistic philosophy proper', as such anticipating his own philosophical enterprise.²²

Asubjective Teleology

A second possibility, which is closely related to the first, is that Jonas's understanding of the teleological element of life diverges from the teleology inherent in Schelling's philosophy of nature. This is undoubtedly true, inasmuch as Jonas and Schelling operate with distinct definitions of freedom and will. For Schelling, original freedom *qua* necessity pertains to nature in its totality – as such, to be regarded as a self-differentiating cosmological principle.²³ For Jonas, original freedom is the same as metabolism, rather designating a self-differentiating physical process.²⁴

Furthermore, the teleology implicit in Schelling's concept of nature is characterized by an essentially positive propulsiveness or force that is absent in Jonas's. Schelling speaks of nature as a stream, law, force, or longing, whereas Jonas's teleology is of a different sort: the most minimal teleology imaginable, namely, the urge of persisting in being.²⁵ No growth, no domination, or positive goal motivates Jonas's organism – not even force or strength. Rather, the claim to remain is a plea not to perish, imbuing the organism solely with vulnerability by making it a potential victim of violation.²⁶

22 Hans Jonas, 'Spinoza and the Theory of Organism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3/1 (1965), 50ff, 55ff. Jonas explicitly writes that Spinoza shows an 'insight into the essentially dual character of the organism: its autonomy for itself, and its openness for the world: spontaneity paired with receptivity' in a way that 'neither Descartes before him nor Leibniz after him did'. Cf. Hans Jonas, 'Parallelism and Complementarity: The Psycho-Physical Problem in Spinoza and in the Succession of Niels Bohr', *Spinoza and the Sciences*, eds. Marjorie Grene & Debra Nails, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1986, 237–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-4514-2_10.

23 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 14.

24 Hans Jonas, 'Organism and Freedom. An Essay in Philosophical Biology', *Hans Jonas. Kritischen Gesamtausgabe, Bd. I.1*, eds. Jens Ole Beckers & Florian Preußger, Berlin: Rombach, 2009, 1.

25 True, Jonas speaks in 'Mortality and Morality' of a 'waiting' or 'yearning' of substance – a 'secret teleology [...] in the colossal predominance of mechanical contingency in the cosmic prehistory of life' – yet he is careful to emphasize that such speculations 'do not step beyond the limits of an immanent philosophy of nature. No "seeing" intelligence at the beginning, no eternal providence concerning what ultimately comes to fruition, need be assumed. Unconscious tendency suffices for the evidence of life. [...] In a word, the testimony of life, immeasurably meaningful for ontology, is still a voice of immanence concerning itself'. Hans Jonas, 'Mortality and Morality: A Search for Good after Auschwitz', Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

26 Cf. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 4: 'With this twin aspect of metabolism – its power and its need – not-being made its appearance in the world as an alternative embodied in the being itself; and thereby being itself first assumes an emphatic sense: intrinsically qualified by the threat of its negative it must affirm itself, and existence affirmed is existence as a concern. So constitutive for life is the possibility of not-being that its very being is essentially

Nonetheless, Schelling and Jonas share the same incitive, namely the recovery of an asubjective notion of freedom that was lost with the emergence of the mechanistic worldview. Again, Hühn and Jantzen finds that Jonas's debt to Schelling in this area is evident, especially in his late writings on theology and ethics. Jonas's concept of God, and his theory of responsibility, both rely on a strikingly Schellingesque theory 'whose anti-Kantian point, as is well known, lies in the fact that it does not tie purposes solely to human rationality'.²⁷ Like Schelling, Jonas breaks with the Western metaphysical obsession with human will – not by abolishing teleology, but by ridding the notions of freedom and will of their anthropological content.²⁸

Moreover, the way in which Schelling's universal teleology comes to expression specifically in the organism is not too different from Jonas's minimal teleology. Whereas Schelling never explicitly discusses metabolism, he keeps returning to the closely related physiological phenomena of 'combustion': 'The major processes of Nature are combustion and decombustion processes, in the great – (therefore, the opposition between sun and planets) – as in the small.'²⁹ He further acknowledges that substance exchange occurs differently in a thing than in a living being. Whether used as its own energy reserve for preserving, increasing, or moving itself 'like the mobile, growing flame' (animals), or returned to the atmosphere (plants), it is clear to Schelling that the organism alone has the ability to buffer the energy released from combustion.³⁰ This explains why the *Stoffwechsel* of the organism, the continuous exchange of its own constituents, has no or little effect on its form: Ultimately, the organism can 'rest in activity'.³¹

In conclusion: while, from Jonas's perspective, Schelling is mistaken in attributing original freedom to all of nature and not just the living (thereby

a hovering over this abyss, a skirting of its brink: thus being itself has become a constant possibility rather than a given state, ever anew to be laid hold of in opposition to its ever-present contrary, not-being, which will inevitably engulf it in the end.³ Renaud Barbaras has criticized this dimension of Jonas's philosophical biology for wrongfully defining the living being by its 'struggle for survival'. Renaud Barbaras, *Introduction to a Phenomenology of Life*, trans. Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022, 352, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21ptrzf>. Whether the fear of no longer being can be equated with a survival instinct is, however, debatable.

27 Hühn and Jantzen, *Heideggers Schelling-Seminar (1927/28)*, 35f. For a more nuanced discussion of whether Kant really 'tie purposes solely to human rationality', see, e.g., Philippe Huneman, *Understanding Purpose: Kant and the Philosophy of Biology*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781580466950>

28 Cf. Hühn, 'A Philosophical Dialogue Between Heidegger and Schelling', 30.

29 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 59. The term metabolism was popularized by the German physiologist Theodore Schwann only in 1839. D. Fraser Harris, "The Date of the Introduction of the Term "Metabolic"", *Nature* 98 (1917), 389f.

30 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 59.

31 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 120.

detaching it from its very root in organic bodies)³² – and although Schelling’s teleology (both of nature in general and the organism in particular) comes down to force, whereas Jonas’s teleology comes down to vulnerability – Jonas and Schelling both conceive original freedom as substance exchange, and both hold that the organism is determined through the specific kind of substance exchange that makes it capable of resting in activity. Again, their disparities in this area are not sufficient to explain why Jonas refrains from discussing Schelling’s work. Rather, their shared views on the topic support the thesis put forward by Michellini, Höfele, Rasmussen, Hühn, and Jantzen: that is, that Jonas philosophical biology may be directly or indirectly influenced by Schelling’s philosophy of nature.

The Anorganic

This brings us to the third, and, as I would like to suggest, most plausible reason for Jonas’s evasion of Schelling: namely, their different attitudes towards the anorganic. This calls for a brief recourse to Jonas’s notebook from the early 1920s, and the work on which the note supposedly comments.

In the first pages of ‘Lectures on the Method of Academic Study’ – fourteen lectures held at the University of Jena in the summer of 1802 – Schelling discusses the role of philosophy in the academy in light of the famous conflict of the faculties in German universities. Between the ‘higher’, practically oriented faculties, that have an unmistakable societal function (theology, law, and medicine), and the ‘lower’ faculties, supposedly targeting individual intellect and creativity (philosophy and the arts), Schelling argues in favor of the lower faculties, emphasizing the importance of a universal perspective on science, which only philosophy and the arts can provide. A science unable to relate to the whole, writes Schelling, is devoid of reality and meaning, and like ‘dead matter’ it ‘will sooner or later be expelled’.³³ Accordingly, the role of the scientist, as that of all men, is to make the ideal unfold in the real by gaining knowledge of the absolute. The rational human being is, in Schelling’s words, ‘placed into the world to supplement [the] becoming [of nature]: what is lacking in the totality of God’s revelation should unfold from him and from his activity’ (activity defined here as ‘[t]he one and only

³² Cf. Höfele’s reading of Jonas’s critique of Whitehead’s process philosophy in *The Phenomenon of Life* as an implicit critique of Schelling. In Höfele’s opinion, however, Schelling’s ‘process-philosophical perspective on the whole of being’, that is rejected by Jonas, is ‘justified from certain points of view, especially in view of a holism increasingly discussed in the Anthropocene’, because ‘[t]o speak with Schelling: if everything is an expression of an “eternal freedom”, it also participates in the value of that freedom’. Höfele, ‘Becoming as Formation of Boundaries’, 24–27, 33.

³³ Schelling, ‘Lectures on the Method of Academic Study’, 90.

action of originary knowledge').³⁴ In other words, there is no true action that 'does not express [...] the divine being within it'.³⁵ All action except for knowledge of the absolute and mediation of the original freedom of nature (which is the same as absolute necessity) is, in Schelling's view, untrue. In a few concise lines, he proclaims that:

Those who cannot grasp the meaning of the absolute unity of knowledge and action raise such vulgar objections as: if knowledge were one with action, action would always follow from knowledge; but it is perfectly possible to know what is right and fail to do it; and so on.³⁶

Action! Action! is the call that rings out from all sides. But it resounds the loudest from those who would prefer not to proceed with knowledge.³⁷

What, then – to bring the argument together – does this have to do with organistic philosophy? The answer, I propose, lies in the different attitudes of Schelling and Jonas towards the anorganic: for while both define the organism in terms of self-individuation, they diverge in how they understand that from which life continues to individuate.

For Schelling, as shown above, the anorganic world is no less animated than the organic: an ideal force and not just the interplay between mechanical laws and accidents determines the route of nature. This ideal force is also the cause of life:

[T]he organism cannot be subordinated to the anorganic. Therefore, [the cause of life] must fall within a sphere that once more comprehends organism and mechanism (both opposed principles) under itself and that is higher than both. That higher sphere is none other than Nature itself insofar as it is thought as absolutely unconditioned (as absolutely organic).³⁸

34 Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study', 91f.

35 Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study', 93.

36 Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study', 93.

37 Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study', 91. In German, the quote reads: 'Handeln, Handeln! ist der Ruf, der zwar von vielen Seiten ertönt, am lautesten aber von denjenigen angestimmt wird, bei denen es mit dem Wissen nicht fort will.' F. W. J. Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode (Lehrart) des akademischen Studiums*, ed. Walter E. Ehrhardt, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2017, 12.

38 Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 116f.

That such a force, or ‘higher organism’, can indeed ‘be derived from the conditions of an anorganic world’, is indicated, writes Schelling, by evolution, but finds its utmost manifestation in primordial natural phenomena that precede light, such as gravity, magnetism, and galvanism.³⁹ At its earliest stages, the anorganic world – still shrouded in darkness – attracts and repulses.⁴⁰ The narrative is reminiscent of *Tehom*, the dark chaotic waters preceding creation in Genesis 1:2, organized and animated by a wind from God.⁴¹ Gravity, for Schelling, is ‘the dark ground’ of light, just like nature is the dark ground of God: a ground ‘inseparable, yet still distinct’ from it.⁴² Any deviation from this primordial dynamic of the natural world, like that of a shooting asteroid, he deems as evil – and the essence of natural evil, in turn, as ‘meteoric’.⁴³

For Jonas, in contrast, the suns, planets, and atoms are of insignificant interest. In *The Phenomenon of Life*, he makes it diligently clear that his world

39 That is, evolution *avant la letter*. In Schellings view, we can draw this conclusion from fact that ‘that the animal and the plant, seen objectively, are really nothing other than a continual leap from the fluid into the solid form (just as all organisms are like amphibians, placed between the solid and the fluid)’. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 121.

40 ‘[I]n universal Nature nothing of the kind shows itself except in the phenomena of magnetism.’ Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 117. See also: ‘life certainly could be [...] only chemical in *tendency* [...] as the advocates of vital force truthfully say [...] and this tendency is constantly inhibited, for which surely no vital force is required’; ‘*by what* it is inhibited seems to be the important question to which galvanism will give the answer’. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 110f. The anorganic world, however, lacks the organic capacity to contract and dilate: ‘the organic power of contraction – which seems to be totally and exclusively proper to organic nature, and to which nothing similar in the rest of nature can be compared’. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 121.

41 ‘[T]he earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.’ Gen. 1:2 (New Revised Standard Version).

42 ‘Since nothing is prior to, or outside of [*außer*], God, he must have the ground of his existence in himself. All philosophies say this; but they | speak of this ground as of a mere concept without making it into something real [*reell*] and actual [*wirklich*]. This ground of his existence, which God has in himself, is not God considered absolutely, that is, in so far as he exists; for it is only the ground of his existence. It [the ground] is *nature* – in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him. This relation can be explained analogically through that of gravity and light in nature. Gravity precedes light as its ever dark ground, which itself is not actu [actual], and flees into the night as the light (that which exists) dawns.’ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006, 27.

43 Cf. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, ‘The Tragedy of Freedom – Some Notes on the Relation between Schelling and Kierkegaard Regarding the Tragic and the Question Concerning Human Freedom’, *Kierkegaard im Kontext des deutschen Idealismus*, eds. Axel Hutter & Anders Moe Rasmussen, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014, 46, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110252798.59>; Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 35, 46; F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, ed. Thomas Buchheim, Hamburg: Meiner, 1997, 38f, 51.

begins and ends with the freedom of the organism; that there is no freedom more primordial than the freedom of organic life (at least not within the framework of human understanding):

Within the vast necessity of the physical universe a principle of freedom for the first time shines forth in the blind stirrings of primeval organic substance, a freedom foreign to suns, planets and atoms. Its original and elementary expression is metabolism.⁴⁴

Admittedly, Jonas does speculate about the lifeless world in his essay ‘Immortality and the Modern Temper’ and later in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*. Yet in his account, it remains a realm devoid of transcendence, language, meaning, and freedom:

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in creation. [...] And for aeons his cause is safe in the slow hands of cosmic chance and probability – while all the time we may surmise a patient memory of the gyrations of matter to accumulate into an ever more expectant accompaniment of eternity to the labors of time – a hesitant emergence of transcendence from the opaqueness of immanence. And then the first stirring of life – a new language of the world: and with it a tremendous quickening of concern in the eternal realm and a sudden leap in its growth toward recovery of its plenitude.⁴⁵

Following this cosmogonic approach, the dark waters preceding Genesis enclose the whole anorganic, mechanical universe, planets and suns included. In this sense, Jonas’s thought can be diagnosed with what the Swedish Romantic philosopher Benjamin Höijer once referred to as ‘hydrophobia’: a fear of contact with the waters and depths of the absolute.⁴⁶ Jonas leaves

44 Hans Jonas, ‘Organism and Freedom. An Essay in Philosophical Biology’, *Hans Jonas. Kritischen Gesamtausgabe, Bd. I.1*, 1.

45 Hans Jonas, ‘Immortality and the Modern Temper: The Ingersoll Lecture, 1961’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 55/1 (1962), 13f; Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 275; Hans Jonas, ‘The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice’, *The Journal of Religion*, 67/1 (1987), 4.

46 Cf. Mats Dahllöv, *Det Absoluta och det gemensamma: Benjamin Höijers konstfilosofi*, Stockholm: Thales, 2022, 108; Benjamin Höijer, *Filosofiska Föreläsningar 1806–1812*, ed. Birger Liljekrantz, Lund: Gleerup, 1931, 76. Indeed, Jonas does write about the importance to ‘take

prime matter aside and, in doing so, avoids any universalistic claims about creation. But he also faces difficulty in explaining the spontaneous movement of an inorganic entity, such as a meteor shaking the ground – ultimately rendering natural evil meaningless.

By extension, I suggest, this disparity leads them to develop incompatible attitudes to the relationship between being, thinking, and acting. For Schelling, being is will, and will is being, and the only true act is the act of nature: the necessity of original freedom in the continuous self-differentiation and self-organization of the dark anarchic ground (the uni-verse).⁴⁷ For Jonas, action entails breaking loose from, or rising above, the laws at work in the depths of the anorganic.

Consequently, their different demarcations of the propulsiveness of nature – commonly addressed by the Greeks as *physis* [φύσις] – have an immediate impact on their respective attitudes towards the relationship between philosophy and action.⁴⁸ Schelling conceives of *physis* partially as the continuous formation of the universe and partially as primordial intentionality, which entails that the knowledge and mediation of the absolute (characteristic of philosophizing) is regarded as the most virtuous activity there is: entering into the freedom of the whole. Jonas interprets *physis* on the one hand as the original freedom of organic beings and, on the other hand, as the source of their vulnerability. This entails that action begins where the absolute ends and makes responsible action tantamount to a concern for the living.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Admittedly, the excerpt from Jonas' notebook is by no means unambiguous, and an inside joke between student friends is in no way a philosophical man-

the plunge into deep water' in *Materie, Geist, und Schöpfung*, albeit by this he means to refrain from universalizing models and to have the courage to speculate. Hans Jonas, *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung: kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung* (1988), 64.

47 'In the final and highest judgment, there is no other Being than will. Will is primal Being [Ur- sein].' Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 21. Cf. e.g., 'After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order'; 'Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance'; 'the yearning, which as the still dark ground is the first stirring of divine existence'. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 29f.

48 For a thorough investigation of the various definitions of φύσις in Greek philosophy, see e.g. Gerard Naddaf (ed.), *The Greek Concept of Nature*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780791483671>.

49 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

ifest. Yet in my interpretation, Jonas’s scribble testifies to the fact that the young Jewish phenomenologists Jonas and Anders were hardly impressed by Schelling’s Augustinian view of the task of philosophy as ‘knowledge and mediation of the absolute’, and of *Gelassenheit* as the highest virtue. Rather, they identify with the, in Schelling’s eyes, ‘vulgar’ and ‘ignorant’ crowd calling out for action: ‘Hans Günther. Kommanditgesellschaft auf Aktien, Wesensontologie auf Aktien.’ This positioning rhymes well with Jonas’s choice, in Heidegger’s Schelling seminar, to write his report on the problem of freedom in Augustine: Schelling’s problem is, in Jonas’s view, an Augustinian problem. In subjecting the freedom of living beings to something larger than life (whether the freedom of Nature, God, or both) Schelling and Augustine alike render the liberative dimension of action insufficient. As such, the notebook entry reveals a fundamental disagreement between Schelling and Jonas – not only regarding the conflict of the faculties or the very purpose of philosophy, but also concerning how and where to set the limits of nature’s original freedom.

If it is true that, like Michellini, Höfele, Rasmussen, Hühn, and Jantzen suggest, traces of Schelling’s philosophy of nature are discernible in Jonas’s philosophical biology, it is thus, as I would like to suggest, a ‘circumcised’ version of Schelling’s thought. Jonas has, in the in Derridean sense of the word, circumcised Schelling’s philosophy of nature: circumscribed it, and – to the extent that he at all makes use of it – imprinted it with a new tradition for which the scission between dead and living, in contrast to Schelling’s dynamic whirlpool, marks the beginning of an actively caring world.⁵⁰

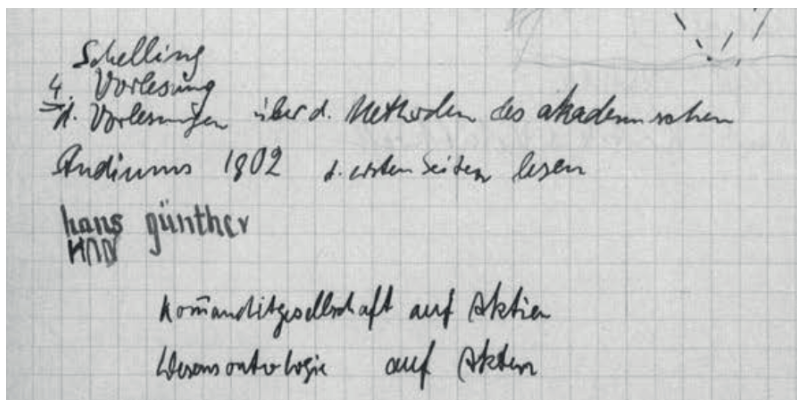


Figure 1. Jonas’s notebook entry. Photo: Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 25; Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne*, Paris: Galilée, 1995, 46f.

SUMMARY

Drawing on a playful notebook entry from Hans Jonas's student years, this article examines why Jonas consistently sidestepped Friedrich Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in his writings on philosophical biology. It begins by outlining the many affinities between the two thinkers, as noted in previous scholarship: both articulate an asubjective teleology, both understand organisms as self-individuating unities, and both reject mechanistic reductions of life. It then considers several possible explanations for Jonas's dismissal of Schelling, arguing that their deepest point of divergence lies in their differing attitudes toward the anorganic realm. Whereas Schelling understands nature – organic and inorganic alike – as animated by a primordial, dynamic freedom, Jonas draws a sharp ontological boundary between living and nonliving matter: arguing that freedom originates only with metabolism, while the inorganic world is characterized by blind necessity and existential opacity. This split yields fundamentally different conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and nature, of action, and, ultimately, of what it means to live and act responsibly.