

# Schellingian Thought for Ecological Politics

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## ABSTRACT

Given the re-engagement of ontology in recent developments in theory at large (whether under the auspices of Speculative Realism, New Materialism, the affective, nonhuman, inhuman, or otherwise), the relation between ontology and politics requires serious renegotiation. In particular, the assertion that any form of ontology implies or even necessitates a particular form of politics (or a politics whatsoever) needs to be closely examined. This essay takes on Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* as a form of philosophy more amenable to thinking through ecological politics through a critique of the aforementioned strategies. This is done through an analysis of Iain Hamilton Grant's recuperation of Schelling's work against other dominant interpretations.

## KEYWORDS

Schelling, Speculative Realism, New Materialism, Jane Bennett, Hasana Sharp

## 0: INTRODUCTION

Given the re-engagement of ontology in recent developments in theory at large (whether under the auspices of Speculative Realism, New Materialism, the affective, nonhuman, inhuman, or otherwise), the relation between ontology and politics requires serious renegotiation. In particular, the assertion that any form of ontology implies or even necessitates a particular form of politics (or a politics whatsoever) needs to be closely examined.

The central works of Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp to be discussed below break ground for such a project as they have

both pursued the constructions of a materialist politics with Spinoza and Deleuze as their central theoretical reservoirs. Given this and the ongoing environmental crisis (a short leap given the celebration of Spinoza and Deleuze by ecological theorists broadly), this essay will interrogate the ecological purchase of Bennett and Sharp's projects and contrast it with the possibility of a Schellingian politics of nature based on the interpretation of Schelling by Iain Hamilton Grant and Arran Garre.

Schelling, it will be argued, provides a methodological split which Spinoza and Deleuze lack, a split which better serves to develop an ecological politics that takes seriously the continuity of, yet difference between, thinking human and nonhuman agencies. Whereas Spinoza's system of parallel naturalism relates mind to nature via a vague correspondence of degree (i.e., a rock is a little minded whereas a human is far more minded), for Schelling there is a real unity between mind and nature. For Schelling, mind cannot grasp the totality of being and furthermore, mind creates a second nature for itself.

Given the relation of ontology and politics laid bare by the recent theorizations noted above, as well as the character of those redrawing the relation through Spinoza and Deleuze, this ecologically friendly formation of politics clangs against the iron of Žižek's Hegelianism (armored with cautionary Lacanian quips) as well as the minoritarian limitations and tactical uncertainties of Deleuzian politics (bolstered by the obscure power of becoming-whatever). That is, I would argue that Sharp and Bennett are steps in the right direction in that they are less subjectivist (as Žižek's Hegelianism seems to be) and more concerned with particular actualities (than the latter Deleuzian politics-of-becoming often seems to be). By subjectivist I mean overly concerned in determining the ontological nature of the subject to necessitate political change. Subjectivism, in my sense here, is to be read as an ontologically sophisticated form of voluntarism. This is not all that surprising given both Sharp and Bennett's connections to the materialist feminisms of Grosz, Bradotti, Haraway, Barad and others. However I believe that Sharp and Bennett (as well as scores of others) are held back by a particular relationship of ontology to politics engendered by their commitment to flat ontologies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Both practitioners of Object-Oriented Ontology/Philosophy (OOO/OOP) and New Materialism adhere to flat ontologies; however, they do not mean exactly the same thing for each group. Generally, flat ontology means that no particular entity or set of entities has ontological privilege

Against such flatness I want to argue that Schelling provides a model of philosophy that emphasizes ontological stratification (caused by a freedom at ground as a metaphysical or transcendental dynamic) and gives both freedom and constraint to thought that politics can adapt locally. Such a model, I will argue, is particularly relevant to ecological politics writ large.

#### 1: NEW MATERIALIST POLITICS: SPINOZA BETWEEN SHARP AND BENNETT

The recent work of Jane Bennett and (even more recently) Hasana Sharp has brought materialism into a close association with politics. That continental thought is geared towards the political is nothing new. But the fact that these arguments are necessitating or at least suggesting a politics from the point of view of ontology *is* new.

While several theorists (most notably, and recently, Graham Harman<sup>2</sup>) have pointed out that the term materialism has all but lost meaning because of its diffuse activation, the materialism discussed here is one of a particular provenance. While, at least, with regards to politics and the relation of philosophy and / or theory to politics, materialism summons particularly Marxist visions, the materialism I wish to engage here is that of Gilles Deleuze which, in turn is pulled from the so-called Prince of Immanence himself: Benedictus Spinoza. This association reintroduces the just-elided specters of Marxism, as Spinoza's naturalism and heretical parallelism were inspirational not only to Marx himself but to Marx's most important philosophical source, Hegel (who famously claimed that all must pass through Spinoza). It is not surprising that the May '68ers—Marxist to various degrees as students of Al-thusser (Balibar, Badiou, Ranciere, and others)—were also affected by Spinoza. But the use of Spinoza here is to follow the more Deleuzian tract, a thinker of roughly the same era but who was, at least ostensibly, more anti-humanist and less psychoanalytically interested than many of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

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over any other. For a specific account of the differences, see Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> While Harman has made this point many times, the most focused example is most likely Graham Harman, "I Am Also of the Opinion that Materialism Must be Destroyed," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28.5: 772–790.

<sup>3</sup> For a historical explication of the relation of psychoanalysis and huma-

However, even Deleuze's Spinoza brings with it a Marxist weight, as Deleuze himself worked with and on Marxist texts (with his works co-authored with Guattari as well as in the most revered non-existent book *The Grandeur of Marx*, the latter was published at the time of Deleuze's death). This is compounded by numerous secondary works on Deleuze (most notably the texts of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri) that are political syntheses of Marx, Deleuze, and Spinoza.

But the Spinoza and Deleuze of Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp is less Deleuze's Spinoza as a Marxist, than one which utilizes Spinoza's naturalism as the well-spring for political action. This is an odd move given not only the feminist credentials of the two authors (as nature has far too often been the bear trap of passivity in which women are ensnared) but that politics is taken to be inferred from a particular reading of nature, whether that nature is couched in terms of agency, materiality, or becoming.

This is not to say that Bennett and Sharp pull only from Spinoza and Deleuze's reading of Spinoza but that their models draw heavily on them and, in so doing, suggest a particular definition of nature, a particular relation of nature to politics which, in turn, suggests a particular relation of thought to nature. It is on this latter issue which I believe Schelling provides the best alternative to Spinoza and to Deleuze. But first it will be important to outline both Bennett and Sharp's use of Spinoza and Deleuze's Spinoza.

Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is subtitled *A Political Ecology of Things* and thus emphasizes not only nature by the political ramifications of human agents being tied to a nature of things but also the political ramifications of human agents being tied to further agencies known and unknown. Bennett argues that thinking politics in such a way makes sense given the fact that "our powers are thing power[ed]."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Bennett argues that one way of accessing such thoughts resides in a strategic anthropomorphism which finds materialities over ontological distinct categories of beings.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Bennett seeks to highlight the kinds of physical and energetic materiality shared between kinds of beings instead of arguing for a fundamental separateness between beings.

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nism in Post-War France, see Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

In terms specifically relevant to the parameters of this paper, Bennett attempts to bring together ecology and politics. Bennett asks what the relationship of politics is to ontology and whether politics can be considered an ecology, a kind of relationality between human and nonhuman agents.<sup>6</sup>

While I appreciate Bennett's goals and choices of examples I have to wonder if her ontological reservoirs are doing the work she wants them to do without undermining her project from the beginning. This of course assumes that ontological justifications are more than operational rhetorics; and, if they are operational rhetorics, they have serious consequences for the forms which politics (or at least political theory will take). For instance, Bennett quite strongly dismisses epistemological concerns because they are, she argues, inherently self interested.<sup>7</sup> This collapses the possible ontological results of an epistemological project (where a concern with how the self accesses the world can over-focus on the self and forget the world at large). However I do not believe this is necessarily the case. In other words, Bennett's approach covers over the need for epistemology in damning epistemology as a self-interested project. Questioning our access to materiality, however, does not mean that that materiality must be inert or that our access gives it life, it merely notes the capacities as well as the limitations, of our own grasp on any kind of materiality, whether human or nonhuman.

One way of seeing the issue here is to examine Bennett's strategy of strategic anthropomorphism. Bennett's anthropomorphism, while useful as a tactic, covers over her disregard of 'cold' (or not politically open) ontology on the one hand and her dismissal of epistemology on the other. This creates a problem as the inclination to anthropomorphize then appears as a natural tendency which retroactively justifies the ontological choices Bennett makes for her politics via the pivot of strategic anthropomorphism. If this anthropomorphism was a full fledged methodology, it would be far less problematic. Bennett suggests that to have this strategy in place of an epistemological apparatus produces encounters which trigger impersonal affects and which further lead to new knowledge of (or perhaps new connections with) the vibrancy of things.

This vibrancy, which is Bennett's articulation of the agency of matter, points to a deeper tension which exists between a thing's vibrancy or power, and the human receptivity or the purported

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<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

thinkability of the underlying metaphysics, the connection between, yet difference in, powers and things. The question becomes: Does material immanence adequately account for the powers of things in relation to immanence, and yet is it also separate from affectivity? Spinoza's politics are combinatorial or ontologically or formally ecological because Spinoza's monism speaks of a world as a single substance in which things that exist as apparently separate entities are in fact only modes of that singular substance. I would argue that it is a performative contradiction to abandon epistemology yet still claim to have strategies. Buoyed by feminist texts, one could argue that affect has in effect become the new epistemology.

Hasana Sharp's text *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* sets up a similar project as Bennett's but draws from further back historically because she draws mostly from Spinoza and less from Deleuze.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, instead of drawing political lessons from vibrant matter, Sharp pulls a concept of nature from Spinoza which she believes not only works against typical usages of nature (in terms of confining normativity) but furthermore suggests that Spinoza's naturalism offers a powerful reservoir for addressing ecology, animal rights, and feminist issues.

Sharp argues that these critiques grow out of Spinoza's ontological flatness and that this leads to a kind of philanthropic posthumanism much along the same terms of Jane Bennett's project (2, 4). While Sharp brings up the problems with deriving a politics from metaphysics, she wholeheartedly endorses the Deleuzian procedure of equating her project of Spinozistic renaturalization with joy by connecting it to a sense of agency (10, 14). This agency, Sharp continues, is affective; she thereby makes affect as such into a trans-individual network of being that is inherently a joyful ground for politics (24–25).

To give Sharp her due, she addresses the problems of attempting politics in nature as a kind of constraint; she also argues that understanding material causes is no doubt necessary for any political enterprise when she writes: "An adequate grasp of the causes and conditions that make oppression the cause often emerges in the process of fighting it" (34, 83). Despite these moments of borderline pragmatism, Sharp, like Bennett, sees affect as a kind of networked system of knowledge which can thereby replace epistemology. Sharp ends her book with a claim that De-

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<sup>8</sup> Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

leuze and Guattari's Spinozist inspired immanence can lead to a naturalistically charged form of politics. The question becomes whether it is merely the Deleuzian form of ontology (or more broadly theory) that seems non-importable to politics, or could it be that assuming any kind of direct relation whatsoever is a grievous stitching of *is* to *ought*?

In the last year there have been numerous outbreaks of political discussions surrounding Speculative Realism and Object Oriented philosophies within the blogosphere. These disputes, of which there are too many to track, have often centered on the separation of ontology from politics. The surgical nature of this separation has been a concern for adherents to, as well as opponents of, speculative realism and its splinter groups since the beginning of its online presence (starting in 2007). While the critiques simply question the possibility of such a connection, the responses have been diverse. Levi Bryant, who has spoken most outwardly for Object Oriented thinking in this regard, has argued that the separation is one of conceptual coherence that to combine the way things *are* with the way things *should be* is egregious. Other responses, and the one I am making here, are more in line with the work of Ray Brassier (and to a lesser extent Iain Hamilton Grant), in that ethics or politics (or other normative dimensions) should not decide ontology any more than ontology should decide them.<sup>9</sup> But, unlike OOO/OOP, the separation is one where naturalism gives over to realism and/or rationalism in that a change happens that is different in kind. This shift is untenable for thinkers of OOO/OOP as all things must be on the same ontological plane in their existence as objects. The foregoing engagement with Schelling is ultimately motivated by such critical verticality. In other words, a vertical or graduated approach to ontology and ethics is not necessarily a hierarchical one just as a horizontal or ontologically flat approach is not inherently democratic.

## 2: SCHELLING'S NON-POLITICS

There are three solid nails in the coffin of the very possibility of a Schellingian politics. First, Schelling rarely if ever openly talked about politics and was brought in to quell the radical upstart of

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<sup>9</sup> See Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) as well as Iain Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

the young Hegelians in the name of a Christian political conservatism. Second, given Schelling's opposition to Hegelianism, his politics automatically appears as a kind of anti-Marxism or anti-dialecticism. Third, the dominant pseudo-political use of Schelling, and perhaps the only well known political or even partially political use of Schelling, is from Slavoj Žižek, and it falls into the subjectivist problem mentioned above.

## 2.1: FIRST PROBLEM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND REACTIONS

From the outset it is difficult to get beyond the very reasons Schelling gave the Berlin lectures due to which he received such poor reviews and responses from the young political upstarts of his time. The situation was a mix of social desperation (to fill Hegel's absence, having recently died) as well as appeasement (to the conservative Christian rule of Germany at the time).

In a letter penned to Schelling, the King's ambassador to Munich, C. J. Bunsen, informed Schelling, in stormy language, that he must set off for Berlin and take the chair of the recently deceased Hegel (his once rival and former friend and roommate) in order to dispatch the "dragonseed" of Hegelian pantheism which had been fostered there by the recently dead dialectician.<sup>10</sup>

Alberto Toscano in his essay "Philosophy and the Experience of Construction," gives an excellent account of the manner in which Schelling gave his Berlin lectures:

In 1841, with the blessing of the Prussian state, the aged Schelling climbed the rostrum of the University of Berlin to denounce the errors and shortcomings of the Hegelian dialectic and reveal the contents of his own positive philosophy. This intellectual episode has gone down in the annals of the history of philosophy principally on account of the audience that came to listen to this last survivor of the golden age of idealism, speaking from the post that once belonged to his philosophical nemesis, Hegel. Kierkegaard, Bakunin, Feurbach, Marx's friend Arnold Ruge, and Friedrich Engels were amongst them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Toscano, "Philosophy and the Experience of Construction," in *The New Schelling*, ed. Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004), 106.



In his essay, Toscano questions what a return to Schelling means given that Schelling's return to the stage in Berlin served as negative inspiration for the projects of the young Hegelians<sup>12</sup> and provided examples from both Engels, Marx, and Kierkegaard of the complaints of those that accused Schelling of being a puppet of the state, and a very highly paid one at that. However, as Bruce Matthews' excellent research has shown, this historical caricature is misleading and must be read as Schelling was expecting it to be read, in one form or another, as a way to attack Hegel's system (as he had begun to do in an introductory remark to Hubert Beckers translation of Victor Cousin's 1834 *Essays on French and German Philosophy*).<sup>13</sup>

If one can get beyond this and search Schelling's work for gems of political insight, then one will find that little are likely to be found. Few have addressed Schelling's contradictory uses of state politics, though, somewhat surprisingly, Jurgen Habermas is one exception. In his essay entitled "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and its Consequences for the Philosophy of History," Habermas states that "Schelling is not a political thinker" and that what is instead present in Schelling are three incompatible deductions of the function of the state.<sup>14</sup> As Habermas shows, to draw political ramifications from Schelling is tricky, to put it lightly.

But before getting too deeply into the political possibilities of Schelling, it would be prudent to first address the problematic relation of Schelling to Hegel and Idealism.

## 2.2: SECOND PROBLEM: SCHELLING AS ANTI-HEGEL

This problem could also be put as follows: why Schelling over Hegel? This is a particularly salient question given Žižek's valorization of Hegel's system as politically useful. Schelling is often thought to be merely the protean misstep between Fichte and Hegel. The immediate question that can be raised is whether Schelling's late critiques of Hegel share goals with Marx's famous inversion of Hegel.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Toscano, "Philosophy and the Experience of Construction," 109.

<sup>13</sup> Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and its Consequences for the Philosophy of History" in *The New Schelling*, ed. Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004), 43.

<sup>15</sup> See Bruce Matthews' "Translator's Introduction" to *The Grounding of*

This is compacted by the fact that several of the thinkers present at Schelling's lectures adapted his critiques of Hegel. Whereas Marx and Engels lamented Schelling for being too idealist and Christian, the former issue is false in practice (as Schelling clearly passed through idealism and consistently tried to break out of it starting at least as early as the *System of Transcendental Idealism*). Schelling's religiosity is the more damning critique, though it is difficult to separate from the pragmatic political constraints of his time. Furthermore, Schelling, despite or even because of his religious moorings, has been referred to as a realist (as in the case of John Laughland's *Schelling versus Hegel*).<sup>16</sup>

Yet the specter of Schelling's idealism seems to continue to haunt critiques of him. Wesley Phillips in "The Future of Speculation?" attempts to simultaneously critique Schelling, Iain Hamilton Grant's reading of Schelling, as well as the use of speculation by Speculative Realism broadly; yet, I would argue, this reading fails in all attempts and instead defends Hegel's concept of history as better than Schelling's.<sup>17</sup> However, Phillips seems (in the end) to turn Schelling's materialism into a crude physicalism that is then seen as less potentially political than Hegel's endless history and a possible speculative materialist history stemming from Hegel's purportedly more concrete and more political notion of materiality. Phillips argues that the crux of this relies on Hegel's negation of the negation (the pivotal synthesis of the dialectical process).

In the end, the fundamental difference between Hegel and Schelling is that consciousness determining history against and with other consciousnesses is the central ontological agency for Hegel, whereas for Schelling the past, or nature, or the real unilaterally, determines the trajectory of thought and action because of its un-prethinkability.<sup>18</sup> Where Phillips erroneously casts

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*Positive Philosophy.*

<sup>16</sup> See John Laughland, *Schelling versus Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007). The relation of politics to religion is further complicated by biographical notes from Schelling's early life at the Turbingen Seminary (where he famously roomed with Hegel and Holderlin). Some accounts suggest that Schelling was a rebel and wrote on the border of heresy, whereas Laughland suggests, based on the accounts of the instructors, that Schelling was a goody goody.

<sup>17</sup> See Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, as well as Wesley Phillips, "The Future of Speculation?" in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 8.1 (2012): 289–303.

<sup>18</sup> "Unprethinkable" is the preferred translation of Schelling's term "das Unvordenkliche." The term addresses not simply what precedes the

Schelling (and in particular Grant's use of Schelling as physicalist), as materialist in a non-political or anti-political way I would argue that Schelling's realism (however strange it appears) makes him more politically useful than Hegel.

Andrew Bowie has pointed out that there are moments of a nascent ecological politics in Schelling's work, particularly with regards to *Naturphilosophie* and Schelling's distancing from his former mentor Fichte whose pure ego-centered idealism Schelling had grown tired of. What is most problematic is that Schelling's realism is not a realism of things but a realism of powers and grounds, which are neither things nor non-things.

Even in Schelling's most idealistic phase, there are traces of a materialist (if not realist) connection. In the *System of Transcendental Idealism* Schelling discusses the possibility of a practical philosophy which follows necessarily from his Fichtean-inspired transcendental idealism. Towards the end of the text Schelling attempts to flesh out how it is that the practical can even be connected to the ideal in order to form a thought of the practical in which the subject appears to be the productive center of the universe.<sup>19</sup> Schelling writes:

That which is to be intuited as operating upon the real, must itself appear as real. Hence I cannot intuit myself operating upon the object immediately, but only as doing so by means of matter, though in that I act I must intuit this latter as identical with myself. Matter, as the immediate organ of free, outwardly directed activity, is the organic body, which must therefore appear as free and apparently capable of voluntary movements.<sup>20</sup>

Grant argues that matter, in Schelling's case, must be read in its most radical Platonic sense, as the darkest of all things that consistently resists philosophical interrogation, the reef on which so many thinkers run their thoughts aground.

Here Bennett's fondness for body over object takes on a different meaning: rather than pointing towards the deepness or limit of her strategic anthropomorphism, it instead shows a non-foundational concept that itself is a ground but since it is not a

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emergence of thought in terms of temporal sequence but that which may be beyond the very capacity of thought as we understand it.

<sup>19</sup> F.W.J. von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 184.

<sup>20</sup> Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 185.

ground in any formal sense (having abjured epistemological solidity) the body becomes a self-grounding materiality or a construction constructed in a way outside of, or means otherwise alien to, knowledge.

It is for precisely such reasons that Grant's anti-somatic reading of Schelling is so important.<sup>21</sup> Given the power-based consistency of Schelling's theory of nature—which is ultimately a speculative field physics—Grant argues that Schelling's speculations are fundamentally anti-somatic and anti-Aristotelian. By holding to an anti-somatic model of nature Grant's theory of knowledge itself becomes a process and not necessarily an ossifying capture or overly artificial construction.

If there is another reason why the young Hegelians balked at Schelling (despite his obvious anti-Hegelianism), is it possible that it was Schelling's call for a more pragmatic or at least engaged form of thinking the positive (what has been variously aligned with hermeneutics, deconstruction, and theology)?

### 2.3: THIRD PROBLEM: ŽIŽEK'S PSYCHOANALYTIC SCHELLING

The flight from the pragmatic brings us to the third problem: that of clearing the brambles Slavoj Žižek has placed on Schelling aligning him with his larger Lacanian-Hegelianism and with his use of Schelling as a figure to prove Hegel's strength through Schelling's failures namely by showing the superiority of Hegel's idealism in relation to necessity and contingency versus Schelling's appeal to actuality and reality.

In a footnote in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* Žižek assaults Schelling's critique of Hegel's logic:

According to Schelling, Hegel's error resides in his endeavor to deduce the contingent fact of existence from the notion: the pure notion of a thing can deliver only *what* the thing is, never the *fact that* it is. It is Schelling himself, however, who thereby excludes contingency from the domain of the notion: this domain is exclusively that of necessity—that is to say, what remains unthinkable for Schelling is a *contingency that pertains to the notion itself*.<sup>22</sup>

Žižek claims that Schelling wrongfully critiques Hegel's notion

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<sup>21</sup> See Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*.

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (New York: Verso, 2005), 51n11.

for its lack of contingency, responding that Schelling is unable to accept contingency within the notion. But in so doing Žižek overlooks the fact that the necessity at work for Schelling is one of endless becoming, a becoming so unhinged that it is unprethinkable, that it cannot be mentally quarantined or mediated via reflection. Contingency (and hence political possibility for our purposes here) in thought for Schelling (and by connection the raw possibility of a politics if not its proscriptive program) lies in instances of cognition being unable to ever fully grasp the idea as it is.<sup>23</sup> I will discuss this more below in relation to Spinoza.

Furthermore, following the above quotation, Žižek argues (in relation to Lacan) that Schelling's philosophy (in relation to Lacan) only thinks the irrational drives of the real whereas Hegel's logic relates directly to mathemes which operate at the level of the Lacanian Real. Žižek effectively psychologizes the irrational drives or will of Schelling's philosophy thereby making the propulsive force of both contingency and necessity in Schelling's work subjective, perhaps even more so than Hegel's. While Žižek cautiously qualifies his labeling of Schelling's philosophy as "naïve psycho-cosmic speculations," the weight of the prefix psychoclearly overrides the purportedly dogmatic or naïve cosmic work of Schelling in Žižek's view.<sup>24</sup> To throw Schelling's speculations in with any pre-critical dogmatism forgets the alliance that Schelling attempts to forge with the sciences on the whole. Instead of highlighting the materialist motions of Schelling, Žižek argues that Schelling puts the emergence of logos as that which speaks towards the imbalance in nature.<sup>25</sup> Put otherwise, Žižek takes the material instability that Schelling places in Nature and translates it into psychoanalytic terms, which disregards Schelling's relation to science as well as Schelling's critical approach to Kant's philosophy.

It is important to note, as Iain Hamilton Grant does, that, in Schelling, thought is nature's attempt to become an object to itself which is always a failed maneuver. There is nothing special (at least ontologically) about thought (it remains a part of nature). Since thought, for Schelling, is a part of nature and does not lord over it, the relation of contingency and necessity becomes a part of nature and not a problem of thinkability or logic. Ultimately the central difference between the materialisms of Žižek and that

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<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 51n11.

<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), 85.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 88.

of Schelling, is that for the former thought is self-grounding whereas, for Schelling the very question of ground is an open question (the ground of ground is an issue of nature and not one of thought since thought, as one of many products of nature, cannot capture its own conditions). Or, as Schelling states, the grounds of consciousness lay outside of consciousness.<sup>26</sup> In kind, we can say that ontology makes politics possible but it cannot lord over its form.

### 3: SCHELLING AND SPINOZA

In his youth, Schelling concluded a 1795 letter to his then friend Hegel, stating “I have become a Spinozist.” Despite his epistolary enthusiasm, Schelling’s published remarks on Spinoza are generally far more measured.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Naturphilosophie* stage, Schelling defines his philosophy of nature as a Spinozism of physics<sup>28</sup> and notes Spinoza’s struggle with the subject-object relation.<sup>29</sup> In the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Spinoza is mentioned only as an example of dogmatism.<sup>30</sup> In the 1810 Stuttgart Seminars, Schelling distinguishes the *Naturphilosophie* from Spinoza’s theories which maintain a parallelism, a mechanical physics, and ignore God’s personality (i.e., his difference from Nature).<sup>31</sup> Schelling makes similar remarks in the 1815 draft of the *Ages of the World* (104–105). Finally, Schelling spends much of the closing movement of his 1842 Berlin lectures critiquing Spinoza’s concept of God though ultimately praising Spinoza’s necessitarian argument for God.<sup>32</sup>

Two texts omitted from this list are *The Philosophical Investigations into Human Freedom* and Schelling’s lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, both of which devote more substantial discussion to Spinoza.<sup>33</sup> In both texts Schelling’s praise for and

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<sup>26</sup> Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 472.

<sup>28</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 117, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 53–54.

<sup>30</sup> Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 214.

<sup>32</sup> Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> See F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (New York:

criticism of Spinoza orbit his notion of necessary unity being, which, through its association with the divine, positively defines it as totalizing, creative and unthinkable, but negatively as erasing God's personality (i.e., difference from nature as productive, as *natura naturans*).

How does this relate to the political? Threaded throughout Schelling's discussion of Spinoza's philosophy is a critique of immanence and, in relation to this, a critique of the quietism that relates immanence to Spinoza's mechanical parallelism. The overall effect of this mechanical immanence is what Schelling calls, following Goethe, a calming effect. Schelling writes:

Spinozism is really the doctrine which sends thought into retirement, into complete quiescence; in its highest conclusions it is the system of perfect theoretical and practical quietism, which can appear beneficent in the tempestuousness of a thought which never rests and always moves.<sup>34</sup>

But how does immanence as a lesser form of being play into this?

For Spinoza, God is perfect and creates out of the necessity of that perfection, whereas for Schelling freedom, at least as the creative capacity of nature, pre-exists God, since, otherwise, God would be rife with evil or, on the other hand, would be static and lifeless. Furthermore, Spinoza's parallelism, as Hasana Sharp describes it, is that of a parallel naturalism (i.e., mind and extension do not interact but merely mirror the affects which cross both). Schelling's approach appears similar except that instead of attempting an absolute immanence (a formulation which, I believe, Schelling would find oxymoronical), Schelling seems to describe immanence as being punctuated by bouts of the transcendental. But, because Schelling sees being as always escaping thought as well as preceding it, this transcendental is not a stable transcendence guaranteeing human efficacy over nature but one which marks a break between regimes of immanence, between the distinct stratifications of being which are re-presented in our thinking and which our thinking can transgress within limits. Spinoza's thinking, on the other hand, because of the strictly main-

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SUNY Press, 2006), as well as F.W.J. Schelling, *History of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Schelling, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 66.

tained parallelism, can only think being as being in thought, or what he refers to as immanent being.<sup>35</sup>

While Schelling's essay on human freedom has been, in my opinion, over-emphasized, it is the essay which receives the most attention in Schelling's corpus (in Heidegger, Nancy, Žižek, Bloch and others) to the disregard of all else. In part, this can be justified by the all-too-often cited 'protean' nature of Schelling, of the figure of Schelling as he who could not make up his mind, and hence why this peculiar transitory text is so focused on. But for our purposes here it is important to discuss the relevance of Spinoza in particular.

In *The Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Schelling defends Spinoza from the charges of pantheism but attacks him (in ways similar to Jacobi, i.e., charging him with nihilism) as a fatalist or determinist not because of putting God into nature but for making the will (that source of freedom) a thing; that is, by explaining it in terms of extension.<sup>36</sup> Schelling seems to suggest (as is unsurprising given his comments above on Spinoza in the *Naturphilosophical* texts) that Spinoza's system could be saved by giving it an injection of dynamics.<sup>37</sup>

In this regard Schelling, on the one hand, seems to see himself as less of a realist than Spinoza, in that Spinoza too freely gave freedom to non-human entities. Yet, at the same time, Schelling levels the following critique at Kant in that Kant should have applied freedom to things in themselves:

It will always remain odd, however, that Kant, after having first distinguished things-in-themselves from appearances only negatively through their independence from time and later treating independence from time and freedom as correlate concepts in the metaphysical discussions of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, did not go further toward the thought of transferring this only possible positive concept

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<sup>35</sup> Schelling, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 21. While Schelling's use of dynamics is too complex an issue to fully grasp given the space available, it is central to the discussion, as for Schelling nature is fundamentally a source of movement. Spinoza's system is for Schelling too closed and too mechanical to allow for movement to take place. For Schelling dynamics is the science that most closely grasps the importance of addressing the centrality of movement for philosophy.



of the in-itself also to things; thereby he would immediately have raised himself to a higher standpoint of reflection and above the negativity that is the character of his theoretical philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

From this, Markus Gabriel argues that the higher realism suggested by Schelling is in fact a form of Hegelian objective idealism.<sup>39</sup> Given the demands of Schelling's *naturphilosophie*-as-will and as the ontological unity of the philosophy of identity, how is it that the 'higher realism' of Schelling is the force of the subject all the way down and not (in a more realist vein) that freedom is a name for a more deep-seeded dynamism which exceeds the subject.

In a daunting footnote in *the History of Modern Philosophy* following Schelling's dissatisfaction with Kant dismissing the possibility of knowing the super-sensual Schelling writes:

[I]f one had to distinguish a *Prius* and *Posterius* in sensuous representation, then the *true Prius* in it would be what Kant calls "thing in itself"; those concepts of the understanding which it shows itself as affected by in my *thinking* are, according to Kant himself, precisely that by which it first becomes object of my thinking, thus is able to be experienced by me; the *true Posterius* is, then, not, as he assumes, that element which remains after the concepts of the understanding have been removed, for rather, if I take these way then this is the being . . . which is unthinkable, *before* and outside the representation, it is thus the absolute *Prius* of the representation, but the true *Posterius* is precisely this Unknown (which he himself compares with the x of mathematics).<sup>40</sup>

Schelling, in the above quote from the *Freedom Essay* and here from *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, indirectly addressing the patchwork problem of the 2nd edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, seems to be wondering why Kant did not grant the non-sensible the pure dynamics of nature and then, on top of this, assume that once removed of their experiential sheen, that the

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: A Plea for a Return to Post-Kantian Idealism," in *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum Books, 2009), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel and Žižek, "Introduction."

<sup>40</sup> Schelling, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 104.

concepts would be not only thinkable but more than thinkable: *actual*.

In this sense, Spinoza's conceptualization of freedom boils down to the virtues of humans (to the degree which we can balance our power which stems from our essence in relation to exterior causes) but in the context of either the realm of either extension or the realm of thought. For Schelling, freedom is the dynamism that is creation (of both thought and nature) and is constrained by the way in which that creation has laid down the sediment of actuality. That is, for Spinoza freedom is a combinatorial game, whereas for Schelling it is a simultaneous wrestling with time and the ideal absorption of time against the limits and constraints of material existence into the past and into the future.

What then, from the historical material, can be extracted of at least the ontological base of a Schellingian politics? Given the name of Schelling in place of Spinoza and / or Deleuze, what kind of vital materialisms could one create, what kind of politics of nature or naturalization could create that do not weigh too heavily on *is*-ness determining *ought*-ness?

#### 4: GARRE AND GRANT

While Schelling's numerous systems could be taken as significantly disjunctive phases, this, as Iain Hamilton Grant has pointed out, overlooks the themes which run throughout his work, a theme which is directly tied to his non-systematicity.<sup>41</sup> In an early letter Schelling writes:

Nothing upsets the philosophical mind more than when he hears that from now on all philosophy is supposed to lie caught in the shackles of one system. Never has he felt greater than when he sees before him the infinitude of knowledge. The entire dignity of his science consists in the fact that it will never be completed. In that moment in which he would believe to have completed his system, he would become unbearable to himself. He would, in that moment, cease to be a creator, and would instead descend to being an instrument of his creation.<sup>42</sup>

This is coupled with Grant's assertion throughout his *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* that the main focus of Schelling's

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<sup>41</sup> See Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 3.

work is that being precedes thinking. The strongest basis for this trajectory is Schelling's non-concept of the unprethinkable. By this Schelling means that there is something (yet not even a thing) which is not even unthinkable but rather *unprethinkable*; this means that it is totally outside of thought which may or may not become thinkable in the future. This non-concept, which Heidegger takes and translates into purely hermeneutic terms, is what drives Schelling to try his hand at different systems. Schelling is less a protean thinker in this regard than he is a prismatic thinker of the same unthinkable and unprethinkable being which precedes thought. It is this problematic which also forces Schelling to have a divided approach to philosophy, whether the system of identity or the *Naturphilosophical*. While multiple approaches to philosophy are addressing the same field (in terms of the unthinkable, thinkable, and the manifestations of both in the other to various degrees) it does not suffice to collapse the approaches into a more general materialism given the unthinkability of nature in the last instance on the one hand (which dynamics comes closest to addressing) and the over-thinkability or reflexivity of the transcendental project on the other hand. In other words, to collapse both into the phrase materialism, says little about the critical positions and different kind of impacts both the real and the ideal have.

Two theorists (though there are many more) who have brought Schelling into the present are Arran Garre and Iain Hamilton Grant. While the former is overtly political in his use of Schelling, the latter is not political but has also done the most to make Schelling a materialist or realist in the ways similar to which Bennett and Sharp have done with Spinoza. It is my hope that combining them will bring Schelling into the debate about the relation between politics and ontology.

Garre has utilized Schelling in numerous works to discuss ecological problems and the concepts of nature. In his extensive essay "From Kant to Schelling To Process Metaphysics," Garre argues that Schelling's philosophy should be less associated with the project of German Idealism and more so connected to Process Philosophies such as those of William James and Alfred North Whitehead. At the level of content, Garre goes to great lengths to show how Schelling's ideas in his *Naturphilosophie* in particular prefigured concepts such as emergence and field physics. Furthermore, Garre argues that Schelling's concept of nature and of humanity's relationship to it provide the possibility of a global ecological civilization. What exactly that entails is left unclear.

Garre admits that he is (at least partially) following Andrew Bowie's lead in terms of reading Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* as a hermeneutics of nature. At the same time, Garre utilizes throughout his essay Iain Hamilton Grant's *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* as book which argues for the centrality of nature to Schelling's project.

A serious point of contention, however, is apparent in Garre's concern that Grant grossly misreads Schelling's relationship to the Copernican revolution. As counter evidence, Garre cites pages from *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, where Schelling heaps praise upon Kant. However, the pages that Garre cites precede roughly one hundred pages of Schelling critiquing Kant. Furthermore, from a young age to his twilight years Schelling asserts the importance of Kant (similar to his comments on Spinoza) but believes that while Kant found a form or methodology that works (the critical or negative philosophy), it nonetheless works best as an academic discipline, as a philosophy which investigates itself and that cannot adequately address nature outside of us. Contra Garre, Schelling's unending assertions that being precedes thinking is *de facto* contradictory to even a kid-gloved handling of the division of the noumenal and phenomenal in Kant's critical system.

Garre's comments on Schelling may be in part due to Grant's abjuration of the political (and serious criticism of the ethical) in Schelling opposed to Bowie's reading as well as many others. However, what Garre does not acknowledge is that the focus on *The Philosophical Investigations* reads a Kantianism (or Hegelianism or Fichteanism) into Schelling which violently undoes the radical premise of his system: namely that freedom is a natural fact and the cause of and material from which most of the world is built is unknown and a smaller fraction is fundamentally unpre-thinkable.

While the difficulties of this system in many ways led Schelling back into theology, from which he began, this is not a necessity. Even Schelling himself would say so. As Bruce Matthews expertly demonstrates in his introduction to *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, Schelling's theological adherence is a decision, it is (drawing a connection to CS Peirce) a form of abductive logic, or what is in many ways an educated guess. Abductive logic was, for Peirce, *the* maxim of pragmatism.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Incidentally Garre wrote a piece on the semiotics of climate change utilizing Schelling and Peirce. But Garre concludes by attempting to connect Schelling and Peirce to Ellis Lovelock's Gaia theory. I do not see

The discussion of pragmatism, combined with a radical theory of nature, brings us back to the philosophies of Bennett and Sharp because their use of Dewey. While Bennett's use of Dewey is interesting, it becomes difficult to see (as already noted) how Bennett can grant humans the capacity of arbitration over (or at least within) the parliament of things. It is here where epistemology appears as a necessary means (the only means) for constructing ontological politics. Schelling's epistemology, as Matthews has shown, is strange, as it relies on abductive inference as well as capacities of knowing which Kant found less than stable; particularly intuition. But Schelling's productive intuition is a kind of construction of a second nature, in which not only concepts but concepts combined with a productive intuition (an expanded empiricism, as he calls it in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*) which involves both authentic and emphatic knowing.<sup>44</sup> Humans are not lords of nature but "autoepistemic organs of nature's self organizing actuality."<sup>45</sup> This does not eradicate the capacity nor the responsibility of humanism regards to nature but makes the fact of being human a fact produced by nature.

## 5: CONCLUSION

As Garre and Bowie have suggested, Schelling's approach to nature demands a thinking of nature that is rational as well as affective. This is unsurprising given the inability of either a plethora of scientific data as well as ethical and emotional pleas to force serious change.

We may question the ease with which politics can be installed as an ecology given the instability of the human element, but it remains true that our ideas of ontology of metaphysics affects the political whether we intend this or not. So if we are going to pursue political ontologies, this cannot merely be a cover for avoiding issues of *ought* in the guise of issues of *is*. For Žižek, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that German Idealism (bound to Lacan) has been more and more construed as a body of knowledge most concerned with the genesis and operation of the sub-

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the political force of this. See Arran Garre, "The Semiotics of Global Warming: Combating Semiotic Corruption," *Theory and Science* 9.2 (2007): <http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol9.2/Gare.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce Matthews, "Translators Introduction," in Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 9.

ject, that strange unknown X which we live inside. I think this is a far too limited image of German Idealism at large and it misrepresents Schelling's work in particular. Schelling is the German Idealist most concerned with the material world, with nature as productivity *and* as a collection of products. Politically, this may have been less appealing in a time where the material crippling of the world through environmental degradation was an unimaginable impossibility; this is simply no longer the case.

While political ontology is a sensible salve to this predicament, it begs several questions. While the ontological democracy of Jane Bennett, Hasana Sharp and others is tempting, I do not believe it adequately accounts for either the capacity nor the responsibility of human beings in a world of things produced by a raw, chaotic, productivity known as nature; a nature that then subsists in a complex network of things through and around us. Schelling's articulation of what could be called a transcendental dynamism attempts to probe the relation between the ontological and the normative, between nature being the face of the ontological dimension of freedom and freedom (in a transcendental sense) being a derivation of that nature that in turn appears as a kind of symmetry break in the productivity of nature. Transcendental dynamism is that which attempt to explain how nature lays down a new set of conditions in which nature operates by different rules broadly construed that are mentally apprehended for us.

What do I mean by this? The transcendental is not an airy concept sewn from gossamer thread floating about us. Grant, following Schelling, makes the transcendental that which gives grounds, that inaccessible process which determines grounds of existence whereby being itself is thought of as a pure productivity stemming from unprethinkable chaos. As Iain Hamilton Grant argues in "Movements of the World," transcendental philosophy focuses on attempting to find the universal "morphogenetic field" from which all objects and subjects are derived.<sup>46</sup> This field is only ever force or motion<sup>47</sup> from which things derive, a derivation which cannot be one of kind (as only forces can interrupt forces) but the result of which is a vertical wasteland of objects, a graveyard of stratifications.

While our capacity to apprehend these objects, or the ways in which we think them may seem to make the world flat, such flatness does not account for the thick skin of time layered over each

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<sup>46</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, "Movements of the World: The Sources of Transcendental Philosophy," in *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3 (2011): 15.

<sup>47</sup> Grant, "Movements of the World," 16.

object, nor for the very different grounds of production for each. Affectivity and connectivity cannot account for pragmatic access (as well as awareness of) of ecological problems. The derision of local engagements in that they do not directly challenge the system at large (whether statist, capitalist, or otherwise) tends to overlook this point. Local engagement is not *the* answer, nor is it worthless. This is why for Schelling philosophy must be systematic but never a single system that is closed and completed. This makes no sense if reality is by its very nature dynamic, and thought must be as organized as it can be without becoming mechanical to the point of failure. How can politics be different?

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