

ON THE POLITICAL USES OF CREATIVE DARKNESS: FREEDOM, SUBJECTIVITY,
AND NORMATIVITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between nature and politics informs the tradition of Western political thought from its inception. In its modern formulation, this tradition generally opposes the domains of the natural and the political, characterizing the natural in terms of determinism or necessity and the political in terms of decision or freedom. In the context of the ecological crisis, my dissertation pursues a range of questions about how theorizing nature and politics in new and different ways allows us to revise core political theoretical concepts like freedom, subjectivity, and normativity.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I repurpose elements from the 19th-century German Idealist F. W. J. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in order to lay the groundwork necessary to characterize nature in terms of an alternative process philosophy of nature I call *transcalar ecology*. Transcalar ecology lets us remap our conceptual landscape to allow categorial domains like freedom, subjectivity, and normativity to appear within nature, rather than in contraposition to nature. Similarly, Schelling's own materialism emphasizes the dynamic of emergence as a material process that nature generates and sustains. Accordingly, I redescribe Schelling's materialism in terms of what I call *noir materialism*, which reconstructs our understanding of matter in resolutely processual terms. As striking examples of this dynamic, I discuss film noir and dark matter. Ultimately, this provides me with an ontological toolkit useful for breaking away from the modern conception of matter as dead or static and the perceived downstream consequences of this for theories of the subject.

In Chapter 3, I use Schelling's philosophy of *freedom and evil* to illustrate how freedom in nature is possible. For Schelling, it is only in the domain of nature that freedom can take place, for freedom is an ontological power that takes shape as the creative agency of subjects. Freedom

results from an ongoing existential decision between good and evil that ultimately issues forth ontological alterations in the order of things. Schelling defines evil as the willful identification of the subject with the entirety of existence. In this regard, Schelling's definition of evil helps us recharacterize the ecological crisis as an ontological disorder. Foreclosing on evil opens up the possibility of reconsidering the relationship between nature and normativity, and redescribing freedom in this way allows the eventual reconciliation of nature and politics, at least conceptually.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I propose a theory of the ecologically conditioned subject and explore some questions about the relationship between nature and normativity as such. In the former chapter, I develop at length the concept of *companion ecologies* – composite, multimodal phenomena that mosaically constitute the ecological conditions necessary for the emergence and individuation of embodied human subjects. To flesh out this concept further, I discuss architecture, the microbiome, and poststructuralist anthropology in the Amazonian context. In the latter chapter, I elaborate the groundwork of a new normative naturalism, or a theory of *econormativity*, which articulates an appeal to the normative implications of our irreducibly ecological condition. From the Italian political theorist Roberto Esposito's work on biopolitics and immunitarian dynamics, I salvage a naturalistic conception of normative obligation capable of informing political judgment without introducing unwanted elements of coercion.

“Genuine awareness of the Real is to be found in the obscuring powers of darkness.”

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INTRODUCTION: THE NIGHTSIDE OF NATURE

THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The ecological crisis is getting worse, and recent years have been marked increasingly by reports of a damaged planet growing rapidly so toxic and unstable as to threaten the material conditions that sustain our existence.¹ Every year, our empirical understanding of the causes and consequences of the ecological crisis increases. However, by now it should be more than evident that the data by themselves do not seem to stimulate adequate change or produce substantially mitigating effects. After reviewing the reality of the ecological crisis – for example, the occurrence of the sixth mass extinction, or the seriousness of near-term climate change projections – we cannot rely on anodyne, familiar narratives about how to resolve our predicament. Numerous stakeholders have attempted to respond proportionately, but there have been systemic failures both of our apprehension of the ecological crisis and of every attempt to forestall it. Bluntly, the international community has failed to prevent the ecological crisis from intensifying, and the environmental movement that started in the 1960s has failed to effect cultural or policy shifts appropriate to the scale or severity of the problem.

Indeed, with each passing year it is as if we dedicate ourselves anew to the project of destroying our world.² It is as if, as a civilization, we are waging a war, and the enemy in this

¹ For example, consider Arctic ice loss, the contamination of natural resources, coral reef depletion, desertification, ecosystem service disruption, extreme weather events, famine, force multiplication of conflicts, increased coastal flooding, increased duration of anomalous wildfire, increased pressure on groundwater supplies, intensification of allergy seasons, ocean acidification, prominent drought, refugeeism, seasonal shifts, and widespread species displacements and extinctions.

² Bill McKibben, “How Extreme Weather Is Shrinking the Planet,” *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2018, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/26/how-extreme-weather-is-shrinking-the-planet> and Brad Plumer and Nadja Popovich, “CO2 Emissions Were Flat for Three Years. Now They’re Rising Again,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2017, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/13/climate/co2-emissions-rising-again.html>.

war – i.e., nature – has both an abstract and a material aspect. It is material insofar as the conscious or unconscious target of our maneuvers comprises the very conditions of our existence, the stuff that makes us up, or what Aldo Leopold characterizes in terms of “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”³ It is abstract because we also have declared through our actions and inactions, if rarely in words so direct, that our enemy, effectively, is something like nature as such.

However we understand nature, it remains unclear what winning this war might look like. According to one view – perhaps the prevailing view – winning this war means the functionally absolute assertion of human dominion, warranted by some purportedly exceptional feature of the human species (e.g., divine ensoulment, evolved intelligence, or technical control). That our quest for ontological imperium degrades and imperils our lives and ravages the planet remains of secondary concern. To quote William Sherman, “War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.”

The irony here is that victory in such a war necessarily produces defeat. The war on nature is a self-consuming war, because we are a part of the processual complex that nature is. Therefore, trying to eliminate nature ultimately means eliminating ourselves. Liken such a war to an auto-immune disorder, in which the body indiscriminately attacks its own constituents. Never mind the fact that bodies only exist as dynamic assemblies of such constituents. In an auto-immune disorder, the body kills itself precisely in order to benefit or save itself. Ironically, the path of prospective salvation leads inexorably to death.

As inheritors and occupants of the ecological crisis, we find ourselves mired in these difficult, perverse conditions, as if subjects of an omnipresent yet largely unspoken *Nerobefehl*,

³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 203-04.

which substitutes destruction for profit and suicide for success. Nothing human makes it out of the future we are crafting. Your children are not going to survive and flourish in the world we will give them, no matter how rich you are, nor how wise your methods. Faced with the planetary nihilism I describe, one question that requires our attention is this: How can we spur people to care about the ecological crisis in politically efficacious ways? Of course, we already know that people do care about the ecological crisis, to some extent, but one puzzle that haunts our predicament no less is the apparent gap between that care and the absence of needful consequences and outcomes. In other words, we may care about the ecological crisis a great deal, but either we do not care enough to arrest it, or we remain unable to convert care into reliably effective action.

Do not let the emphasis on care fool you. If the roots of action are passionate, then care cannot simply be a matter of ethical comportment, of mood, or of altered perspective. Rather, care refers to the compulsion to act, to disturb, to organize, and to respond. However, it seems likely that the problem is not how to transition from apathy to care. As a global civilization, we are not apathetic in the least. Our passions largely seem directed toward the war effort. We care about control, profits, reproduction, and security, and we care in ways that enthusiastically generate and sustain complex, coordinated programs of ecocide, exploitation, and extraction. We work very hard at this. Viewed in this way, there is tremendous political efficacy in the prosecution of our war on nature at every level, from personal behavior and consumer choices to corporate and governmental policy formation.

The task we face does not therefore consist in transforming apathy into care. Rather, it is the more arduous task of endeavoring to disturb and transform antecedent passionate and political attachments. These attachments, and their contingent, nonlinear histories, structure how we

conceive of the distribution of possibilities for action and imagination available to us. To revise our attachments, we first must refuse to accept what is given to us as possible, because what is given to us as possible has delivered us into one of the most severe and existentially threatening crises in human history, with no ready resolution in sight. “If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?”⁴

Accordingly, we arrive at a theoretical decision point. Either humanity is such that our commitment to the death drive will lead us to extinction – whatever the professed reason for this determinism (e.g., path dependence, species maladaptation, or total depravity) – or else it is possible to shift our attachments and, thereby, to transform our actions and ourselves. I say this decision point is theoretical not because it is abstract or impracticable, but because it involves committing to a basic philosophical decision about who we are, about what is possible for us, and about how we are supposed to act and live. Choosing the path of extinction means that there is very little else to say. If extinction is our destiny, then we have a limited range of options left: depressive palliation or manic defensiveness, misanthropic rage or tragic hedonism.

Choosing the path of transformation, however, means that we must direct our attention and care to the conditions of the real – that is to say, to the ecological crisis in all its horror, the overbearing awareness of which becomes increasingly like hearing a fire alarm “that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.”⁵ Caring about the ecological crisis in ways that might impel political efficacy derives from an engagement with the real. This openness is multidimensional, which is to say that it ranges from intellectual apprehension to bodily responsivity, from collective action to individual imagination. In short, we need to learn how to care about new

⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 175.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism” (1929), *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 239.

things in new ways. We must become what Sara Ahmed calls *affect aliens*: “to be an affect alien is to experience alien affects – to be out of line with the public mood, not to feel the way others feel.”⁶ Regarding the ecological crisis, then, if there is a clear failure of political efficacy across the board, I suggest that this failure has a great deal to do with how our affective habits and attachments as a civilization and our concepts and theoretical assumptions coproduce each other. If we want those affects, attachments, or assumptions to shift, then we must examine and unsettle their conceptual infrastructure. Consequently, the task we face – as political theorists and as feeling, thinking, vulnerable bodies – is, first, to understand the background of theoretical assumptions that makes this crisis appear so intractable and, second, to propose ends and exits that speak to our predicament and enable meaningful responses to it. I turn to this task now.

First, I examine how and why the concept of nature inflects the ecological crisis so significantly. In general, the concept of nature configures the background of theoretical assumptions in which the ecological crisis takes shape. Insofar as nature and politics are construed as constituting radically distinct or separable domains, we are attached to a concept of nature that precludes efficacious political action in relation to the ecological crisis. Because these terms are fundamentally misconstrued – particularly nature, which often gets described in terms of its imputed blind necessity – we find ourselves neither able to take action in ways that address the crisis appropriately, nor able to imagine and occupy alternative political forms of life. Accordingly, we must reconceive the relationship between nature and politics so that our assumptions and attachments can shift in ways that open up new ontological opportunities and political possibilities. I endeavor to do this in this dissertation project as a whole.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 157.

Next, I discuss why I choose to reconstruct a philosophy of nature specifically as a process philosophy. Regulating this reconstruction is a framing device, a powerful and flexible metaphor I have crafted, which I call *creative darkness*. Not only are there longstanding historical and symbolic associations between darkness and the natural or the material, but the necessary imbrication of creativity and darkness captures aptly the dynamic interaction of novelty, opacity, and plurality that gives rise to each of the theoretical innovations I propose. Ultimately, the metaphor of nature as creative darkness names a politically generative ontological framework. Characterizing nature in these processual, secular terms allows me to foreground the emergence of ontological novelty in the form of free political action by ecologically conditioned subjects. In other words, creative darkness provides a productive register in which to reimagine what it means to be a political animal. In this regard, I propose to reconstruct a form of anthropocentrism, but it is a *dark anthropocentrism*, which is to say, one that foregrounds the distinctly human subject precisely by decentering the category of the human and showing how that category emerges only by virtue of the darkly inhuman conditions that produce it.

This alternative process philosophy of nature helps us respond to the ecological crisis because it evidences how a strong theoretical redescription of a problem ultimately transforms that problem. As a kind of pragmatist, I think theoretical descriptions function like tools that help (or hinder) us in navigating our environment.⁷ We are failing to navigate the ecological crisis effectively, in no small part because our affective and conceptual vocabularies are insufficient to the task. Indeed, they seem to be contributing to the problem by distorting our ability to formulate novel pathways of action and imagination alike. If this is true, then we need strong

⁷ Gideon Calder, *Rorty's Politics of Redescription* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).

theoretical redescrptions like the one I provide – indeed, perhaps as many of them as possible. Creative darkness has valuable political uses precisely because it is such an alienating, strong redescription of ourselves and our relationship to the world.

Finally, I provide a brief prospectus of the five chapters constituting the substance of this project. I explore how they, in a purposefully patchwork fashion, allow me to propose overlapping speculative answers to some longstanding questions that have plagued attempts to theorize nature and politics on the same plane of immanence. Specifically, I elaborate some of the uses to which creative darkness can be put. Redescrbing nature in terms of *transcalar ecology* (Chapter 1) ultimately helps me intervene and reconfigure some core political theoretical concepts throughout later chapters. Consequently, I provide novel reformulations of new materialism as *noir materialism* (Chapter 2), of the conceptual usefulness of *freedom and evil* (Chapter 3), of subjectivity in terms of *companion ecologies* (Chapter 4), and of *econormativity* as a framework of obligation (Chapter 5).

CONCEPTS OF NATURE

A specter haunts the ecological crisis – the specter of nature – and we must tarry with this specter.

On the one hand, this should surprise us. One commonplace of contemporary environmental thinking is that we live at the end of nature. As Bill McKibben and many other environmentalists have documented, the human signature now can be found everywhere on Earth.⁸ Go for a walk in the rainforests of Borneo, and you will cut yourself on an old tin can. Sail to the farthest reaches of the Pacific Ocean, and there you will find a widening gyre of

⁸ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 2006) and Paul Wapner, *Living through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010).

assorted debris, chemical sludge, and polymer particles.⁹ There's even garbage on the Moon.¹⁰

This is not to suggest that nature was once a pristine wilderness, but now has become a corrupted wasteland. Current conditions notwithstanding, it is very likely that our figurations of wilderness have always been romanticized constructions.¹¹ However, as McKibben argues, it is not the material processes of nature as a whole that have ended – although the disruptive effects of industrial civilization upon those processes are manifold – but rather the concept or the idea of nature that is lost to us, the feeling that such a thing as nature any longer exists, untouched by the trail of the human serpent.

In the Anthropocene, the concept of nature has become even more embattled. Partly, this assault marks the continuation of trends in 20th century critical theory and postmodern philosophy that dismiss the concept of nature either as an instrument of ideological domination or political authority, or else as a hegemonic concept relying upon debunked or infelicitous categorial distinctions.¹² As Jedediah Purdy notes, the concept of nature, historically, has been “a vessel for many inconsistent ideas, whether one claims to be following it or overcoming it.”¹³ In the Anthropocene, the implication of humankind in the entirety of our planetary landscape raises new and interesting questions about the conceptual status of nature. Can we continue to afford nature any conceptual independence from the category of the human, if the human appears to be

⁹ “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” *National Geographic Society*, 2016, accessed February 15, 2020, <http://nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/>.

¹⁰ Megan Garber, “The Trash We’ve Left on the Moon,” *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2012, accessed February 15, 2020, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/the-trash-weve-left-on-the-moon/266465/>.

¹¹ *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998) and *Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1993); *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*, eds. Donald S. Moore, et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

¹³ Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 13.

driving – or even only affecting – so-called natural processes to such an extent? Many environmental theorists suggest otherwise, arguing that the concept of nature is dated or destructive, monolithically indefensible or mythological.

Both Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton argue that the concept of nature has outlived its usefulness – if, indeed, it was ever useful for anything at all. For Latour, the world consists of discontinuous but overlapping modes of existence and networks of actants.¹⁴ For him, nature as we know it is a concept or an image erected in the early modern period in order to try to secure the divide between nature, or the nonhuman realm, and culture, or the human domain. Latour argues that such a divide has been an illusion since its inception. Now it is time for the fantasy of inhuman nature to be dispelled, to be replaced with a new myth, that of Gaia – a cheerfully anthropocentric instrumentalization of ecological and human networks specifically constructed to serve material and political ends.¹⁵ Similar to Latour, Morton argues that the “fetish” or “transcendental principle” of nature “ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its lifeforms.”¹⁶ The concept of nature hypostatizes what are, in fact, complex, monadic assemblages and shifting networks of closed, enclosing objects.¹⁷ In place of nature, Morton endeavors to provide us with an object-oriented ecology, one that captures the modal diversity

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Medford: Polity Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5, 2.

¹⁷ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013). Echoing Graham Harman, Morton writes:

[...] things withdraw, which means that they limit what one can think about them. Things also contain other things that are not strictly them – just as a zebra is not reducible to its atoms, from an OOO point of view, and yet a zebra is composed of just these particular atoms. Objects are thus inclosures in Priest’s and Garfield’s terms. They are “closed” – a zebra is not a giraffe – and yet not closed – they contain things that are not themselves (28).

and multiscalarity of the ecological by incorporating both everyday objects, in all their inaccessible tangibility, and what he terms “hyperobjects,” or “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (e.g., global warming or pandemics).¹⁸

On the other hand, even among relatively new environmental discourses like these, nature’s hauntological presence nevertheless remains. Can such an expansive term truly be discarded or escaped? After nature, the end of nature, the death of nature – all these theoretical gestures and performances intend to secure some purchase upon the world by dispensing with the concept of nature, and yet all of them refer back to it. Nature necessarily haunts the post-natural; it is the absent or occluded referent that makes intelligible the latter term. Accordingly, while the invocation of nature may seem passé, the concept of nature looms large over the landscape of environmental thinking, like the animate and anonymous rustling of Algernon Blackwood’s willows.

So what would happen to our political theories if we were to foreground the concept of nature now, at the very moment of its apparent loss? What would happen to our sense of the subject, and to our understanding of political action and possibility, if we were to take nature seriously again, to reconsider its purchase upon us and its pragmatic use-value for us? There are good reasons to think we ought to retain this concept, to reconsider its meaning, and to repurpose it theoretically today.

Generally speaking, there are three good reasons to retain the concept of nature. First, there is the conceptual and historical richness of the concept. Invoking this richness requires that we reevaluate one of the principal reasons why theorists like Latour, Morton, and Purdy suggest we discard the concept in the first place – namely, its polysemy and the patchwork history of its

¹⁸ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

use. However, the patchwork history of the concept of nature is a resource, not a detriment. Not only does “the rich ambiguity of the term [nature] resist its premature reification,” as Ted Toadvine observes, but it also provides the resources for a speculative naturalism such as what I propose.¹⁹ Next, there is the degree to which the concept of nature alludes to that which simultaneously conditions and exceeds our own creatureliness. By this, I intend to evoke the various senses in which nature can be used to refer to the resolutely inhuman dimensions of the world – to the whole, to the great outdoors in the strongest possible terms. Accordingly, the concept of nature refers to the inhuman conditions of the human – just as, in some fashion, material nature environs or situates the human body. Last, the very term “nature” unsettles some of the underlying assumptions that inform our ongoing cultural conversation about “the environment.” By referring to those determining or subsidiary conditions that surround some privileged site, at whatever scale, the concept of environment preserves an ecologically problematic distinction between entity and environment, between person and place.

There is, however, a tangled history of the concept of nature – a history that often has been deeply troubled. This is especially the case insofar as nature and politics have been intertwined by various philosophers and theorists. Ostensibly, the relationship between nature and politics informs the entirety of Western political thought, from Plato and Aristotle to the present.

Consider the contrast between the Greek term φύσις (*physis*) – which refers to ongoing processes of change or growth – and the Latin translation of that term, *natura* (whence the English word “nature”) – which stems from *nasci*, referring to the act of birthing. For a philosopher like Aristotle, nature encompasses the self-contained but dynamic principles of

¹⁹ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2009), 7. Thanks to Arran Gare and Leon Niemoczynski for the term “speculative naturalism.”

development that animate or inform every entity in existence.²⁰ By contrast, after the Roman appropriation of the term, the philosophical discourses of nature increasingly take on the signification of some character of necessity that determines the ontological constitution of a given entity. As such, we can see the contours of two rather different cosmoses: the cosmos of φύσις is more developmental, subject to dynamic self-alteration, while the cosmos of *natura* is more determined, even deterministically inborn. Analogously, consider the contrast between Aristotle's concept of the political – defined by him in teleological terms such that the political community as a whole must aim at the good life for all of its members – and the highly administrative or agonistic paradigms of politics that emerge in modern and late modern figures like Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber, and Carl Schmitt.²¹

Indeed, often philosophies of nature that portray nature in deterministic terms detach the human from the natural in order to preserve some sense of autonomy, mastery, or self-determination. This is particularly true in the modern period, and the early modern conception of nature that emerges during the scientific revolution in Europe is especially relevant here. The early modern conception of nature gets articulated almost entirely in terms of its separation from the category of the human, and the human condition is examined and postulated as if it occurred apart from or even in conflict with nature. Nature and culture, so the story goes, are distinct and separate spheres of inquiry and interest.²² Nature, specifically, is projected as an ontological domain exclusively characterized by causal determinism, mechanism, and necessity. It is described as base or passive in some way and, therefore, ideally or necessarily subject to human

²⁰ Sheldon M. Cohen, *Aristotle on Nature and Incomplete Substance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and Adriel Trott, *Aristotle on the Nature of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²² For an intriguing argument that complicates this distinction from the very start, see Latour, *Modern*.

directives. As examples, consider two exemplary theorists of the modern conception of nature, Francis Bacon and René Descartes.

Bacon argues that nature is passive, or without agency, and secretive. The natural world is subject to a rigorous logic of linear cause and effect, so it can contain no agency on its own terms. For Bacon, agency is the product of critical observation and investigation, which are processes that only properly skeptical human inquirers can perform. In order to purchase agency, which Bacon conceives in terms of the control or direction of the causal forces latent in nature, the scientific method is needed. This means that real agency cannot exist without rigorous methodological standards and practices. Ultimately, Bacon thinks of agency in terms of the ability to produce desired effects. To produce desired effects, the empirical and theoretical nature of causation must be understood. For Bacon, therefore, nature is secretive because it does not expose the causal logic of events to observers unless those observers are aided by batteries of rigorous methodological instruments. On the one hand, the purpose of these instruments is to provide inquiry with tools intended to make systemic inductive errors less likely.²³ On the other hand, Bacon's project entails the complete epistemological remapping of the natural world so as to effectuate its total submission to human ends. Hence why he refers to the purpose of the new science as "to generate and superinduce on a given body a new nature" in accordance with the methodological instruments he endeavors to construct.²⁴

Descartes agrees with Bacon that relying upon a rigorous methodology is necessary for approaching nature scientifically.²⁵ Unlike Bacon, however, Descartes ontologizes nature in a

²³ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, trans. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Julie Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Bacon, *Organon*, 192.

²⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (New York: Hackett, 1998).

very particular way.²⁶ Descartes is an ontological dualist, which means that he thinks the world is comprised of two metaphysical substances: matter and mind. Like Bacon, Descartes understands matter entirely in mechanistic terms. He does so because this buys him tremendous explanatory power. In the context of the new science, alongside technological innovations spurring the elaboration of the sciences into explicitly philosophical registers, mechanism offers a way both to conceive of nature as wholly material and to explain the causal operation of matter such that it can be understood and, optimally, redirected.

However, Descartes does not want to eliminate mind from existence altogether.²⁷ Keeping the category of mind lets Descartes practice and theorize the new science while also permitting him to remain within a received tradition of specifically Christian dualism. Retaining mind as a metaphysical substance that supervenes upon matter allows the many norms and structures of political and religious life to remain unthreatened by the determinism that the mechanistic view of matter implies. It is difficult to overemphasize how fundamentally and intimately such norms and structures are entangled with metaphysics – that is, with arguments, assumptions, and speculations about the ontological structure of the world and our relationship to it. In summary, then, Descartes separates mind and matter into two ontological substances because he conceives of nature as material (and matter as mechanistic), but he does not want to abandon any of the traditional vocabularies of morality or politics.

So, initially, it seems like Descartes solves both a philosophical and a political problem in one stroke. The problem is posed by the profound tension between, on the one hand, the

²⁶ René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, trans. Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁷ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Justin Skirry, *Descartes and the Metaphysics of Human Nature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006).

perceived need for a mechanistic apprehension of nature in order to ratify apparent gains made by early modern science and, on the other hand, the desire to retain the categories and concepts regulating, or even structuring, political life (e.g., decision, freedom, normativity, responsibility, etc.). By separating matter and mind, Descartes gives us two domains – one domain (the material) is determined by a rigorously mechanistic causal logic and the other (the immaterial) allows for the distinctively human practices that compose politics in the first place.

More generally, then, especially since the early modern period, nature in relation to politics is often approached in one of two ways. Either it provides the ontological space in which politics takes place, necessarily serving some strongly normative or regulatory role, or else it functions as the contrapositive of politics altogether. Conversely, the political gets imagined either as determined by natural imperative, or else as occurring freely in some supranatural dimension.

In terms of the first approach, take the two following examples. First, consider the prevalence of both conservative and critical theoretical readings of Plato and Aristotle, in which both figures are seen to rely upon invocations of nature that support structures of political exclusion. For the conservative critic, the ancients endorse and elaborate a kind of political inequality as a necessary function of the natural order – and this is received by those critics either as a felicitous feature or as a hard fact that must be acknowledged and integrated into any practicable political theory whatsoever.²⁸ By contrast, for the critical theorist, it is precisely such inequality in classical political philosophy that needs to be exposed and expunged.²⁹ As

²⁸ For a representative selection of the conservative interpretation, see Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Thomas Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

²⁹ See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), as well as the longstanding literature on Aristotle's arguments about natural slavery and women.

such, the critical theorist and the conservative agree that the use of nature by the ancients serves to legitimate various political inequalities. Indeed, a concern about the ways in which the invocation of nature can be used as such a legitimating strategy informs much critical theory on the topic. A second, more contemporary example can be found in biopolitical discourses ranging from social Darwinist political thought (including eugenic theory and practice throughout the 19th and 20th centuries), sociobiological reductionism, and thanatopolitical projects of all kinds. For much of biopolitics, some conception of nature is taken to provide strong normative guidance for bettering society, often by eliminating or excluding supposedly undesirable or unnatural elements of the population.³⁰

As for the second approach, consider the degree to which many political theorists have sharpened the distinction between the human and nature, due to the concern that the distinctiveness of human endeavors – paradigmatically, politics – may be threatened or lost entirely if collapsed into a naturalist ontology that gets conceived in terms of mere animal behavior or physical process. As examples, take Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt. For Kant, nature is defined as the totality of appearances, entirely subject to a rigorously mechanistic logic of cause and effect.³¹ Normative judgments and principles derive their legitimacy from universal reason, not from anything or anywhere inside the natural order of things.³² Kant argues that this disarticulation of the natural and the normative secures a variety of theoretical goods, from

³⁰ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003) and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003). See also Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). On conflicting uses of biopolitical vocabularies, see Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, “Biopolitics: An Encounter” in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (eds.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 1-40.

³¹ Daniel Warren, *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant's Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2015). For an argument to the contrary, see Hannah Ginsborg, *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³² Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

political agency or moral freedom to legal retributivism and personal responsibility for actions taken. Similarly, Arendt views invocations of nature with intense suspicion due to how she thinks they function as the legitimating instruments of political and social structures of domination. In Arendt's case, invoking nature in political contexts indicates the presence of totalitarian aspirations.³³ This is because the appeal to nature, conceived as an appeal to necessity, forecloses upon the conception of freedom integral to her theory of action.³⁴ In both cases, this radical distinction between nature and the political gives rise to what is sometimes called the deontological subject – or, in more everyday language, that understanding of the human that endeavors to treat human agency as existentially privileged in some fashion either above and beyond or apart from nature's domain. It is worth noting how this privilege gets erected on the very basis of a conception of nature that declares nature to be precisely the domain of causal determinism, mechanism, and necessity.

Both of these ways of theorizing nature and politics are mistaken deeply. To the contrary, if nature either determines or opposes the political, then we lose any sense of the political whatsoever. Politics as the unique synthesis of collective action and collective imagination becomes impossible both if nature determines it and if nature serves as its antagonist. If nature determines our politics, then this eliminates the possibility of free action. Without the possibility of free action, collective action ceases to be action at all. It becomes mere behavior, for action is reduced to chains of causally determined events. On the other hand, if nature serves as antagonist to the political, then politics transforms into sheer domination, and a politics of domination is no more genuinely political than is mere compulsion itself.³⁵ If nature and politics are

³³ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York; Penguin, 2006), 142-69.

³⁵ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

contrapositives, then the political no longer has any connection or recourse to the ontologically productive resources that nature provides, such as affects, bodies, or landscapes. Hence, trying to theorize the political in contraposition to nature takes place in one of two modes. Either nature is conceived as the appropriate object of domination – so that, therefore, its domination is intentional and strategic (e.g., in the prevalence of extractivist ideologies operative today) – or else nature is conceived primarily in terms of how it impinges upon the political. Admittedly, this latter mode is more ambivalent with regard to domination, but nature nevertheless becomes an abstraction for it. This abstraction veils domination that gets enacted in the former mode.

Taken altogether, the foregoing arguments highlight one of my central critical contentions in the dissertation that follows, namely, that political theory without an accompanying account of nature is empty – which is to say, a politics without nature loses itself in false abstraction. At the same time, any philosophy of nature that endeavors to downplay or eliminate the dynamic collective voluntarism of the political mutilates the very conception of nature it purports to provide. Given the context of ecological crisis in which we find ourselves, then, what political theoretical use can the concept of nature provide us that other concepts and schema cannot? In other words, what can the concept of nature do – and what can it do for us as political theorists? Summarily, I claim that a properly reconstructed philosophy of nature will allow three needful things. It allows me to propose a theory of existential freedom that secures the possibility of free action in nature that is necessary for meaningful collective action. Second, it allows me to provide a new theory of the ecologically conditioned subject, which situates the subject fully within nature without reducing the subject to an epiphenomenon, to mere necessitarian excrescence. Last, it allows me to suggest a compelling new way to refigure nature and normativity in terms directly relevant to the ecological crisis.

CREATIVE DARKNESS

At this point, the fundamental question emerges: What is nature, and what conception of nature can make possible the political and its subtending vitalities? Conversely, what is the political, such that it interacts with and relies upon various conceptions of nature in order for collective action and imagination to unfold? To start addressing these questions, I propose to develop the groundwork for a philosophy of nature alternative to the modern philosophy of nature and the conceptual divides upon which modernity relies for its stark separation of nature and politics. To do this, I turn to the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) for theoretical inspiration and for various resources, although my use of his work in this dissertation will not be limited to straightforward exposition. It is intriguing to note how Schelling identifies as the “common defect” of “[t]he entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes)” that “nature does not exist for it and that it lacks a living ground.”³⁶ With Schelling, we find a fundamental break with post-Cartesian conceptions of nature characterized by casual determinism, mechanism, and necessity. We need to return to this break in order to develop possible alternatives to our current predicament. By recasting the fundamental relationship between nature, freedom, and subjectivity, Schelling’s philosophy of nature helps me pose a substantive revision in the concept of nature itself and explore political theoretical uses of that concept.

The primary claim I make about nature is that it is irreducibly composed of processes and that providing an account of these processes generates useful theoretical repercussions that

³⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 26, translation modified. The original German reads: “*Die ganz neu-europäische Philosophie seit ihrem Beginn (durch Descartes) hat diesen gemeinschaftlichen Mangel, daß die Natur für sie nicht vorhanden ist, und daß es ihr am lebendigen Grunde fehlt.*”

ultimately help loosen up some of the conceptual bondage that attends the ecological crisis. As such, I intend to sketch out a process philosophy of nature in what follows. Lurking in Schelling's philosophy of nature are nascent insights into the ecological, processual composition of things, and I salvage and repurpose those insights throughout this dissertation. Other scholars, like Arran Garre and Bruce Matthews, have sounded out Schelling's usefulness for ecological political theory, but it remains a largely unexplored avenue, alluded to but rarely traversed.³⁷ I do not believe that we have yet made the best use of Schelling that we can, and I intend to rectify that.

Regulating my efforts is the metaphor of nature as *creative darkness*. Creative darkness is not itself a power of nature, nor one of the processes composing nature, but, instead, refers to the interaction between the alluring, but often disconcerting or even horrifying opacity of nature, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the emergence of ontological novelty that freedom entails in the form of creative subjectivity. Schelling writes that "Matter is the darkest of all things – indeed, it is the darkness itself. Yet it is precisely this unknown base from which all formations and living phenomena emerge."³⁸ In this regard, he channels a longstanding association between the productive groundwork of nature and the metaphors of darkness. This association can also be discovered in numerous cosmogonic and ontological accounts, ranging from the roles played by Erebus and Nyx in Hesiod's *Theogony* to the identification of matter as darkness in Marcionism and later Neoplatonic philosophy, from the first verses of the Bible to the first verse of the Tao Te Ching ("Mystery and manifestations arise from the same source. This source is

³⁷ Arran Garre, "From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization," *Cosmos and History* 7:2 (2011): 26-69 and Bruce Matthews, "Schelling in the Anthropocene," *Symposium* 19:1 (2015): 94-105.

³⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Von der Weltseele* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1806), IX.

called darkness”) to the magically charged darkness named Ginnungagap that precedes the phenomenal world in the Old Norse *Prose Edda*.³⁹ As Elisabeth Bronfen writes,

Cosmogenetic narratives revolve around the notion of formless darkness informing the beginning of all things. The world takes shape only in contrast *to* and in separation *from* the deep darkness from which it has emerged, engendering an incessant interplay of day and night, light and shadow, becoming and passing away.⁴⁰

As I will show, the metaphor of nature as creative darkness is conceptually rich and generative. For example, my reconstruction in Chapter 2 of some theoretical elements in the new materialisms in terms of noir materialism provides a provocative perspective on how traditionally “immaterial” features of the world can emerge as functions of the immanent plane of ecological materiality. Ecological thought both attracts and benefits from a vocabulary of darkness that emphasizes the night side of nature, which is composed of “hidden recesses, shadows and shade, secrets and anonymity; with an obstinate resistance to the *lumen naturale* whose obscurity or veiling is inseparable from forming and disclosing but which is confused with transcendent forces or certainty at our peril.”⁴¹ Other ecological or political theorists have noted this affinity before – such as Diana Coole in her work on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Morton in his *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016).⁴² However, rarely has it been explored in depth, and never has it been put to the sustained political theoretical use I make of it here. In this regard, the metaphor of nature as creative darkness is useful, like an instrumental myth that helps us redefine our perception of what we are talking about when we talk about nature and politics in the age of ecological crisis.

³⁹ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial), 1.

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film*, trans. David Brenner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 29, emphases in original.

⁴¹ Diana Coole, “The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh,” *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

⁴² Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

Perhaps counterintuitively, the metaphor of nature as creative darkness ultimately gives us access to a normative political theory of the human subject as both ecologically conditioned and existentially free. In this regard, I am reclaiming a form of anthropocentrism explicitly, but it is a dark anthropocentrism, one that hopefully will make all parties to the debate about anthropocentrism distinctly unhappy. Critics of anthropocentrism will be unhappy because I am valorizing anthropocentrism in the first place, while unreconstructed anthropocentrists will be unhappy because of the degree to which I argue that we can conceive the category of the distinctly human only in terms of its constitutively inhuman penumbra. Dark anthropocentrism is anthropocentrism because I am primarily concerned with the human subject, and it is dark because the distinctly human subject is possible only on the basis of its inhuman conditions. This is an insight that has haunted the ecological tradition since its inception. For example, when Leopold refers to “that dark laboratory we call the soil,” he is underscoring the degree to which our relationship with the land community is precisely what makes possible the development and exercise of ecologically informed judgment in the first place.⁴³ For Leopold, “the soil” is not merely a pastoral metaphor, then, but an ontological metaphor for the very ground of nature itself – for what Schelling earlier characterizes in terms of the darkness that precedes and attends all things.⁴⁴ Nature is a dark laboratory, and the creative labor of experimentation and variation it makes possible gives rise, first, to us, its dark researchers, and, second, to our own pathways of innovation and inquiry.

⁴³ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 83.

⁴⁴ Susanna Lindberg, “On the Night of the Elemental Imaginary,” *Research in Phenomenology* 41 (2011): 157-80.

WILD PRAGMATISM: A NOTE ON METHOD

I turn now to a brief note on my own method, which is consistently informed by a thoroughgoing experimentalism. By an experimentalism, I do not refer specifically to contemporary methodologies of the scientific experiment as much as I refer to the more generic sense of an experiment. Scientific experiments are indeed rigorous, if not methodologically untroubled, but the conceptual apprehension of cause and effect that obtains for scientific experiments is too narrow to capture what I intend. Rather, I refer us to the more generic sense in which an experiment is an ongoing attempt to effectuate and track transformations at multiple scales. Typically, in scientific experiments, it is desirable or necessary to hold constant as much as possible in order to isolate the causal effect of treatment. In the mode of experimentation I am suggesting, however, it is perhaps the terms we often hold constant that need to be experimented upon, played with, and transformed.

Consider how Charles Sanders Peirce construes the logic of inquiry. For Peirce, experiments consist of non-aleatoric attempts to generate and track the network of effects produced by different assumptive, practical, and theoretical conceptions. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), Peirce writes: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”⁴⁵ In other words, Peirce identifies a “conception” (“love,” “nature,” and “truth” all figure prominently in his writings) with the penumbra of effects that such a conception enacts. On the one hand, this definition appears unclear insofar as it is precisely the determination or imputation of effects that is at issue when we are discussing experimentalism of any kind. On the other hand, Peirce is not trying to provide

⁴⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” *Selected Philosophical Writings: Volume 1, 1867-1893*, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 132.

the criteria by which we accurately or inaccurately determine which causes produce which effects as much as he is trying to collapse our traditional understanding of linear cause and effect – in which cause and effect are methodologically and ontologically distinct – into an ongoing, processual conception of causality. The point is that experiments are less like distinct calculative measurements of effect than they are like uncertain navigations through strange causal oceans.

How Peirce understands experimentalism – and, likewise, what I intend by the term – becomes even more evident when we turn to how Peirce understands the originary moment in the logic of inquiry. For Peirce, inquiry begins with the formation of novel hypotheses that generate regimes of experimentation, research, and revision. This formation he refers to as “abduction.”⁴⁶ Now commonly taken to mean “inference to the best explanation,” it is ironic the degree to which Peirce often means almost the opposite of this latter phrase.⁴⁷ Peirce thinks about the logic of inquiry not in terms of the programmatic testing of possible solutions to a preexisting problem, the form of which remains constant, but, rather, in terms of the generation of new problematics consequent to novel hypothesis formation. For me, novel or speculative hypothesis formation allows us to generate material and political lines of flight rather than binding us to a conception of the problem that appears to aggressively, relentlessly perpetuate itself through every solution attempt.

Accordingly, in what I hope is a broadly, if crookedly Peircean spirit, my method could be termed a kind of *wild pragmatism*. This method is particularly congruent with the interdisciplinary orientation of the biohumanities. After all, biohumanities research requires the

⁴⁶ Christopher Hookway, “Interrogatives and Uncontrollable Abductions” in *The Pragmatic Maxim: Essays on Peirce and Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 71-83 and Geert-Jan M. Kruijff, “Peirce’s Late Theory of Abduction: A Comprehensive Account,” *Semiotica* 153:1-4 (2005): 431-54.

⁴⁷ D. G. Campos, “On the Distinction between Peirce’s Abduction and Lipton’s Inference to the Best Explanation,” *Synthese* 180 (2011): 419-42.

ability to navigate mixed methods, to read and process alien and unfamiliar approaches, and to compare, mix, and match research questions in ways that do not simply collapse disciplinary specificities into simple rank-orders or syntheses. The ability to do this is not simply a tool the biohumanist can use in order to traverse diverse disciplinary domains and literatures, but also a very means by which new questions and research programs can be developed in the first place. This is not merely a point about professional academic inquiry, but, rather, reflects an orientation toward the production of knowledge itself. When I write the phrase “mixed methods,” I do not simply mean a toolbox approach to methods, in which a specific method is selected carefully after being deemed most appropriate for a specific question, nor do I refer to the subjection of a research question to robust examination by multiple methods. Instead, I mean a methodological diaspora, which is to say, the simultaneous breaking apart or scattering abroad of our methodological expectations, paired with the refusal to let any particular method determine the boundaries of what we can see. Every methodological approach to the real makes some things visible and some things invisible: “No single theory ever agrees with *all* the facts in its domain.”⁴⁸ Characteristic of my method, then, are these two operations: symbolic translocation and material speculation.

By *symbolic translocation*, I refer to practices of reinscribing or shifting our symbolic formations (e.g., arguments, concepts, injunctions, metaphors, phrases, texts, words) into jarring or novel contexts. In at least one sense, we already do this whenever we coin a neologism, fashion an idiolect, mix a metaphor, or even commit a malapropism.⁴⁹ What remains

⁴⁸ Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Verso Books, 1993, 3rd edition), 39.

⁴⁹ See Donald Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89-108, where he argues that the very use of language implies something like an ongoing chain of symbolic translocations in the first place. Central to his argument is that we do not simply acquire the meanings of words and the rules for using those words, but that we are constantly navigating interpretive landscapes of context and misuse, update and utterance.

underexamined, especially in the context of philosophy and political theory, is the degree to which symbolic translocations can break up established patterns of feeling and thinking. For example, William S. Burroughs experiments extensively with a literary form he calls the cut-up, which is a technique used to rearrange the elements of a text randomly in order to produce novel effects. The cut-up is an experimental form of symbolic translocation that Burroughs intends specifically to intervene in the structure of human political consciousness so as to disrupt the order of things. For Burroughs, linear causality is a function of linear causal narrative, and such a narrative form serves to erect and enforce a kind of sociopolitical determinism that traps human subjects within the limits of control.⁵⁰ I am not yet suggesting that we replicate the technique of the cut-up in our political theories, but I do think Burroughs directs our attention toward the possible power of refusing various logics of conventional association intended to deter and discipline our political imagination and its materially transformative power.

By *material speculation*, I intend to translocate our sense of speculation – i.e., that it is airy, ineffective, or insubstantial – into a register of material efficacy. This requires that we expand how we understand the category of the speculative in two ways. First, speculation can be, in fact, a material practice. Consider technical practices of salvage and tinkering, of repurposing artifacts in general. To repurpose an artifact entails an experiment or a gambit insofar as it is an attempt to test what an artifact can do beyond its apparent purpose. No artifact exists as an isolate, and we tend to forget (or we never even notice) that artifacts only exist as temporally extended complexes that emerge within machinic networks. Even the most independent, privileged artifact relies necessarily upon networks of maintenance, production, and support. Consequently, to repurpose an artifact means two things: (1) we transform its purpose into

⁵⁰ William S. Burroughs, “The Limits of Control” in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1986).

another purpose, *materially*, and (2) we thereby change its place with the machinic networks that produce and sustain it. This requires the intervention of imagination, of speculative reason – that is to say, of positing a different world than the world we think is given. Second, even the mere exercise of imagination or speculative reason itself is a material practice insofar as it functions as kind of ontological mapping. Speculative reason maps distributions of possibility. Such a distribution constitutes a set of alternative possibilities. Possibilities exist, even if they exist in a different way than do actualities.⁵¹ Because thinking is not a ghostly operation that supervenes upon the world without touching it, speculation remains a form of action – or, rather, it irreducibly accompanies what we identify as action in every case.

Consider, then, a wild pragmatism that obtains for theory more generally – perhaps even especially for us as political theorists. Particularly in the context of the ecological crisis, our thinking should be inflected by Bonnie Honig’s suggestion that catastrophic times may contain “hidden resources and alternative angles of vision,” deployed in idiosyncratic and specific configurations intended to cast some light upon the most pressing crises at hand.⁵² These “hidden resources and alternative angles” are particularly welcome in a political culture rife with despair and gridlock, not to mention a university culture that often rewards cleverly disguised defenses of the cultural, economic, and political logics that sustain and even accelerate the ecological crisis. The purpose of a wild pragmatism is not to propose tentative solutions that we consequently reject or shelve when they do not immediately transform the world, but, instead, to serve as speculative engine that cannot stop generating affects, concepts, hypotheses, programs,

⁵¹ For example, the actuality of a binary switch is that it is either on or off. Yet to understand what a binary switch is in actuality requires us to understand that the actual state of a binary switch (either on or off) always already is supplemented by the possibility of its alternative (either off or on, respectively). To understand what a binary switch is, we need to understand this relationship between the actual and the possible, and understanding this relationship, in fact, necessitates the exercise of speculative reason. Exercising speculative reason thereby enables us to effect further transformations in the world (e.g., turning the light on or off).

⁵² Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), xv.

questions, and regimes of description, all intended to emphasize the immense exigency of the ecological crisis and to propose the changes we need to make in order to navigate that crisis. Hence, despite – no, *because of* – the agitating, even *irritating* impetus it provides, we need to return again (and again and again) to a wild pragmatism in action and thought.

The last thing the world needs is more soothsaying.

PROSPECTUS

In Chapter 1, I repurpose elements from F. W. J. Schelling's philosophy of nature in order to lay the necessary groundwork to characterize nature as the domain of freedom and subjectivity. This groundwork consists of elaborating upon three ontological processes – dynamic reciprocity, constitutive interconnectivity, and the involution of life. I call the necessary interaction of these processes *transcalar ecology*. Transcalar ecology lets us remap our conceptual landscape so as to allow freedom and subjectivity to appear within nature, rather than in contraposition to nature. Transcalar ecology is the very engine of creative darkness insofar as the unconscious labor of these processes produces the distribution of tangible things.

In Chapter 2, I redescribe Schelling's materialism in terms of *noir materialism*. For noir materialism, matter is processual, and it effects a figural process of structural differentiation between background and foreground. This enables us to understand how subjectivity emerges in resolutely new materialist terms. Film noir and dark matter both serve as examples or paradigm cases of this process. We can see figurations of creative darkness at work in both. Likewise, Schelling's own materialism emphasizes the dynamic of emergence as a material process that nature generates and sustains. Indeed, Schelling refuses to place nature or materiality in contraposition to subjectivity or, ultimately, freedom. Rather, he provides me with an ontological

toolkit useful for breaking away from the modern conception of matter and its perceived downstream consequences for theories of the subject. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of noir materialism, the emergence of subjects into the foreground absolutely requires the background of dark materiality. Subjectivity is a processual output of ecological and material interaction.

In Chapter 3, I use Schelling's philosophy of *freedom and evil* to illustrate how freedom in nature is possible. For Schelling, it is only in the domain of nature that freedom can take place. Freedom is an ontological power that takes shape as the creative agency of the subject. Freedom consists of an existential decision between good and evil that ultimately issues forth ontological alterations in the order of things. Schelling defines evil as the willful identification of the subject with the entirety of existence. In this regard, Schelling's definition of evil helps us recharacterize the ecological crisis in terms of an ontological disorder. Foreclosing on evil opens up the possibility of reconsidering the relationship between nature and normativity, and redescribing freedom in this way allows a reconciliation of nature and politics, at least conceptually. Ultimately, Schelling's philosophy of freedom offers an exotic definition of freedom that solves several theoretical problems simultaneously. It shows how it is *only* in the domain of nature that freedom can take place. If this is true, then freedom in nature is not just possible, but only possible because freedom emerges out of the material conditions and relations that constitute human subjectivity in the first place.

In Chapter 4, I propose a theory of the ecologically conditioned subject. To do this, I develop the concept of *companion ecologies*. Companion ecologies constitute the lively contexts within which the subject emerges. I use three examples—namely, architecture, the human microbiome, and Amazonian indigenous ontologies—in order to show how the concept of

companion ecologies can be used to characterize complex ecological entities at multiple scales. Companion ecologies refer not only to our conditions, then. The term also functions as a referent, for an ecology is a composite, multimodal, yet entitative plurality. Ultimately, companion ecologies reveal that individuation is a process that only takes place, paradoxically, because of ecological plurality. From this, I derive a theory of the subject for which the subject is a materially and temporally extended and causally distributed morphogenetic site, which emerges within the context of interactive, multiscalar, and overlapping companion ecologies. In this regard, the human subject – itself a peculiar kind of companion ecology – is a free subject of nature. If creative darkness provides the ecological background from whence the subject emerges materially, then companion ecologies are the media in which the subject appears as a distinctly individuated agential form.

In Chapter 5, I employ Roberto Esposito's alternative communitarian paradigm to reexamine some questions about the relationship between nature and normativity. After modernity, Western philosophers and political theorists traditionally remain cautious about grounding normative claims in nature. There are good conceptual, historical, and political reasons for this. However, Esposito allows me to propose a normative naturalism, or what I call *econormativity*, which consists of an appeal to the normative implications of our irreducibly ecological condition. Esposito's dialectical examination of his key terms *communitas*, *immunitas*, and the *munus* generates a complex normative and ontological framework that provides for the emergence of the subject as a normatively-laden or obligated subject, precisely because of how the subject relates to the dark background within which it emerges. However, Esposito limits his conclusions about normativity to the field of biological form and potential.

Expanding Esposito's affirmative biopolitics into a conception of econormativity gives us more resources for addressing the conceptual gridlock of the ecological crisis.

CHAPTER 1: TRANSCALAR ECOLOGY

1.1 INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND PROCESS

Emily Dickinson's poem "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark" (c. 1862) offers a useful distinction between modes of apprehension or vision.⁵³ At the start of the poem, she observes that "We grow accustomed to the Dark — / When Light is put away —," and she concludes with the following stanza:

Either the Darkness alters —
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight —
And Life steps almost straight.

Dickinson's poem concerns itself with the uses of vision, and the question she poses involves exploring how we can best "fit our Vision to the Dark" so as to navigate our pathways through the world. Regardless of which of Dickinson's options seems true – that the darkness changes us, or that we adapt ourselves to it – she foregrounds the degree to which all the colors of the dark become apparent only when "We uncertain step" away from sources of illumination. Consider the etymological origin of "theory," which stems from θεωρία (*theōría*), meaning "contemplation," "speculation," or, significantly, "a looking at," "a vantage," "a vision," or "a view." To repurpose Dickinson's insight, our mode of theoretical apprehension changes when we step into a register of darkness, integrating an active awareness of what F. W. J. Schelling calls the world's "preceding darkness" into our thinking. In this regard, Schelling captures the same insight as Dickinson.

⁵³ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1979), 325.

Instead of crafting gnomic poetry, however, Schelling develops a philosophy of nature, one for which both “what we call ‘reason’ is a mere play of higher and necessarily unknown natural forces” and “[t]he understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance.”⁵⁴ Schelling’s consistent focus on darkness as the condition of possibility for the emergence of creatures and their capacities or faculties stands out starkly in these brief quotes. In this chapter, I intend to start exploring specific elements of Schelling’s philosophy of nature, which, in turn, allows me to develop and elaborate upon the metaphor of nature as creative darkness.

For Schelling, nature is a system of opposing forces that dynamically produces the full range of entities and events making up everything that exists. He does not construe nature in terms of its ontological contents or substance. Rather, Schelling’s nature is fundamentally processual. Insofar as nature produces not only objects, but also subjects, there must be an irreducible capacity for subjectivity latent in nature from the start. If nature is fundamentally processual, then the interaction of processes must ground and sustain objects and subjects alike.⁵⁵ As Schelling writes,

Insofar as we regard the totality of objects not merely as a product, but at the same time necessarily as productive, it becomes *Nature* for us, and this *identity of the product and the productivity*, and this alone, is implied by the idea of Nature, even in the ordinary use of language. *Nature* as a mere *product* (*natura naturata*) we call Nature as *object* (with this alone all empiricism deals). *Nature* as *productivity* (*natura naturans*) we call *Nature as subject* [...] We can say of Nature as object that it *is*, not of Nature as subject; for this is being or productivity itself.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 195 and F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 29.

⁵⁵ Iain Hamilton Grant, “‘All things think:’ Panpsychism and the metaphysics of nature” in *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, ed. David Skrbina (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 283-99.

⁵⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline*, 202, 203, emphases in original.

Schelling's fascination with the inhuman, processual, and productive character of nature affords me the opportunity to sketch an alternative process philosophy of nature that breaks away from the suffocating conceptual constraints of modernity.

Indeed, this is the first broad organizing question with which I begin: What is nature, such that freedom and subjectivity are possible expressions of it? As I show in this chapter (and the following two chapters), features drawn from Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* reconstructed as a process philosophy of nature ultimately allow me to reconcile the concept of nature with the ideas of freedom and the subject. A processual conception of nature is well-attested by arguments and regimes of description in both metaphysics and the natural sciences.⁵⁷ Therefore, my intention is not to dwell on the features of process itself, as such, but to provide an answer to this organizing question, which helps me suggest a robust alternative to the modern conception of nature conceived as the mere domain of determinism or necessity.

This alternative concept of nature is ecological and material. Exploring these two fundamental aspects of nature occupies this chapter and the next. In this chapter, I use elements from Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* to redefine the concept of the ecological in ontological, processual terms. My claim is that Schelling prefigures, and provides the means to elaborate, what I call *transcalar ecology*. Transcalar ecology is the ontological framework, or format, of any material ecology that occurs at any scale whatsoever. It consists of three ontological processes, the iteration and interaction of which produces and sustains whatever exists. As Schelling writes, "No subsistence of a product is thinkable without a continual process of being reproduced. The product must be thought of as annihilated at every step, and at every step

⁵⁷ See Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) for an influential overview.

reproduced anew.”⁵⁸ These continual ontological processes are *dynamic reciprocity, constitutive interconnectivity, and the involution of life*. See Figure 1.

Ultimately, my use of Schelling is as a contemporary. He is someone who helps us conceive of, cope with, and perhaps even begin to break away from the reality of the ecological crisis we now face. It is also a rather ruthless use of Schelling, for I acknowledge that much of what follows takes shape as a repurposing of Schelling’s insights. You could say that my method of interpretation is modeled after the salvage ship: to recover and repurpose artifacts from the deep. I reconstruct elements of Schelling’s thinking, or its intellectual environs, but my purpose is never strictly historicist in aim. Rather, Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* allows me to build an alternative process philosophy of nature that ultimately makes freedom and subjectivity in nature conceptually possible. If freedom and subjectivity in nature are possible – something that no modern can admit directly – then our relationship to nature as newly discovered free subjects may be able to break away from the affective and conceptual deadlock the ecological crisis poses.

1.2 SCHELLING’S PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

In his *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling fashions an ontological framework that is both historically significant and theoretically novel. For example, Schelling’s naturalistic ontology deserves far more historical attention that it receives. Although ecology proper does not exist until Ernst Haeckel coins the term in 1866, it remains indebted to the legacy of Schellingian

⁵⁸ Quoted in Joseph L. Esposito, *Schelling’s Idealism and Philosophy of Nature* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977), 86.

Naturphilosophie.⁵⁹ It is indebted because of the specific innovations that Schelling's ontology makes possible and not only because of Schelling's naturalistic monism – for Baruch Spinoza, one of Schelling's primary influences, precedes Schelling in this.

For Spinoza, there is only one ontological substance, which Spinoza calls “God, or Nature.” This substance makes up everything that exists. Unlike his philosophical predecessor Descartes, Spinoza no longer conceives of matter and mind as separate substances that give rise to ontologically distinct domains. Rather, matter and mind are different aspects or expressions of the same underlying substance. This means that nature and the human cannot be radically distinct at all, for nature is all-encompassing and the human is but a part of the whole of nature. However, one of the original problems that Cartesian dualism intends to dispel returns. After all, Spinoza's nature appears to be strictly necessitarian, which is to say it is a domain entirely subject to a principle of necessity. If nature is necessitarian, then there is a political theoretical concern about the idea of freedom and its effect upon the status of the political. Spinoza resolves this problem because he thinks that freedom must be conceived as correct rational apprehension of the whole of nature.⁶⁰ Freedom is understanding, because only by understanding do we become able to live in accordance with necessity rather than dooming ourselves to destruction by fighting what is necessary. For Spinoza, causal determinism does not threaten the political because he does not define freedom as the circumvention of determination, but as the intellectual understanding of necessity. The political is threatened only when humans abandon rational intellection for cultural superstition or egoistic illusion.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Eric Paul Jacobsen, *From Cosmology to Ecology: The Monist Worldview in Germany from 1770 to 1930* (Bern: Peter Land, 2005) and Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Hence why Spinoza is often read today as a kind of compatibilist. On this, see Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁶¹ See Jonathan Israel's extensive elaboration of this insight in his *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The German reception of Spinoza in 18th and 19th century Germany was profoundly influenced by Immanuel Kant's interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics as a so-called "system of fatality," a consistent and holistic, but strictly deterministic, metaphysics. As Kant writes, for Spinoza, "the connection of ends in the world must be assumed to be unintentional (because it is derived from an original being, but not from its understanding, hence not from any intention on its part, but from the necessity of its nature and the unity of the world flowing from that)."⁶² In other words, Spinoza's nature appears to be completely necessitarian. In Germany at the time, Spinoza was the subject of a major controversy known as the *Pantheismusstreit*, in which various negative effects were imputed to the impact of Spinoza on German culture and philosophy.⁶³ Although the Romantics received Spinoza enthusiastically, concerns about the modern conception of nature haunted every attempt to articulate a consistent Spinozistic monism.

Schelling retains Spinoza's flat ontology, but his primary goal is to innovate a concept of freedom that obtains in creative agency and existential choice.⁶⁴ This requires that Schelling integrate subjectivity into his conception of nature at a basic level, which, in turn, entails that nature necessarily contains a dimension of irreducible subjectivity. For Schelling, freedom is not an abstraction, like a capacity or a right. Rather, freedom is an ontological power latent in nature itself. As an ontological power, freedom entails action. This is not to say that freedom guarantees any particular consequences, but it does secure theoretically the conditions for action not determined by causal precedent. This does not suggest that Schelling theorizes freedom in purely

⁶² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 263.

⁶³ Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 44-126.

⁶⁴ Alexandre Guilherme, "Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* Project: Towards a Spinozian Conception of Nature," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 29:4 (2010): 373-90.

negative terms, as if freedom were nothing more than the absence of causal determination. In short, Schelling proposes a theory of freedom that operates neither apart from nature nor by negating nature. Instead, Schelling theorizes nature in such a way that freedom emerges within nature, rather than in contraposition to nature. Thus, he reveals freedom to be a constitutive feature of nature in the first place.

Schelling's engagement with Johann Fichte's theory of the subject and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's simultaneously empirical and poetic apprehension of nature's autonomy (as well as that of the later Kant) stimulates this ongoing valorization of the idea of freedom. As Schelling writes very early in his philosophical career, "Originally in man there is an absolute equilibrium of forces and of consciousness. But he can upset this equilibrium through freedom, in order to reestablish it through freedom. But only in equilibrium of forces is there health."⁶⁵ Accordingly, Schelling's speculative approach intends to weave together findings from the natural sciences with philosophical inquiry itself, as well as to preserve a concept of nature that serves both generative and normative ends. In general, Schelling seeks to construct a revised concept of nature that attends, first and foremost, to nature's generative autonomy and, second, to the emergence of the free human subject therein as a distinct natural product. Schelling's goal with his *Naturphilosophie* is to surpass the epistemological limitations imposed by Kant's critical philosophy, but without simply returning to pre-Kantian dogmatism.

According to Kant, the critical philosophy secures the possibility of both moral freedom and scientific knowledge, but, for Schelling, Kant's ontological division between the natural or phenomenal world and the noumenal world proves deeply dissatisfying. It is dissatisfying because Kant fails to justify the division in question to anyone's satisfaction – including,

⁶⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11.

probably, his own.⁶⁶ This failure is not only philosophically disappointing, but it also characterizes nature in inextricably necessitarian terms. As such, Schelling's deep appreciation for the autonomy of nature precludes his ability to accept Kant's philosophical portrait of nature. Rather than a strictly determined clockwork world of cause and effect, Schelling's sense of nature from the very beginning remains deeply inflected both by Goethe's keen sense of nature's paradoxical accessibility and independence (the so-called "delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object") and by Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer's biological and proto-evolutionary theories of morphological recapitulation.⁶⁷

In Schelling's own philosophy of nature, then, we see his attempt to "naturalize the transcendental," a phrase to which Iain Hamilton Grant frequently returns.⁶⁸ In other words, we see Schelling trying to understand how the conditions of possibility for both freedom and "science," or knowledge, which is always already knowledge of nature in some capacity, emerge within nature. As Grant writes,

Asking the apparently transcendental question of how a system is possible at all, Schelling offers the naturalistic response that 'long before man decided to create a system, there already existed one: the *System der Welt*.' Calling this a transcendental naturalism does not go far enough, since if the conditions of possibility for systematising, whether cosmogonic or ideogenic, are nature, then nature transcendentalises.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 180-215. Kant appears to discard the distinction in various later works. On this, see Peter Fenves, *Late Kant: Towards another Law of the Earth* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections in Scientific Studies: The Collected Works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, Vol. 12, trans. Thomas Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 307. See also Gabrielle Bersier, "Visualizing Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer's Organic Forces: Goethe's Morphology on the Threshold of Evolution," *Monatshefte* 97:1 (2005): 18-32 and Dalia Nassar, "From a Philosophy of Self to a Philosophy of Nature: Goethe and the Development of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 92:3 (2010): 304-21.

⁶⁸ See Iain Hamilton Grant, "'World' in middle Schelling: why nature transcendentalizes," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2014): 82-108, but also Sami Pihström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003).

⁶⁹ Grant, "Why nature transcendentalizes," 5.

Ultimately, therefore, Schelling's goal is to develop and exercise a post-critical speculative philosophy that affords insight into the nature of nature itself.⁷⁰ It is in this regard that Schelling inadvertently founds the idea of an ontologically informed philosophical ecology, which I characterize below in terms of transcalar ecology.

Despite the significance of this discovery, however, Schelling has largely been overlooked by intellectual historians of ecology, and the ecological haunts the secondary literature on Schelling without ever quite materializing. Although ecological themes are often cited, they have yet to be operationalized or reconstructed in a sustained manner. For example, Andrew Bowie writes that Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* "echoes contemporary ecological concerns" and that Schelling develops "an expressly ecological conception of nature," but then says little more.⁷¹ Alex Savory-Levine alludes to "the contemporary relevance of Schelling's thought to the environmental movement," claiming that "Schelling's model of human freedom is compatible with contemporary views in ecology."⁷² However, the insight is limited to arguing that Schelling is not an anthropocentrist and that he has some interest in the "environment," broadly conceived.⁷³ Similarly, the deep ecologist Fred Dallmayr situates Schelling in his alternative genealogy of Western philosophy, but the role Schelling plays for Dallmayr is relatively simplistic insofar as he subsumes Schelling's distinctiveness into a somewhat sweeping counterhistorical narrative.⁷⁴ It is the mere fact that "nature" plays a prominent role for

⁷⁰ Iain Hamilton Grant, "The Universe in the Universe: German Idealism and the Natural History of Mind," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 72 (2013): 297-316.

⁷¹ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8, 46.

⁷² Alex Savory-Levine, "Man Is the Redeemer of Nature: An Interpretation of Schelling's *Of Human Freedom*," *Idealistic Studies* 42:1 (2012): 1, 2.

⁷³ Ibid., 9. For an opposing view, see Devin Zane Shaw, "'Animals, Those Incessant Somnambulists': A Critique of Schelling's Anthropocentrism," *Rethinking German Idealism*, eds. Sean J. McGrath and Joseph Carew (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 77-98.

⁷⁴ Fred Dallmayr, *Return to Nature?: An Ecological Counterhistory* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 33-52.

Schelling that he earns his place in Dallmayr's narrative, and little to do with the specific details of Schelling's thought.

Two of the most substantive comments on Schelling's relationship to the ecological are by Arran Garre and Bruce Matthews. For Matthews, Schelling serves as an early prognosticator of the annihilation of nature through which we are living now.⁷⁵ He attributes this to Schelling's grasp of the consequences of eliminating the concept of nature conceived as a vital whole from our philosophical apprehension of the real. These consequences include something like an early apprehension of the ecological crisis that lurked in Schelling's future – that is to say, our present. Matthews proceeds to locate in the late Schelling's philosophy of mythology possible resources for a new Anthropocene mythology and a new realism alike. Specifically, Matthews argues that, in the Anthropocene, Schelling opens up the possibility of recovering and revivifying a cultural and philosophical sense of nature's normativity. It is precisely this possibility that I explore throughout this dissertation project (and especially in Chapter 5).

For Garre, it is Schelling primarily (along with the other great process metaphysicians, such as Alfred North Whitehead) who offers us a metaphysics adequate to the construction and occupation of what Garre terms "ecological civilization."⁷⁶ In this regard, Garre seeks to reform our collective action strategies and worldview such that our industrial-neoliberal civilization is supplanted by a robustly ecological one, one that prioritizes nature as a system or an unconscious agent that informs our processes of ecological and public reason. Like Dallmayr, Garre sketches out an alternate historical track of philosophical development. Unlike Dallmayr, though, Garre sutures Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* to the political in particular. He argues that a

⁷⁵ Bruce Matthews, "Schelling in the Anthropocene," *Symposium* 19:1 (2015): 94-105.

⁷⁶ Arran Garre, "From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization," *Cosmos and History* 7:2 (2011): 26-69.

reconstructed concept of nature allows us to reimagine what it means for us to be political animals. As Ben Woodard notes rather critically, it may not be clear immediately what “ecological civilization” actually entails, but this does not efface Garre’s expressly normative political theoretical intentions.⁷⁷ Indeed, Woodard’s critique gives us cause to wonder if Garre intends to evoke some kind of myth, reminiscent of Matthews’s insistence upon our need for a new Anthropocene mythology.

While I remain hugely indebted to the foregoing literatures, I do not believe that we have yet made the best use of Schelling. Schelling’s relationship to the ecological has yet to be explicated satisfactorily. It remains a largely unexplored landscape, alluded to but rarely traversed. Accordingly, many resources lurking within his body of work remain largely undiscovered. Ultimately, the same can be said regarding Schelling’s potential use for political theory. For me, the ecological and the political are bound together so intimately that encountering one in Schelling entails consequences for the other. This conceptual overlap between the ecological and the political is something Schelling can help us understand. As Schelling notes, the purpose of his philosophy is not to arrive at a final conclusion, but, instead, to “furnish material for endlessly possible *Bildung* (*endlos möglichen Bildung*).”⁷⁸ Accordingly, I now turn my attention toward some of the specific details of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* in order to see how these details can be reworked into the core ontological processes of transcalar ecology.

⁷⁷ Ben Woodard, “Schellingian Thought for Ecological Politics,” *Ontological Anarché: Beyond Materialism and Idealism* (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 86-108 and Arran Garre, “Toward an Ecological Civilization: The Science, Ethics, and Politics of Eco-Poiesis,” *Process Studies* 39:1 (2010): 5-38.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Matthews, “Anthropocene,” 95.

1.3 TRANSCALAR ECOLOGY

Schelling's ontological framework is theoretically novel because he provides the format of any material ecology that occurs at any scale. I call this format transcalar ecology, and it is composed of these three ontological processes: dynamic reciprocity, constitutive interconnectivity, and the involution of life. I do not suggest that Schelling "invents" ecology (an anachronistic claim), much less that he ever uses the vocabulary of transcalar ecology, although his *Naturphilosophie* certainly stimulates the development of ecology as a philosophical and scientific discipline. Rather, Schelling prefigures the ecological thought, or the core insight at the heart of every ecological perspective, and he makes my development of transcalar ecology possible by virtue of his organized ontological speculations.

Today, we often use the term ecology in reference to a discipline of study. However, we also employ a sense of the term that functions as a referent. An ecology in this sense is a composite, multimodal, yet entitative plurality. It is composite because, unlike a mere aggregate, the various parts of an ecology are irreducibly layered upon each other. As an example, consider the interaction of trophic levels. It is multimodal because the parts in question do not necessarily belong to the same physical modes and ontological orders. The featural and scalar differences between photosynthesis, dead and living squirrels, and the water cycle are ontologically significant, even as all of these things equally real. It is entitative insofar as we can refer to "an ecology" as something that is, at least, heuristically distinct. Admittedly, all ecologies are going to be ecotonal to some extent. Ecotones refer to spaces in which diverse ecologies overlap in order to make transitional zones. For example, a shore is a paradigmatic ecotone, as it consists of the space in which sea and land come together. Last, an ecology is a plurality because its parts appear and exercise themselves as distinct, if dependent entities in their own right. The "pieces"

of an ecology, regardless of the scale at which they take place, move around. Animals and weathers move, but so do landscapes, as well as the multiscalar processes – like accretions, cycles, erosions, or metabolisms – that compose each of the foregoing examples.

Transcalar ecology, then, refers to the generic format of any possible ecology, that is to say, material ecologies at any possible scale, ranging from the microbiota of a particular animal body to the sum total of earthly life and its planetary conditions. I use the term “format” because it is important to recall the degree to which Schelling’s contribution here is very abstract. A format is a template or a set of consistent ontological features that recur in order to produce consistent, if varying outcomes. It is necessary to start with abstractions of this order if we are to rework our concept of nature from the ground up. In what follows, I define each of these ontological processes in some detail, as well as showing how and why Schelling prefigures each term within the context of his *Naturphilosophie*. I then show how transcalar ecology contrasts with several popular contemporary ontological frameworks, as well as how it undergirds the most prominent philosophical statement about scientific ecology to date.

1.3.1 Dynamic reciprocity

Dynamic reciprocity is a kind of causal rippling, which Schelling prefigures in his uses of the phrases “*die größte Bindung*” (“the greatest bond”) or “*wechselseitige Abhängigkeit*” (“reciprocal dependence”). This causal rippling refers to a property that obtains in sequences of multiple effects such that each effect to some extent both conditions, and is conditioned, by all other effects in each sequence. Accordingly, it is an intrinsic and necessary property of causal interactions in which the causal effects “ripple,” so to speak. This causal rippling is fundamentally characteristic of the ecological because material ecologies do not exist as closed

or isolated wholes. To the contrary, ecologies hook into ecologies hook into ecologies, *ad infinitum*.

Necessarily, there is no clear beginning or end of this relational dynamic. Each minor ecology in the whole ecological system can affect and be affected by any other ecology insofar as ecological components are attached to numerous multiscale processes that traverse any given ecology. In other words, dynamic reciprocity names the general structural process of ongoing reflexive affectivity.

In Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, the process of dynamic reciprocity takes shape in relation to the theoretical construction of matter. In other words, Schelling wants to provide a theory of what matter is, of how matter takes place. For Schelling, matter is not inert or passive. Rather, it is active; it is something that happens, rather than something that merely is. Accordingly, it carries ontological implications and developmental latencies. As Schelling writes, "Matter is the general seed of the universe, in which everything is hidden that unfolds in later developments."⁷⁹ This means that the processual structure of matter reveals a great deal about nature as a whole, as Schelling's goal here is to determine the necessary conditions of possibility for both subject and object as emergent occurrences within nature's plenitude.

In order to develop his concept of matter, which embodies and prefigures the process of dynamic reciprocity, Schelling starts with a theory of dynamics heavily indebted to Kant's 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*.⁸⁰ In that text, Kant argues that, in accordance with the table of categories – specifically, in accordance with the categories of quantity and quality – matter obtains only due to two fundamental forces that contradict each other ceaselessly. There is

⁷⁹ Schelling, *Ideas*, 179, translation modified. The original German reads: "Die Materie ist das allgemeine Samenkorn des Universums, worin alles verhüllt ist, was in den spätern Entwicklungen sich entfaltet."

⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), trans. by Michael Friedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

a quarrel at the heart of the world. In terms of its quantitative aspect, matter is movable in space, while, in terms of its qualitative aspect, a material body resists the incursion (*Eindringen*) of other material bodies into the space it already occupies. Consequently, Kant argues that these two aspects of materiality allow us to discover that matter consists of the tension between a repulsive force and an attractive force. The repulsive force consists of matter's inherent resistance to incursion, its propensity to diffuse or discharge itself, while the attractive force consists of matter's inherent propensity to aggregate or clump together. Each force can be derived from the other because, if only repulsive force were to exist, then the world would consist of infinite expansion (nothingness), whereas if only attractive force were to exist, then the world would consist of infinite contraction (a singular, infinitely dense point).

In his 1797 *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling insists that his *Naturphilosophie* is an elaboration upon Kant's "metaphysico-dynamical" theory of natural forces.⁸¹ However, this elaboration rapidly reveals itself to be rather more ambitious. As Schelling argues, "Objects themselves we can regard only as products of forces, and with this there vanishes of itself the chimera of things-in-themselves [...]"⁸² For Schelling, this resolves Kant's outstanding problem regarding the ontological status of the noumenon. Kant, however, remains theoretically ambivalent about whether or not the fundamental forces of matter are empirically given or mathematically necessary.⁸³ As such, Kant effectively restricts his claims about the composition of matter to mere empirical inferences. As fundamental forces, they do not admit of any further philosophical explanation. Unlike Kant, Schelling's more speculative goal is to seek out and articulate the actual conditions of possibility for matter as such. Schelling wants to explain the

⁸¹ Beiser, *German Idealism*, 514.

⁸² Schelling, *Ideas*, 176.

⁸³ Michael Friedman, *Kant's Construction of Nature: A Reading of the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

force relations that produce matter in terms of even more fundamental forces, which, in turn, characterize the concept or idea of nature itself. In articulating these forces, we encounter the very “possibility of Nature” altogether.⁸⁴

To uncover these more fundamental forces, Schelling borrows and repurposes Fichte’s principles of the construction of the subject (*das Ich*). Fichte argues that subjectivity is entirely self-sufficient. The subject has no basis outside of its own self-consciousness, because self-consciousness is the logical origin of the subject *qua* subject. For Fichte, the first two principles he uses to construct an account of subjectivity consist of the following axioms: (F1) “The I originally and unconditionally posits its own existence” ($I = I$, or the principle of self-identity) and (F2) “a not-I is unqualifiedly posited in opposition to the I” ($\text{not-}I \neq I$, or “the principle of opposition”).⁸⁵ Fichte’s starting point, then, is the subject in itself. If the starting point of his dialectic is the subject, then there is ultimately no problem about freedom, because freedom logically precedes its own constraints. By starting with the subject as an axiomatic component of his system, then, Fichte ensures that any constraints on freedom are merely empirical. They do not impinge upon the foundational freedom that conditions the subject and the theoretical trajectory from subject to world. If such constraints are merely empirical – that is to say, they exist in nature – then the subject can dominate them, negate them, and overcome them.

Schelling appropriates Fichte’s axioms and uses them to recharacterize the two activities of which he thinks nature consists. On the one hand, there is a positive, unrestricted activity that necessarily exceeds our capacity to grasp it intellectually until it is opposed, on the other hand, by a negative, restricting activity that forces both activities into the distributed multiplicity of

⁸⁴ Schelling, *Ideas*, 9.

⁸⁵ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 96, 105.

determinate forms. Against Fichte, then, Schelling argues that even foregrounding subjectivity necessarily presupposes the background of nature. After all, Schelling wants to situate subjectivity within nature, rather than relying upon the negation of nature in order to construct a systematic theory of the subject. As Schelling writes, rather polemically, “What ultimately is the essence of his [Fichte’s] entire understanding of nature? [. . .] Actually, nothing but a moralizing of the entire world that undermines life and hollows it out, *a true disgust towards all nature and vitality except what there is of this in the subject.*”⁸⁶

Altogether, we can see the parallel between Schelling’s attempt to theorize the primary forces or powers of nature, that is to say, the relentlessly ongoing productivity of contraction and expansion, and both Kant’s fundamental empirical forces and Fichte’s first two axioms of the subject.⁸⁷ As Schelling writes,

In general, the state of contraction and expansion is the state of productivity *passing into product*. That alternation does not only happen in organic nature, it happens also outside of organic nature – in the elementary phenomena, for example; [...] the elementary phenomena are not appearances of one product, but appearances of *productivity itself*, and are actually phenomena of restricted productivity.⁸⁸

This productivity at the heart of nature is a function of the “reciprocal dependence” of actants or powers.⁸⁹ Accordingly, Schelling makes the process of dynamic reciprocity central to his ontology. Every entity or product in nature consists of “the free play of the two basic forces,” and

⁸⁶ Quoted in Iain Hamilton Grant, “The ‘eternal and necessary bond between philosophy and physics:’ a repetition of the difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian systems of philosophy,” *Angelaki* 10:1 (2005): 43, emphasis added. The original passage reads: “What ultimately is the essence of his [Fichte’s] entire understanding of nature? *It is this: that nature is to be used, that it is only there to be used. The principle according to which [Fichte] looks at nature is the economic-teleological principle alone [...]*” For the original, see F. W. J. Schelling, “Darlegung des wahren Verhältnisses der Naturphilosophie zu der verbesserten Fichteschen Lehre” (1806), *Sämmtliche Werke* 1.7, 17.

⁸⁷ George Di Giovanni “Kant’s Metaphysics of Nature and Schelling’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17:2 (1979): 197-215.

⁸⁸ Schelling, *First Outline*, 87.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

this interaction of spontaneous, unrestricted expansion and reactive, restricting contraction produces the shifting disequilibria that make up the world.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Schelling's creative salvage of both Kant and Fichte in his explanation of the process of dynamic reciprocity enables him to develop the second ontological process.⁹¹

1.3.2 Constitutive interconnectivity

Constitutive interconnectivity refers to something rather more counterintuitive than dynamic reciprocity. In simple terms, constitutive interconnectivity refers to the fact that constitutions – that is to say, entities of whatever variety – emerge from backgrounds of interconnected plurality. It is a commonplace in ecological thinking to assert that everything is connected to everything else. Call this the interconnectivity thesis. For example, recall Timothy Morton's claim that this insight comprises the entirety of the ecological thought as such.⁹² However, the process of constitutive interconnectivity encompasses a more replete and generative insight, for merely noting that "everything is connected" is far too thin to be useful for my purposes here. The emphasis of constitutive interconnectivity is not simply on the mere fact of interconnectivity as such, but, rather, highlights how the conditions of possibility for the entitative in *any* sense of the term necessarily *require* ontological plurality.

As Jean-Luc Nancy observes, "origin is irreducibly plural," and this observation applies to every singular entity that emerges within, and traverses, the plurality that makes it possible and in which it takes place.⁹³ Without an interconnected plurality, first, there is no constitution of

⁹⁰ Schelling, *Ideas*, 200.

⁹¹ I do not claim that dynamic reciprocity is a conceptual innovation entirely unique to Schelling. To the contrary, it is not the genealogical origin of any of these processes that interests me primarily, but, rather, how Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* lets me articulate them together, as a processual whole.

⁹² Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

⁹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 12.

the entitative, the individual, or the singular. Accordingly, the process of constitutive interconnectivity should have radical effects for our ontology. On the one hand, it inverts the function of many commonplace distinctions (e.g., the distinction between entity and environment, between person and place) – not by effacing those distinctions, but by forcing us to reevaluate how each distinction operates and performs itself. On the other hand, it provides the groundwork for a theoretical apprehension of identity that does not mistakenly calve off identity from its material context, but instead irreducibly situates the singularity of each identity within the context of which it is a part.

Schelling initially explores the structural process of constitutive interconnectivity in terms of his repurposing of Fichte's third principle of the construction of the subject. Fichte's third principle takes shape in the context provided by the axioms F1 and F2. Call it (F3): "In the I, a divisible not-I is opposed to the divisible I."⁹⁴ Fichte intends F3 to resolve the tension that obtains between F1, the principle of self-identity, which consists of the subject's unconditioned self-positing, and F2, the principle of opposition, which entails the subject's own finitude when thrust into conditions of external constraint. The tension between the unconditioned nature of the subject and the subject's own finitude can be resolved only if the subject also posits her own finitude, as well. For Fichte, this redoubles the absolute priority of the subject insofar as she posits both her own subjectivity *and* its limitations.

In Schelling's repurposing of Fichte, however, something novel happens. For Schelling, F3 takes on a new guise. Namely, it consists of the full range of "qualitative attractions and repulsions" that results from the interaction of the two basic forces posited above.⁹⁵ Schelling

⁹⁴ Fichte, *Science*, 110, translation modified. The original German reads: "*Ich setze im Ich dem theilbaren Ich ein theilbares Nicht-Ich entgegen.*"

⁹⁵ Schelling, *Ideas*, 201.

puts the point rather bluntly several pages later: “All quality of matter rests wholly and solely on the intensity of its basic forces.”⁹⁶ Schelling argues that qualitative differentiation only emerges within a background composed of forces acting reciprocally upon each other, thereby producing nonlinear causal networks instead of linear causal chains.

What is most important here is the degree to which Schelling illustrates that individuation is a process that only takes place as a consequence of a background plurality. Although there are two basic forces or tendencies, the background plurality in question does not reduce to a dualism of forces. Instead it refers to the numerous differentials contingently produced as those forces or tendencies generate qualitative intensities and inflect spatial points in the immanent continuum of existence. As Schelling writes:

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 vortex, every organized being. E.g., 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. (We do not really see the subsistence of Nature’s products, just their continually being-reproduced.)⁹⁷

1.3.3 The involution of life

The involution of life proves to be the most difficult to define of the three ontological processes of transcalar ecology. At first glance, it simply refers to the fact that any ecological framework that eliminates or omits life from its consideration altogether is no longer an ecological framework. “Ecology” is not a mere synonym for “relationality,” considered abstractly. Material and physical processes unfold relationally in lifeless contexts, but nothing distinctly ecological happens in those contexts until life is present. Therefore, the presence of life

⁹⁶ Ibid., 216.

⁹⁷ Schelling, *First Outline*, 18.

is necessary for an ecology to take place. This relatively simple observation remains relatively agnostic as to the definition or origin of life. That being said, no matter how little life there may be in our universe, or how it contingently emerges, we must acknowledge that nature is necessarily ecological insofar as life exists and, therefore, that life must be possible within nature.

At the same time, the involution of life refers not only to the presence of life, but to the degree to which life is implicated in the dynamically reciprocal, constitutively interconnected web of ecological relations. I refer to the *involution* of life because “involution” imparts a sense in which life and its effects are centrally involved in the unfolding of nature over time from the very beginning.⁹⁸ As Christopher Alexander argues at length, life is a structural feature of the world, for life is always already present as a latency in nature.⁹⁹ This is also what Jason Wirth refers to as “the conspiracy of life” that traverses Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* – that is to say, “the life beyond and within life and death,” which consists of the spiral of compositions and decompositions making up the dynamics of creation and decay.¹⁰⁰

For Schelling, the concept or quality of life occurs by degrees. As he writes, “there are developmental stages of life in Nature.”¹⁰¹ Principally at issue here is the concept of the *Stufenfolge*, which Schelling adapts from Kielmeyer and others. *Stufenfolgen*, or stages of development, refer to hierarchical, qualitative shifts in the degree of autonomous motility evidenced in a given range of material formations. In the *First Outline*, for example, Schelling

⁹⁸ I am indebted to the architect and philosopher Christopher Alexander for this idea, although he does not use the phrase “involution of life.”

⁹⁹ See Christopher Alexander, *Nature and Order, Volume One: The Phenomenon of Life* (Berkeley: The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002), in which Alexander theorizes the degree to which life appears in nature as a particular structural process that unfolds as a property of space.

¹⁰⁰ Jason Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁰¹ Schelling, *First Outline*, 35, translation modified. The original German reads: “es gebe eine Stufenfolge des Lebens in der Natur.”

states that this is “the fundamental task of all nature philosophy: TO DERIVE THE DYNAMIC GRADUATED SEQUENCE OF STAGES IN NATURE.”¹⁰² It is important to note, however, that Schelling never constructs the *Stufenfolgen* in terms of an ascension from inert matter to animate or vital matter. Rather, from the very start, Schelling writes that “[e]ven in mere organized matter there is life, but a life of a more restricted kind.”¹⁰³ This raises the question of what Schelling intends by the term life (*Leben*), as well as what it does for him.

First and foremost, it must be observed that Schelling does not ascribe to any form of strong vitalism, in which some ontologically external additive, like a life-force (*Lebenskraft*) or an *élan vital*, functions as a supplement to matter. In a different context, Nancy again captures the point well: “The world has no supplement. It is supplemented in itself and, as such, is indefinitely supplemented by the origin.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, as early as 1797, Schelling seeks to identify life with the aforementioned “free play of forces” that constitutes materiality as such.

Accordingly, Schelling endeavors to articulate how each *Stufenfolge* in the material history of the world generates its constituents in a nondetermined fashion – that is to say, “freely.” To do this, Schelling states that the emergence of life is central to his inquiry, the reason being that the presence of life as organismic bodies indicates the coincidence (the “absolute simultaneity and reciprocity”) of object and subject, of natural embodiment and subjectivity.¹⁰⁵

For Schelling, then, life bursts out; it emerges and disrupts. In this regard, life, for Schelling, functions rather like the alien in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979): it is natural, but also nature’s excess, both the ghost and the darkness. The bodies of the *Nostromo*’s crew are its standing reserves, much like the bodies of the living are the only vehicles of life. The alien takes

¹⁰² Ibid., emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ Schelling, *Ideas*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Schelling, *Ideas*, 36.

first one shape, then another, proceeding crabwise along pathways of fleshly development. First, it is an unknown interloper and later, entitative and taxonomized, the product of habits and milieus. It takes shape only by traversing its hosts. We cast the alien as the antagonist, because it reproduces itself through us, the living, but life stalks history in the same manner as the alien stalks the *Nostromo*'s decks and involutes the blood-spattered chest cavities of those who encounter it. As Schelling writes, "In the dead object everything is at rest – there is in it no conflict, but eternal equilibrium. Where physical forces divide, living matter is gradually formed; in this struggle of divided forces the living continues [...]"¹⁰⁶ Life therefore serves as the paradigmatic site of free disruption within the distribution of tangible things. We can even start to see how, very early in his philosophical career, Schelling claims that subjectivity must, in some primary way, embody or entail freedom. On the very first page of his first monograph, he asserts that the pursuit of a philosophy of nature is itself "a work of freedom" ("*ein Werk der Freiheit*").¹⁰⁷

In the *First Outline*, Schelling argues that nature consists, fundamentally, of infinite productivity (*natura naturans*) – that is to say, nature is neither merely the aggregate of all products (*natura naturata*), nor a constitutive "substance," as it is for Spinoza. Rather, it is the principle of productivity in and of itself. This immediately raises a theoretical problem, namely, how to account for the fact that infinite productivity produces finite products. Schelling attempts to resolve the problem as follows. The infinite productivity that nature is consists of two opposing forces, which he now calls the centrifugal and the centripetal. These forces underlie and structure the empirical distribution of tangible products. This fundamental opposition remains always already operative. Otherwise, the productivity of nature would equilibrate into

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1.

the mere serialization of products. As such, momentary apparent stability appears insofar as the constitutive opposition of forces in nature flirts with equilibrium and falls repeatedly into disequilibrium. What this produces, Schelling claims, is not an entropic slide into absolute disequilibrium, but, rather, the aforementioned *Stufenfolgen*.

Insofar as each stage or *Stufenfolge* has distinct, identifiable features, Schelling refers to them as “potencies” (*Potenzen*). A potency refers simultaneously to a level of organizational complexity and to a structurally distinct conceptual dispositive. For Schelling, the concept of potencies resolves longstanding problems posed by dualism and mechanism. Because “higher” potencies encompass and presuppose “lower” potencies, the problem of dualism disappears. There is a continuum or a spectrum of capacities instead of a radical ontological break between substances. On the other hand, because all “higher” potencies are more complex than “lower” potencies, the problem of mechanism also disappears.¹⁰⁸ It is worth noting that the progression of potencies is not strictly linear, but, in many ways, incorporates something very much like contemporary conceptualizations of top-down causation. Top-down causation refers to effects on components of a structural system that cannot be reduced to the effects of individual components, but, rather, must be imputed to the structural system as a higher-order system.¹⁰⁹

A potency, therefore, is a formal degree of complex organization (or self-organization). It is composed of “darkness,” that is to say, of matter – matter that is organized more or less differently, thereby giving rise to potencies that exceed basal norms. The matter or stuff that nature organizes benefits from being characterized in terms of darkness precisely because the processual origins of entities and events are occluded insofar as these material products appear as

¹⁰⁸ Robert J. Richards, *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin's Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21-61.

¹⁰⁹ The relationship between Schelling's ontology and top-down causation is treated extensively by Charlotte Alderwick in “Freedom and Powers in Schelling's Metaphysics,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2015.

spatial or temporal fixities. This is precisely the point at which Schelling's ontology formally positions life, or subjectivity, within the very concept of nature itself, as an occulted aspect or element of excess that remains implicated in nature nonetheless. He does not claim that nature is like a person, with intentions or psychological motivations that apply reflexively at the scale of nature as a whole. But Schelling does suggest that nature necessarily incorporates subjectivity as an active capacity, one that conceptually or logically precedes any particular placement of objects.¹¹⁰ Frederick Beiser summarizes the point succinctly:

Nature as subject is the single activity that is controlling, directing, and organizing itself throughout all of its potencies; but nature as object consists in these different potencies themselves, which are indeed distinct from one another. The distinction between nature as subject and as object is therefore one between nature as productivity and nature as product, or, as Spinoza put it, between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.¹¹¹

By "life," then, it seems that Schelling refers to the material manifestation of free disruptions of causal order – that is to say, to all the objective embodiments of nature's subjectivity. Another term that Schelling uses for this is "organism," referring to the aforementioned amalgamation or co-incidence of object and subject at every possible scale.¹¹² Schelling refers us to the organism because life does not exist as an abstraction, but as an involution, which is to say, both as an actually emergent property of real material conditions and as a propensity latent in the heart of matter itself. Indeed, this is precisely the point, namely, that there is a dimension of impersonal subjectivity necessarily present in Schelling's concept of nature. As Lara Ostaric writes, "for Schelling the principle of life is an expression of nature's

¹¹⁰ Iain Hamilton Grant, "The Hypothesis of Nature's Logic in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*," *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism*, ed. Matthew C. Altman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 478-98.

¹¹¹ Beiser, *German Idealism*, 549.

¹¹² Tobias Cheung, "From the organism of a body to the body of an organism: occurrence and meaning of the word 'organism' from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries," *British Society for the History of Science* 39:3 (2006): 319-39.

freedom.”¹¹³ This latent dimension of impersonal subjectivity means that nature as a whole never can be divided clearly into pure object or pure subject at any level. It also ultimately sets the stage for the emergence of the ecologically conditioned subject.

1.4 TRANSCALAR ECOLOGY AS AN ONTOLOGY

Transcalar ecology provides us with an ontological framework, and it serves as the foundation of the alternative process philosophy of nature I provide. Transcalar ecology characterizes nature in terms of a process ontology, composed of three intersecting ontological processes. Dynamic reciprocity refers to a causal rippling in which causal effects condition, and are conditioned by, all other causal effects. Constitutive interconnectivity individuates entities and events precisely as a consequence of a background plurality. The involution of life situates life within the processual whole of nature from the very start, as a capacity or a latency that manifests free disruptions of causal regularity. The intersection of these processes gives us nature characterized as a transcalar ecology. In this regard, transcalar ecology has several advantages over several popular contemporary ontological frameworks. Specifically, each one of the other frameworks I discuss – *hylozoism*, *assemblage theory*, and *network theory* – integrates only one of the ontological processes I enumerate and describe. See Figure 2.¹¹⁴ This is a weakness because eliminating even one of these processes gives us significantly more impoverished theoretical conceptions of nature, freedom, and subjectivity.

¹¹³ Lara Ostaric, “The concept of life in early Schelling,” *Interpreting Schelling*, ed. Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 62.

¹¹⁴ Figure 2 also indicates three additional ontological frameworks that I do not discuss at length here – Deleuzean vitalism, ecosystem theory, and object-oriented ontology (OOO). Although each of these frameworks is more processually composite than the three I largely discuss, each one admits of too much complexity and conceptual variation to discuss any further here.

1.4.1 Hylozoism

Hylozoism refers to the doctrine or presupposition that matter itself in its very materiality is intrinsically motile, vibrant, or vital. It foregrounds only one of the three ontological processes of transcalar ecology – namely, the involution of life – and it neglects the other two processes. For example, the core contribution of Jane Bennett’s vital materialism is precisely that of “materiality experienced as a lively force with agentic capacity.”¹¹⁵ One of the major motivations animating Bennett’s argument is her recognition of the agency implicit in our material environs. For Bennett, this recognition requires us to reconsider our relationship to the environment as citizens, as consumers, and as publics, because if our material environs are agentic and lively, they demand and deserve more affective and political recognition. Matter can no longer be conceived merely as a patient or a resource. There is a certainly a degree to which Bennett’s hylozoism penetrates the subject materially and destabilizes our sense of dominion, even self-dominion, but the political ecologies she proposes as alternative formations to ourselves, as individuals and as collectives, rely first and foremost upon a vitality present in the heart of matter.

It is certainly true that hylozoism makes the involution of life manifest as a core component of the ontology of nature. Without dynamic reciprocity or constitutive interconnectivity, however, hylozoism courts the risk of merely emphasizing a feature of the world rather than operationalizing a process and thereby generating or justifying normative or theoretical outcomes. If matter is lively, it may well be that we should treat it, and ourselves, differently. That being said, it is unclear to what extent Bennett can get life, or liveliness, to do the theoretical work she intends, without implicitly relying on both dynamic reciprocity and

¹¹⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 51.

constitutive interconnectivity. For without dynamic reciprocity initiating degrees of causal cross-cutting, instantiations of vibrant matter may well be ontological isolates that cannot, or do not, affect each other. Likewise, without constitutive interconnectivity linking together and producing the material distribution of agents, there is little reason to think that we are, in fact, both enmeshed with the ecological fabric of existence and distinct enough to generate or enact normative claims. Respectively, then, interaction and individuation both remain pressing questions for Bennett insofar as she foregrounds only the involution of life.

1.4.2 Assemblage theory

Assemblage theory relies fundamentally upon a conceptual term – assembly, or *agencement* – first developed by Félix Guattari in reference to self-organizing processes that integrate and disintegrate their component or constitutive parts into aggregate metaprocesses.¹¹⁶ Assemblage theory operationalizes the ontological process of constitutive interconnectivity, but it deprioritizes the other two processes of transcalar ecology. Here is a succinct, albeit very difficult, definition of the term, employed extensively by Gilles Deleuze and Guattari in *A*

Thousand Plateaus:

An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus). There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author).¹¹⁷

In other words, an assemblage is a complex, but ontologically real object that exists independently of any particular epistemological framing. An assemblage participates in multiple

¹¹⁶ Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious* (1979), trans. Taylor Adkin (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

¹¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 22-23.

flows – semiotic, material, and social flows. This means that an assemblage has multiple processual and temporal dimensions, or exists in multiple registers simultaneously. It also traverses multiple modes of the real. So, for example, a representation of an assemblage is counted as a part of that assemblage made manifest in additional register. Elsewhere, Deleuze writes that each assemblage brings together “different natures,” like “alliances [or] alloys,” although it is important to note how the conceptual flexibility of the term allows it to encompass multiple scales at the same time.¹¹⁸

One of the clearest expositions of assemblage theory in its contemporary context can be found in recent work by Manuel DeLanda.¹¹⁹ DeLanda argues that assemblage theory provides us with a materialist ontology that scales up from the smallest material processes to “the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence, consistency, or interiority,” that is to say, the world as such, including all of its ontological registers.¹²⁰ DeLanda’s claim is that assemblage theory provides suitably flexible terms for a realist ontology sufficient to ground the natural sciences, but which does not eliminate possible dimensions of experience and existence that attend and exceed scientific inquiry.

My claim is that assemblage theory elevates the process of constitutive interconnectivity above all other processes. For theorists of the assemblage, constitutive interconnectivity serves as the primary process, the process that enables all other processes to take shape.¹²¹ Assemblages are therefore the principal units of ontological concern or interest. While dynamic reciprocity and the involution of life may figure contingently into any given assemblage, constitutive

¹¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II* (1977), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Continuum, 1987), 52.

¹¹⁹ Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹²¹ Thomas Nail, “What Is an Assemblage?” *SubStance* 46:1 (2017): 21-37.

interconnectivity will always be conceptually and even ontologically prior. This is a problem, first, because dispensing with the need for any fundamental sense of life at all throws into question the coherence of both ecology and politics as anything other than epiphenomena, but it also eliminates from its purview a significant dimension of world's unfolding. Assemblage theory courts eliminativism. Ostensibly, Deleuze's own impersonal vitalism seeks to address this problem by construing life as a process of intensifying various ontological propensities latent in the real.¹²² However, for assemblage theory, dynamic reciprocity also disappears, or else becomes derivative. This is a problem because it decomposes the very process of constitutive interconnectivity into mere ontological flow.¹²³ A question about the function or status of normativity itself emerges here.¹²⁴ We can also ask whence the constituting power of constitutive interconnectivity, without the emergence of distinctly individuated entities or events that dynamically reciprocate each other's ontological affections? If we are committed to, or interested in, any sense of a political subject, then it seems as if assemblage theory cannot deliver or sustain such a theoretical construction.

1.4.3 Network theory

Network theory (or ANT: "actor-network-theory, a name that is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept") consists of a material semiotic approach to ontology that characterizes the relations between all possible causal actants, human or inhuman, in terms of social network theory, which operationalizes the process of dynamic

¹²² Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life" in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

¹²³ Peter Howard, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (New York: Verso Books, 2006). A possible solution to the problem can be found in Arjen Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity: Gilles Deleuze's Speculative Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

¹²⁴ Myron A. Penner, "Normativity in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of philosophy," *Continental Philosophy Review* 36:1 (2003): 45-59.

reciprocity.¹²⁵ Only actants exist, and actants only exist in networks composed of other actants. Actants could be anything in particular, but the existence of any actant can be measured solely by its actions, that is to say, its effects in the networks of which it is a part. Actants act; put differently, actants exist insofar as they exert varying degrees of influence or power upon other actants in their networks. The core ontological formation in network theory is that of nodal pathways. As Bruno Latour states, networks are composed of “nodes that have as many dimensions as they have connections.”¹²⁶ The intensities or pressures that traverse these nodal pathways compose the things themselves as and insofar as they affect each other. As Graham Harman puts it, in network theory, “the world [is composed of] a set of shifting networks involving trials of strength between actants.”¹²⁷

The ontological process that receives conceptual priority for network theory is dynamic reciprocity. After all, actants only exist as reciprocally dynamic relational objects. Any actant that bears no relation to any other actant is quite literally nothing at all. Having no effects whatsoever is to be nonexistent. Similarly, no actant occupies or can achieve a position of stasis or supremacy, which is to say, since all actants affect all other actants in any given network, there is no point at which any actant escapes from being affected by a range of differential pressures. This range of differential pressures constitutes a network. However, as numerous applications of ANT have illustrated, neither constitutive interconnectivity nor the involution of life need to figure in networks, per se. As for constitutive interconnectivity, there is a degree to which each actant or node in the network necessarily occupies an atomic or central position within the network. This is a degree of perspectivism that precludes individuation from within a

¹²⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.

¹²⁶ Bruno Latour, “On actor-network theory: a few clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47:4 (1996), 370.

¹²⁷ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 60.

background plurality. In fact, it may preclude individuation altogether, and network theory seems agnostic about any question to do with ontogenesis or subject formation. As for life, it drops out of network theory altogether. Hence, perhaps, Latour's imperative to abandon the concept of nature entirely, as well as any concept of the political that refers to it at all.¹²⁸

1.5 TRANSCALAR ECOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC ECOLOGY

It is also worth considering how transcalar ecology relates to the architectonic of contemporary scientific ecology. After all, regardless of any of its philosophical dimensions, ecology prominently figures as one of the natural sciences. To consider this, I turn to Samuel M. Scheiner and Michael R. Willig's general theory of ecology.¹²⁹ The Scheiner-Willig program gets articulated as a general theory, which is to say, as a statement of fundamental disciplinary principles, or as a conceptual infrastructure intended to support the lower-order concepts and models that practicing scientists employ. As Scheiner and Willig take great pains to show, the Scheiner-Willig program is also fully concordant with the practice of contemporary scientific ecology.

Summarily, the program consists of the following eight fundamental principles as Scheiner and Willig describe them:

1. Organisms are distributed in space and time in a heterogeneous manner.
2. Organisms interact with their abiotic and biotic environments.
3. Variation in the characteristics of organisms results in heterogeneity of ecological patterns and processes.
4. The distributions of organisms and their interactions depend on contingencies.
5. Environmental conditions as perceived by organisms are heterogeneous in space and time.
6. Resources as perceived by organisms are finite and heterogeneous in space and time.

¹²⁸ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹²⁹ *The Theory of Ecology*, eds. Samuel M. Scheiner and Michael R. Willig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

7. Birth rates and death rates are a consequence of interactions with the abiotic and biotic environment.
8. The ecological properties of species are the result of evolution.¹³⁰

Taken altogether, the principles constituting the Scheiner-Willig program present a philosophically coherent account of ecological being, consisting of evolved, spatiotemporally distributed organisms interacting with environments in ways that generate functions patterns at multiple scales. The ontological processes of transcalar ecology both ground and unground each of the principles that compose the Scheiner-Willig program. They ground these principles insofar as each principle presupposes the necessary intersection of all three processes. They unground these principles insofar as the very fact of this grounding indicates the need for a higher-order ontological framework that stipulates the interaction of the listed principles. For example, regarding the involution of life, every principle in the Scheiner-Willig program integrates the biota. Biotic action cannot be eliminated from this conceptual schema, yet no principle addresses the involution of life as such. It is simply assumed. Likewise, the intersection of dynamic reciprocity with constitutive interconnectivity can be discovered in the network of assumptions and implications informing the Scheiner-Willig program as a whole. Consider that the distribution of organisms (in Principle 4) is not purely random, but, instead, a function of contingent interactions between organisms and environments. Organisms interact with each other in a dynamically reciprocal fashion, but they also interact with the underlying physical processes that inhere within the environment. The interactions that transect organisms and environments alike reflexively affect both over time, much as environmental change and biological evolution take place in conjunction. In terms of constitutive interconnectivity, these interactions and transections produce the ecological patterns that, in turn, condition organisms.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 13.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Transcalar ecology lets us remap our conceptual landscape so as to allow freedom and subjectivity to appear within nature, rather than in contraposition to nature. To effect this remapping, I have salvaged material from Schelling in order to show how we can start to amalgamate freedom and subjectivity as inextricable parts of nature as such. In this regard, Schelling helps resolve a further theoretical question: What is the relationship between freedom and necessity? Hannah Pitkin goes so far as to describe the very task of political theory as “the attempt to define the interface between what must be accepted as necessary and what can be altered through active intervention.”¹³¹ Schelling defines this relationship not by assigning necessity and freedom to two conceptually or practically distinct domains – that is to say, nature and the political, respectively – but, rather, by endeavoring to provide a dynamic, evolutionary account of the fundamental role of subjectivity in nature. In this regard, transcalar ecology is the very engine of creative darkness insofar as the unconscious material labor of its processes ultimately produces and sustains both freedom and the subject.

¹³¹ Hannah Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism: Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics.” *Dissent* 20 (1973): 514.

1.7 FIGURES

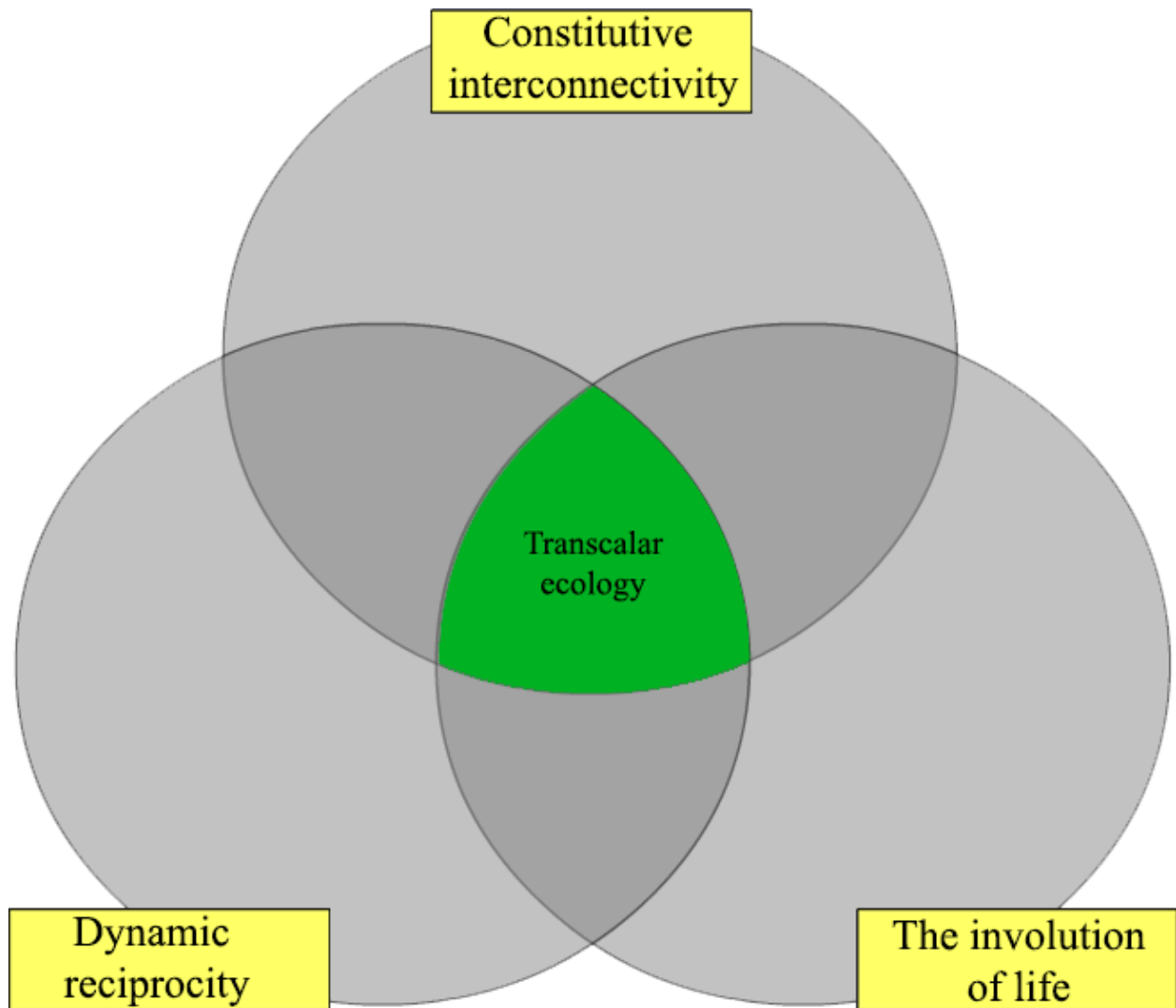


Figure 1. Transcultural ecology as the intersection of three component processes.

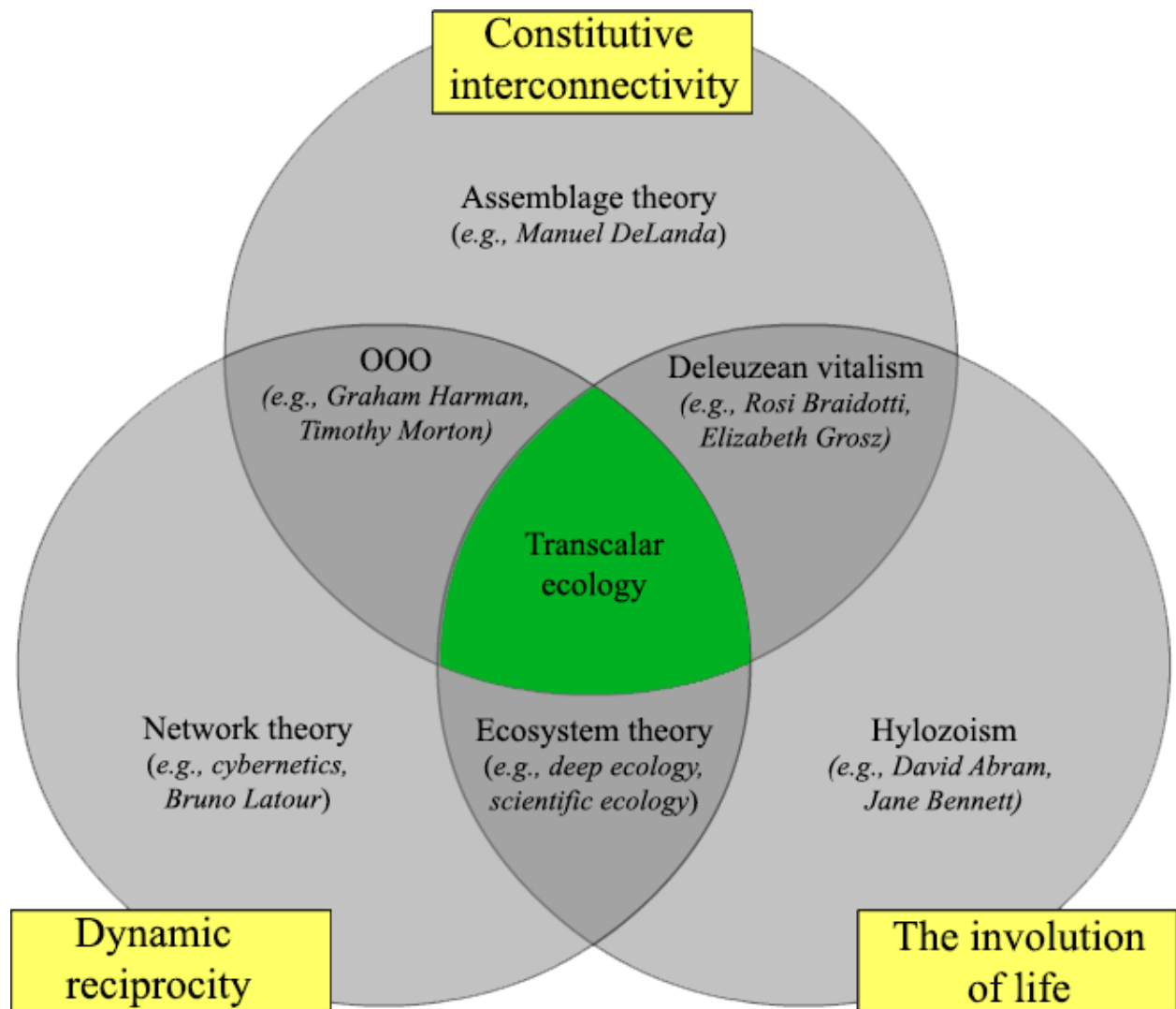


Figure 2. Transcultural ecology contrasted with alternative ontologies.

CHAPTER 2: NOIR MATERIALISM

2.1 INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND MATTER

Recently, a novel paradigm – frequently termed the “new materialisms,” or the materialist turn – has emerged in the fields of philosophy and political theory alike.¹³² Although new materialist positions vary wildly – e.g., ranging from continental realisms and speculative naturalisms to science studies and updated Deleuzian philosophy – all of them assert the ontological primacy of matter and its heterogeneous functionality. To put it simply, matter matters, and it matters insofar as the new theories of materiality break with philosophical descriptions of matter as dead or inert. To the contrary, new materialists generally impute matter with some degree of ontological “liveliness,” which is to say, agency or productivity.¹³³

Of course, there is also an implicit critical dimension present in the new materialisms, which draws upon and sharpens longstanding critiques of modernity’s ontological self-image. To borrow a striking turn of phrase from Thomas Carlyle’s Romantic novel *Sartor Resartus* (1836), many modern philosophers construe nature as a universe “void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: [...] one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference.”¹³⁴ Although the moderns are often preoccupied with how life or mind is therefore possible – e.g., in the recurrent fascination with automata characteristic of the 17th and 18th

¹³² For excellent articulations of this trend, see *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and *The New Politics of Materialism: History, Philosophy, Science*, eds. Sarah Ellen Zweig and John H. Zammito (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹³³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), and Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹³⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127. Thanks to Bruce Rosenstock for bringing this passage to my attention.

centuries – matter, the very stuff of nature, largely remains a mechanistic substratum.¹³⁵ For the moderns, matter is determined by patterns of causal necessity and ultimately unrelated to experience or subjectivity, referents which may not even exist in early or late modern theoretical imaginaries.¹³⁶

For the new materialists, however, matter works rather differently, and it is on the basis of previous critiques of modernity's ontological self-image that the new materialisms can take their leave of it. For example, Donna Haraway's body of work explores the degree to which cultural, epistemological, and technical modes of production materially overlap. In her so-called cyborg materialism, or in her later reflections on the distinction between humans and other animals, Haraway simultaneously breaks down and reformulates received senses of agency and subjectivity. Similarly, the environmental political theorist Val Plumwood argues against the deleterious ecological and political effects of Cartesian dualism in Western history.¹³⁷ As Plumwood writes, the Cartesian dualism that informs or even structures much of modernity is largely responsible for "the great gulf between the human and the natural which has become characteristic of the western tradition."¹³⁸ Following after theorists like these, new materialists tend to emphasize the generative dimensions of materiality, engaging with concepts of matter, or even with concrete materialities, to produce and propose theoretical innovations in aesthetics, ontology, and political theory. That being said, the place of nature in the new materialist

¹³⁵ Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

¹³⁶ Contemporary versions of this are called eliminativism. For the classic statement, see Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013, 3rd edition).

¹³⁷ Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) and Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

paradigm is not always immediately clear. Indeed, many new materialists expound the end of nature thesis I discuss in the Introduction.¹³⁹

Against this trend, in this chapter, I explore a second aspect of my answer to the broad organizing question posed in Chapter 1: What is nature, such that freedom and subjectivity are possible expressions of it? For if nature is thoroughly ecological, it is also thoroughly material. In Chapter 1, I repurposed elements in F. W. J. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* to craft the foundations of a process philosophy of nature – the ontological framework provided by transcalar ecology. But materiality is precisely how we get from the abstract philosophical articulation of process to the manner in which the inherent polarity in nature shapes its constituents, that is to say, the material manifestations constituting our empirical and experiential lifeworlds. The second fundamental aspect of nature is therefore its materiality, and its materiality is the medium and means by which distinct entities and events are generated within the ontological framework of transcalar ecology.

In this regard, I both rely and expand upon the new materialist theoretical imaginary. Accordingly, matter figures for me, but also for Schelling, as an active and productive process.¹⁴⁰ This point is worth emphasizing, namely, that matter is not a substance (at least, construed in the terms of a traditional substance ontology), but a process. As Samantha Frost writes, “the atomic elements that compose matter are not really ‘stuff’ at all but rather conglomerations of energy” and “the solidity or substantiality of the matter we encounter daily is an effect of the constrained flow and interrelation of energy.”¹⁴¹ It is still very common to find matter discussed as if it were

¹³⁹ *Philosophy after Nature*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

¹⁴⁰ F. W. J. Schelling, *Allgemeine Deduktion des Dynamischen Prozess oder der Kategorien der Physik in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings Sämmtliche Werke* 4, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1860), 1-78.

¹⁴¹ Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 32, 34.

a substance, but what Frost and others help clarify is the degree to which matter, in fact, is produced and sustained only by means of underlying processual relations. Insofar as “energy takes form as matter through its constrained self-relation,” “matter is differentially composed.”¹⁴² In other words, matter is a kind of processual doing. It conglomerates and constrains; it differentiates and relates. Matter unfolds, even insofar as it appears merely to perdure, which is to say that even if a material object looks like it is just sitting there minding its own business, it nevertheless embodies active, ongoing processes of differentiation and self-relation.

The processual quality of matter materializes transcalar ecology. This translates into what I call *noir materialism*, which is noirish for reasons I make apparent below. Noir materialism evidences how traditionally “immaterial” features of the world, such as subjectivity, emerge as irreducible features or functions of the immanent plane of ecological materiality – that is to say, nature. Here we see creative darkness at work, in the churning background processes that generate and sustain materiality as such and that allow entities and events to emerge into a brightened foreground. Preliminarily, we must ask what it means for matter to be an activity or a process rather than a substance. In other words, what is the matter of materialism, and what can such matter do? To answer these questions, I expand upon some elements of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* in order to see how Schelling builds his own materialism and to clarify and repurpose the dynamic of emergence that animates it. Central to my salvaging of Schelling’s materialism is the figuration of matter as an ontogenetic process. Ultimately, elaborating upon the generative ontological processes that Schelling proposes lets us imagine how processual matter is able to produce stable entities or events.

¹⁴² Ibid., 35, 33.

I describe Schelling's materialism in terms of a figural process of structural differentiation between background and foreground, which enables us to understand better how the free subject emerges in nature. Two examples – film noir and dark matter – allow me to explore initially how this process takes shape in various ontological domains. I then turn to Schelling's own materialism to see how this figural process of structural differentiation takes place in his *Naturphilosophie*.

Film noir serves as my paradigmatic example because, due to the nature of film, the process I want to make apparent occurs there with the least amount of epistemological friction. In other words, film noir visibly performs the structural differentiation in question. You can watch a film noir and see creative darkness laboring before your very eyes. Like the protagonists in a film noir, for whom the background logics of the world are opaque, we may not even know what we are looking at when we watch one. But we see characters and figures pursuing various dramas in the foreground only by virtue of the enframing darkness that surrounds and sustains them. Likewise, noir materialism draws our attention back to the processual darkness of matter that ultimately serves as the condition of possibility for freedom and subjectivity.

2.2 FILM NOIR AND DARK MATTER

Schelling's materialism entails a theoretical narrative of emergence that operates on the basis of a discontiguous continuity between object and subject, between the world of objects typically identified as empirical or material reality and the subject as a conscious being. Contiguity here refers to adjacency, to the state of existing "next to," while continuity refers to immanence, to the state of existing on the same continuum. As an example, consider how objects can be in the background or the foreground of a filmic image, a shot, only provided that they

occupy the same image. Background and foreground are discontiguous but continuous. Things in a film may occupy structurally different spaces, but, in order to occupy any space at all, they must be in the film. Describing the process in these terms emphasizes and privileges something like a perspective or a vantage point upon the process itself. Although films exist as temporally extended ontological artifacts whether or not they are being watched, their manifestation of structural and visual relationships implies a perspectival, viewing subject. The implication of perspective is not a problem, however, because my analysis directs itself ultimately to the reconstruction of the subject as such, as well as the permanent perspectival alteration that such analysis fosters (i.e., to “fit our Vision to the Dark”).¹⁴³ This relationship of discontiguous continuity embodies and evidences a figural process of structural differentiation between background and foreground, as the examples or paradigm cases of film noir and dark matter show.

The term “film noir” originates from the French for “black film,” coined by the film critic Nino Frank to refer to a number of American crime dramas shown in Paris in 1946.¹⁴⁴ However, almost uniquely characteristic of film noir is the fact that film theorists cannot agree about what it is. Numerous formalizations of the definition of film noir have been attempted. For example, Wheeler Winston Dixon characterizes film noir entirely in terms of the coincidence of its aesthetics – dark, shadowy recesses, infinite nights, and labyrinthine spaces – with its themes, namely, despair, entrapment, fatalism, epistemological and existential failure.¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, Robert B. Pippin explores dimensions of agency in the film noir, taking it as a cinematic

¹⁴³ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film*, trans. David Brenner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

¹⁴⁵ Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

genre form uniquely placed for addressing American historical and philosophical concerns about freedom and sociality.¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, early arguments by Raymond Durnat and Paul Schrader against conceiving film noir in terms of genre retain their force. This is largely because of the narrative heterogeneity of films considered to be noir exemplars, ranging from the classic hardboiled detective story to dry police procedurals, overwrought social melodramas, and gloomy underworld tragedies.¹⁴⁷ It is true that the film noir generally embodies an atmosphere of fatalism, failure, and threat, but attempts to characterize film noir merely in terms of mood or tone rapidly meet difficulties upon the objection that many films embody such a mood without being even remotely noirish.

The approach to identifying film noir that retains the most promise after sixty years of intermittent analysis privileges stylistics. By “stylistics,” I mean something rather more abstract than “cinematography,” although the two are undoubtedly related. Stylistics are “inside” of a film. They serve as the visual grammar that a given film embodies, while cinematography refers to processes that are “outside” of a film, like the technical means and methods by which the film is made. It is the stylistics of film noir that stereotypically distinguish the form from other kinds of films. Indeed, film noir puts darkness to work. It privileges darkness as a creative framework for the production of its cinematic contents. This is a purposefully broad claim. Although I am privileging film noir here, relevant literatures in film theory attend to the function and use of

¹⁴⁶ Robert B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013) and Erik Dussere, *America Is Elsewhere: The Noir Tradition in the Age of Consumer Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁷ Raymond Durnat “Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir” and Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2003), 37-64.

darkness in other contexts, as well.¹⁴⁸ However, the creative or productive function of darkness is displayed with exceptional force in the film noir context.

The stylistics of film noir are defined principally by the use of anti-traditional lighting.¹⁴⁹ Although numerous lighting techniques inflect the history of film, the oldest and most traditional means of lighting a scene is called three-point lighting. Three-point lighting allows the illumination of the shot's subject while avoiding, controlling, or minimizing artificial shadows cast by more direct lighting methods. Traditional lighting in film aims to produce the illusion of natural lighting while also maintaining or manipulating contrast and light levels in the shot, to various effects.¹⁵⁰ In film noir, fill lights are typically eliminated, which means that the background of any given scene is allowed to remain as dark as possible, while unsoftened key lights are used to highlight and select narrow, often partial elements in any given scene. Overall, this produces the visual effect of emphasizing any lit object, often jarringly so, while simultaneously obscuring the source of lighting altogether. What matters here is not that the objects in question are, in fact, actually lit, but, rather, the stylistic effect of this highly contrastive lighting schema.¹⁵¹ Hence the notion of making film noir as a process of working intimately with shadows.

Stylistically, this means that film noirs are quite literally and materially composed of emergences upon emergences. The film noir structurally embodies discontinuous continuity. Backgrounds are indeterminate stygian regresses, and constantly emerging into the foreground of

¹⁴⁸ Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and Daisuke Miyao, *The Aesthetics of Shadow: Lighting and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁹ Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," *Film Noir Reader*, 5-77. See also John Alton, *Painting with Light* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013). Originally published in 1949, Alton's text provides a detailed methodological treatise in praise of shadows by one of the finest film noir cinematographers.

¹⁵⁰ Patrick Keating, *Hollywood Lighting: From the Silent Era to Film Noir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 244-64.

visible legibility are the lurching forms of our various doomed protagonists. Bodies emerge from the darkness as if produced by it, and they are discontiguously related to that darkness. Yet by virtue of being in the same film together, the dark background and the key lit figures enacting the plot are directly continuous. In this sense, in film noir, we can see depicted before our very eyes what emergence is, in Schelling's sense. As Schelling writes, in the context of speculating about the physics of light, "light, in touching the [dark] body, entirely changes its nature."¹⁵² This dynamic of emergence helps me characterize Schelling's materialism as a noir materialism, that is to say, a materialism in which the subsistence of ontological "darkness" is necessary for the emergence of determinable, novel, or stable features in the real.

Ontological "darkness" is neither inhibiting nor opposed to such emergence, but structurally necessary for it. Schelling writes, "It is light which limits our intuition absolutely; what lies beyond light and the luminous world is for our senses a sealed book and buried in eternal darkness."¹⁵³ In the stylistics of film noir, we register noncognitively and in the starkest possible terms the very ontological process of emergence as it appears against the black background of our turbid universe. Things are happening back there, in the dark, in the night, but as any character in a film noir could tell you, you can't see everything at once – only the flash or cinematic smear of entities and events, like starkly lit faces moving through the night of the world. Andrew Bowie captures this dynamic in Schelling rather neatly:

In the same way as it is only if there is darkness that light can manifest itself as light, human conceptual consciousness both makes possible a manifest objective world, and, precisely by making it manifest, makes inaccessible how it is that the world produces conceptual consciousness from itself.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 225. Schelling returns to both metaphoric and scientific vocabularies of light and darkness ad nauseam throughout his entire body of work.

¹⁵³ F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 98.

¹⁵⁴ Bowie, *Schelling*, 75.

Likewise, the dark matter studied by physicists provides an additional paradigm case of ontological emergence as expressed by noir materialism. Admittedly, dark matter as an object of inquiry belongs to a highly complex scientific research domain. However, without getting too bogged down in technical details, the current scientific perspective on the function of dark matter can be elucidated relatively briefly.

Although the term admits of some scientific ambiguity, when we talk about matter, we typically refer to ordinary, baryonic matter. Ordinary matter consists of the neutrons and protons that produce the range of atomic elements. However, in the 1920s and 1930s, a disparate group of astrophysicists (Jacobus Kapteyn, Jan Oort, and Fritz Zwicky) inferred the necessary existence of a form of exotic matter that Zwicky named dark matter (“*dunkle Materie*”). Dark matter remains a rather mysterious form of matter because it cannot be observed directly, only inferentially. Its composition is unknown. However, two of the major means by which dark matter is measured involve measurements of the velocities of galaxies and distortions thereof. The proportion of dark matter to ordinary matter is relatively high. Jeremiah Ostriker and Simon Mitton, a contemporary astrophysicist and astronomer, respectively, write that, universally, dark matter “dominates over ordinary matter by roughly a factor of ten.”¹⁵⁵

The purported function of dark matter in the physical structure of the universe is particularly interesting. Ostriker and Mitton write in a recent monograph on the topic that dark matter is probably “the principle component of the universe, as the stuff that makes gravity act properly, to force the growth of all the structure we observe around us.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, the

¹⁵⁵ Jeremiah Ostriker and Simon Mitton, *Heart of Darkness: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Invisible Universe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 99.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 174. See also Iain Nicolson, *Dark Side of the Universe: Dark Matter, Dark Energy, and the Fate of the Cosmos* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), which unpacks in technical terms the claim that most matter in the universe is dark matter.

theory of dark matter consists of the following claims. We can observe the universe behaving in a certain way (e.g., how a galaxy is formed and how it moves over time), but we cannot explain this behavior by invoking only the mass of ordinary matter. To explain the behavior fully requires the postulation of dark matter, which provides the additional mass necessary to produce the observed effects. One further reason scientists do not think of dark matter as a mere instrumental hypothesis is that the precise amount of additional mass needed in order to adjust the aforementioned calculations is the same as discovered in other calculations (e.g., calculations involving gravitational lensing effects). Accordingly, while dark matter cannot be observed in a directly empirical fashion, it necessarily must be there. As Lawrence Krauss observes drily, “all roads lead to dark matter.”¹⁵⁷

Both film noir and dark matter therefore provide striking examples or paradigm cases of ontological emergence in Schelling’s sense – of what I repurpose into a noir materialism. Film noir both shows us the figural effects of the structural differentiation between background and foreground, but *it also is itself composed of such figural effects*. Likewise, the relationship between dark matter and ordinary matter is such that dark matter provides the necessary background that allows ordinary matter to make its foreground appearance in the composition of our empirical lifeworld. All things shining – everything you see and touch is framed and sustained by overwhelming masses of darkness necessary for the emergence of whatever we might register as entities and events. As such, film noir and dark matters are not merely analogies or metaphors. For both, emergence takes place by means of a structural differentiation that not only remains immanent to itself, but which requires and relies upon that immanence in order to differentiate. You may not be able to touch the darkness directly, but it is touching you.

¹⁵⁷ Lawrence Krauss, *Quintessence: The Mystery of Missing Mass in the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 234.

In this regard, the dynamic process at work here differs from, say, the relationship between noise and the structured flow of the world that Michel Serres analyzes. For Serres, partially distinct entities or events appear as eddies or turbulent fluctuations within a surging ocean of ontological noise: “The noise, the background noise, that incessant hubbub, our signals, our messages, our speech and our words are but a fleeting high surf, over its perpetual swell.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, signals presuppose background noise, to one degree or another. Serres writes, “Background noise is the ground of our perception, absolutely uninterrupted, it is our perennial sustenance, the element of the software of all our logic. It is the residue and the cesspool of our messages. No life without heat, no matter, neither; no warmth without air, no logos without noise, either.”¹⁵⁹ There are indeed some parallels between Serres’ account of noise and signal and noir materialism, insofar as both direct attention toward the background and foreground relation, but the necessary implication of perspective in the latter contributes more fully to the foundations of a dark anthropocentrism.

As Timothy Morton writes, “The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it. The point of view of the narrator herself becomes stained with desire. There is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements.”¹⁶⁰ In this regard, he draws our attention both to the structure of noir narratives, but also to the noirish dimensions of both ecology and the ecological crisis itself. We, subjects of the ecological and subjects of this crisis, are implicated in the world and in its disastrous unfolding at present. Similarly, we are drawn

¹⁵⁸ Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119. See also François J. Bonnet, *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago*, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media, 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 16-17.

into a film upon viewing it, for films are ontologically unique insofar as they simultaneously are distinct ontological artifacts, but also nothing more than structural productions of perspectival constraint.

However, what I call noir materialism offers several theoretical resources that exceed this insight about our entanglement in ecological being and implication in the ecological crisis. On the one hand, we have the intersecting processes of transcalar ecology I discuss in Chapter 1, which describe and provide us with the fundamentally ecological conditions of being in the most abstract sense. Being is an emergent ensemble, and nature is ecological to its roots. On the other hand, the relations between these processes give rise both to unconscious material interactivity and to the latent subjectivity that emerges within materiality as such.¹⁶¹ Schelling's own materialism embodies this latter insight in a number of productive ways.

2.3 SCHELLING'S MATERIALISM

Although Schelling of course never refers to any such theoretical construction as noir materialism, his materialism is indeed latent in his philosophy of nature from the very start. Ultimately, Schelling provides an account of how subjectivity is generated or implied by a processual materialism. Namely, subjectivity emerges. Since materiality is processual, however, subjectivity emerges as a shift *within* those processes, as a co-incidence or a focal point that relies upon the background and foreground relationship, rather than a radically separate product that is fundamentally different in kind from other entitative or eventual products of matter's dark agitations.

¹⁶¹ For another, very recent take on this, see N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

To set the stage for his materialism, however, we need to engage with a major interpretation of Schelling's work as it takes place from 1797 to 1801. According to this interpretation, there is a tension inflecting Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, a tension only dispelled in 1801 when Schelling transitions from the *Naturphilosophie* to the *Identitätsphilosophie*, or the identity philosophy.¹⁶² The basic idea is that, prior to 1801, Schelling developed two philosophical systems in conjunction with each other: respectively "the Philosophy of Nature and the Philosophy of Man," which is to say, a form of ontological realism and a form of transcendental idealism. The purpose of his ontological realism is to preserve and elucidate a conception of nature that allows for the generation of free subjectivity, while his transcendental idealism purports to provide a theory of the active, free subject that can determine and justify the existence of the external world in all its material complexity. As Michelle Kosch argues,

[Schelling] saw two options for 'developing' spirit from nature and nature from spirit. Either nature could develop towards spirit because it is itself already implicitly spirit, or it could be caused to develop towards spirit by some further principle. The same alternative he thought to hold of the opposite movement, from spirit to nature. [...] The first system follows the first option – the systematic principle is not one out of which the subjective and the objective can both be shown to arise; rather it is a principle which is somehow both subjective and objective. The principles of nature and those of intellect are not two different sets of principles; the purpose of the two-part system is to show how they could appear, to the naive understanding, to be two separate principles, while in fact being identical. The second option informs the strategy of the second system, which proceeds from a highest principle which is neither subject nor object, but some third thing: the original 'indifference' of the subjective and objective somehow (nevertheless) originally differentiated such that it contains the origins of both.¹⁶³

In pursuing this "second option," Schelling's cognizance of the conceptual role of the absolute, that is to say, the indifferent and unconditioned whole, encompassing and grounding both object and subject, eventually gives him the *Identitätsphilosophie*. In the

¹⁶² For examples, see Robert F. Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809-1815* (London: Associated University Press, 1977) and Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶³ Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*, 75.

Identitätsphilosophie, Schelling's renewed emphasis on the conceptual priority of the absolute appears to collapse the world of individuation into a generic condition so all-inclusive that any material or meaningful differentiation is lost within it. As Frederick Beiser observes, at this stage of his philosophical career, Schelling "cast himself in the role of a modern Spinoza," which is to say, his articulation and defense of a thoroughly naturalistic monism ends up effacing the role of subjectivity in nature and reintroducing a covert necessitarianism back into his ontology.¹⁶⁴ The absolute – nature as ground – comes to dominate completely, and what gets lost in this development is any possibility or sense of free subjectivity whatsoever. As George Seidel observes, it is as if "With his *Identitätsphilosophie* freedom had come to an end right at the beginning."¹⁶⁵

This shift in Schelling's thinking suggests that the *Naturphilosophie* never really adequately functions as a consistent monism, much less a materialism, because Schelling always twins the *Naturphilosophie* with a form of idealism that exceeds or undermines it. However, this is untrue insofar as Schelling identifies nature and spirit (i.e., matter and mind, object and subject) as aspects of each other. Because he does not presuppose a radical distinction between nature and subjectivity, their mutual imbrication does not necessarily appear as a fundamental problem. To see why, we must examine how Schelling's early materialism takes shape, as well as why it matters for Schelling, and for us, whether he is actually a materialist or not.

At issue for Schelling is whether or not matter self-organizes. He is consistently clear about the autopoietic nature of matter, but, more importantly at stake is how the necessary possibility of subjectivity latent in nature itself manifests in the form of the subject, given the

¹⁶⁴ Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 567.

¹⁶⁵ George J. Seidel, *Activity and Ground: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, 1976), 99.

constraints of materiality. How do subjects individuate? It is not enough to argue that, because subjects exist, subjectivity necessarily must be a feature of nature. There needs to be some theoretical pathway by means of which the latent subjectivity lurking in the darkness of nature comes to manifest itself creatively in the form of determinate, individuated subjects. In fact, this is what Schelling intends his theoretical construction of matter to do.

It is worth noting the degree to which Schelling constantly ascribes conceptual priority to matter, whether it is conceived as the “the first foundation of all experience,” or as “the general seed of the universe, in which everything is hidden that unfolds in later developments,” or as the “dark foundation” or “dark principle” that haunts his later texts.¹⁶⁶ It is clear that, for Schelling, there is ultimately something primary about materiality as such. As I argue in Chapter 1, the core ontological processes of transcalar ecology ground and structure materiality; *matter is their expression*. Transcalar ecology is the processual heart of matter. Accordingly, Schelling’s account of matter portrays matter at its most basic level, as the dynamically reciprocal relationship inherent in the shifting disequilibria produced by the “free play” of centrifugal and centripetal forces. His account of matter also captures the appearance of matter at the perceptible level of our empirical and experiential lifeworld, for constitutive interconnectivity constitutes or generates the distribution of the tangible. Foreground entities emerge within background pluralities. Last, his account involutes life at a basic level. Life and subjectivity are latent in the plane of immanence from the very start. As such, Schelling’s account disrupts both dualism of the Cartesian or Christian type and the purely mechanistic monisms of Spinozists like La Mettrie and the later positivists.

¹⁶⁶ Schelling, *Ideas*, 17, 179 and F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 29, 33.

It is therefore necessary to emphasize the importance of Schelling's positioning of subjectivity in nature, as a feature or latency in nature itself. Insofar as his basic ontological framework is ecological through and through, it cannot and does not function mechanistically. In this regard, I break with Iain Hamilton Grant's speculative realist reading of Schelling in order to retain the intimate conceptual tie between materiality and subjectivity that Grant fails to emphasize. In part, this is because Grant wants to avoid identifying the subjectivity in nature with any specific subject, or the structural expression or features of any specific subject. However, Grant conflates subjectivity with the subject, which mistakes the process of structural differentiation for the structure that that differentiates. In other words, products may be processual, but it is still a category error to conflate processes as such with instances of process.

Starting from Gilles Deleuze's observation that "[t]he most important aspect of Schelling's philosophy is his consideration of powers," Grant develops a totalizing naturalism characterized in terms of fundamental powers and a principle of productivity that ungrounds the world of things.¹⁶⁷ Grant proceeds to use Schelling to theorize the deep field logic of nature, or, in other words, to sketch a philosophy of nature in which nature functions as the total morphogenetic field consisting of the immanent, ongoing production of all possible entities and entitative modes.¹⁶⁸ He argues that, if genesis exists in nature, then nature cannot be reduced to a mere aggregate of products. Nature resists disaggregation into distinct because there must be some fundamental power or underlying principle of productivity that accounts for the genesis of those products in the first place. As Joseph Lawrence observes, Grant and Schelling alike

¹⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 190. See also Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006).

¹⁶⁸ Iain Hamilton Grant, "Everything is primal germ or nothing is: The deep field logic of nature," *Symposium* 19:1 (2015): 106-24 and Charlotte Alderwick, "Nature's Capacities: Schelling and Contemporary Power-Based Ontologies," *Angelaki* 21:4 (2016): 59-76.

apprehend “nature as always more subject than object, the ground and condition of human subjectivity rather than simply the object of human reflection.”¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Grant appears to lose any grasp of the importance of the subject for Schelling. As he writes,

Where therefore nature figures as subject [...], it is already consequent upon its being expressed as such, that is, on the consequent predication of an antecedent, or on the production of grounds. This is not to say that there is a ‘nature itself,’ an *abstract* nature without characteristics, but rather that where there are predicates, these follow a subject that only becomes what it is in that expression *by* that expression. Let us say then, that nature is source.¹⁷⁰

In the context provided by his *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling’s account of matter functions as that processual and relational field within which subjectivity emerges, and I place special emphasis upon this effectuation of the subject. Matter provides the background against which the subject comes to the foreground. Background and foreground are immanent to one another in much the same way as background and foreground in the medium of film are immanent to each other. Both background and foreground exist in the same continuum, despite the fact that their relationship allows the differentiation of space and the perception of depth. The presence of this dynamic is one reason why Schelling’s twofold approach from 1797 to 1801 does not reflect any particular uncertainty about which comes first – material nature or “immaterial” mind – but, instead, testifies to Schelling’s cognizance of the degree to which “mind” emerges in nature only on the basis of nature’s latent capacity to generate subjectivity.

For Schelling, then, subjectivity emerges in nature as a distinct part of nature, such that we can no longer secure any concept of nature without subjectivity, but nor can we acquire a theory of subjectivity without nature. The subject does not emerge from nature by negating nature. To the contrary, nature forms the “dark foundation” from whence the subject emerges and upon

¹⁶⁹ Joseph Lawrence, “On an Artificial Earth: Philosophies of Nature after Schelling,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2007), May 10, 2007, accessed February 15, 2020: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25292/>.

¹⁷⁰ Grant, “Everything is primal germ,” 18, emphasis in original.

which it relies for its existence. The question here is not whether or not there is such a thing as mindedness or subjectivity at all, but, rather, how such a latent capacity gets actualized. If the possibility of subjectivity inheres in nature as a core latency, it becomes necessary to establish that subjectivity, in fact, *emerges* within nature.¹⁷¹ After all, it is logically possible to imagine a natural world in which subjectivity is possible, but never actualized.

2.4 SUBJECTIVITY EMERGES

In 1805, Schelling writes the following: “Matter is the darkest of all things – indeed, it is the darkness itself. Yet it is precisely this unknown base from which all formations and living phenomena emerge.”¹⁷² In this passage, he emphasizes the dynamic of emergence, specifically, the emergence of living subjects from within the processual darkness of matter that produces and sustains such subjects. In contemporary terms, emergence refers to the generation of phenomena from out of underlying circumstances to which the emergent phenomena cannot be reduced.¹⁷³ This is also what Schelling intends.

Principally, Schelling’s theoretical narrative of emergence operates on the basis of the discontiguous continuity between object and subject, between the world of objects typically identified as empirical or material reality and the subject as a conscious, individual being. As noted above, contiguity refers to the state of existing “next to,” while continuity refers to the

¹⁷¹ I must note here that Schelling’s theorization of emergence can be incomplete and obscure. Especially in the *First Outline*, Schelling prevaricates at length about how emergence happens. Principally, he pursues the analogy of chemical synthesis, as well as difficult and unclear explanations involving gravity and light. Nevertheless, that Schelling first articulates the concept of emergence in terms that exceed the merely chemical often gets overlooked.

¹⁷² F. W. J. Schelling, *Von der Weltseele* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1806), ix, translation mine. The original German reads: “*Das Dunkelste aller Dinge, ja das Dunkel selbsts nach einigen, ist die Materie. Dennoch ist es eben diese unbekannte Wurzel, aus deren Erhebung alle Bildungen und lebendigen Erscheinungen der Natur hervorgehen.*”

¹⁷³ Mark Bedau and Paul Humphreys (eds.), *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008).

state of existing on the same continuum. Recall how objects can be in the background or foreground of a filmic image only provided that they occupy the same filmic continuum. Likewise, for Schelling, subjects emerge only on the basis of the creative material and processual darkness that environs and attends them.

In this regard, Schelling's narrative serves as a kind of prehistory of the subject, a theory of the moment or possibility of emergence in the most general and technical sense as opposed to a detailed inventory of whatever emerges. Schelling's idea here differs in an important way from Johann Fichte's theory of the subject. For Fichte, both subject and world develop as sequences in a dialectic of the subject's self-construction from out of its own primordial self-positing. In other words, Fichte argues that subjectivity is entirely self-sufficient, which means that nature exists for it as something derivative or secondary, as something that exists only to be negated and overcome. By contrast, for Schelling, the emergence of the subject results from the productively antagonistic tensions that produce the distribution of objects in the first place.¹⁷⁴ In turn, the emergence of the subject embodies the intractable opposition that inheres in the conflict of fundamental forces that, for Schelling, produce matter as matter. As Sean J. McGrath writes,

Material nature now tells us as much about the structure of the subject as the structure of the subject tells us about nature. [...] It is not that we understand nature on the *analogy* of transcendental patterns of consciousness, or vice versa; it is rather that the dynamic of production through polarity, which is empirically and externally experienced in natural processes, is transcendently and internally experienced in consciousness.¹⁷⁵

In other words, we can say that the emergence of the subject is, in at least some sense, the emergence of a peculiar kind of matter, which is to say, organized matter that constitutes a

¹⁷⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978) and Alexander Schnell, "The Meaning of Transcendental Idealism in the Work of F. W. J. Schelling," *Rethinking German Idealism*, eds. Sean J. McGrath and Joseph Carew (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 51-76.

¹⁷⁵ Sean J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 87.

distinctive animal form – that of the human subject. Of course, Schelling himself upholds a radical distinction between humans and other animals. For him, animals are compared to mere somnambulists, while human beings alone are capable of art, culture, philosophy, and reason.¹⁷⁶ Regardless of any stance we might take on the distinction between humans and other animals, we can see how the subject emerges into the foreground against the background of materiality – without either escaping or negating its own material constitution.¹⁷⁷ The emergence of subjectivity is a function of materiality itself. This also illustrates the degree to which the subject, despite any superficially “immaterial” features, remains conditioned by material constraints but, also, that it exists only on the basis of those constraints. In a materialism for which matter is processual, in which matter materializes by means of the tension between equilibria and disequilibria, constraints produce form. As N. Katherine Hayles writes,

While many new materialists might argue that far too much consideration has been given to the “entity” [i.e., to apparently self-identical or stable ontological formations], resulting in a devaluation of material processes, dwelling entirely on the “event” side fails to capture essential characteristics of the living, especially the ability of living organisms to endure through time, construct as well as interact/intraact with their environments, and deploy agencies that are not merely emergent but also intentional, even when nonconscious.¹⁷⁸

If constraints produce form, as Schelling suggests, then the relationship between materiality and subjectivity receives more definition. Subjectivity is something matter *does*. As Grant writes, “It is only if thinking about nature always involves more nature than can be thought that nature is in fact being thought.”¹⁷⁹ This means that there is an excess in the processual

¹⁷⁶ Devin Zane Shaw, “‘Animals, Those Incessant Somnambulists’: A Critique of Schelling’s Anthropocentrism,” *Rethinking German Idealism*, eds. Sean J. McGrath and Joseph Carew (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 77-98.

¹⁷⁷ On this issue, see Michael Uhall, “Creaturely conditions: acknowledgement and animality in Kafka, Cavell, and Uexküll,” *Configurations* 24:1 (2016): 1-24.

¹⁷⁸ Hayles, *Unthought*, 84.

¹⁷⁹ Iain Hamilton Grant, “How nature comes to be thought: Schelling’s paradox and the problem of location,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 44:1 (2013): 28.

enactment of matter that grounds the emergence of the subject. When we are talking about the capacities of nature, these capacities exceed their expressions. But it is equally important to note how, and in what, these expressions take form – that is to say, how they materialize. Materialities are processes of individuation, not mere outcomes or products of some underlying “primal germ” that is otherwise kept offstage. Likewise, dark matter, or the shadows in a film noir, are distinctly present. Dark matter abuts us; shadows pool on the screen. If we adopt Frost’s observation that “energy takes form as matter through its constrained self-relation,” then our apprehension of materiality changes in precisely the way that new materialism intends.¹⁸⁰ As Schelling puts it, matter is the darkness itself, and that darkness attends and makes possible entities and events, including the subject.

As Bowie notes, one of the most distinctive things about the *System* is how Schelling “explicates for the first time in systematic form one of the most influential ideas in modern thinking: the idea that self-consciousness has to develop in stages from a point where it did not exist as such.”¹⁸¹ The processual development of these stages (*Stufenfolgen*) gives rise to the subject, not as an epiphenomenon or a late-stage excrescence, but as a living process of individuation and, ultimately, navigation. As Schelling writes in a later text, the fragmentary novel *Clara* (1810):

[...] if you consider yourself as yourself and thus as a person differentiated from everything else, don’t you then feel that something lies at the very basis of your consciousness that no concept can unravel, *something dark*, that acts as a support for your personality?¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 35.

¹⁸¹ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45.

¹⁸² F. W. J. Schelling, *Clara or, On Nature’s Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 49, emphasis added.

While Schelling is sometimes understood as talking about the emergence of the subject in allegorical terms, his account of how subjectivity is generated or implied by a processual materialism is intended quite literally. For example, Slavoj Žižek reads Schelling's ontology as a series of quasi-theological allegories that prefigure basic Lacanian psychoanalytic insights.¹⁸³ For Jacques Lacan, the subject is constituted by means of the traumatic expulsion of the unassimilable conditions of the real, the suppression of any direct cognizance thereof, and the subject's consequent self-constitution as a set of symbolic interpolations or structures that drift uneasily thereafter. In other words, the real is conceived in terms of a chaotic, opaque ground composed of material drives and forces. The subject emerges from out of the real by means of the arbitrary, violent repression of those drives or forces – a decision which is thereby itself repressed. This is where the subject begins.¹⁸⁴ For Žižek, Schelling provides a necessary, but necessarily irrationalist, allegory of subject formation.

While Žižek conceives of Schelling as an allegorist, I think the ontological operation Schelling describes – that is to say, emergence, but also, specifically, the emergence of the subject – is rather more substantive. Even interpreted in psychoanalytic or quasi-psychoanalytic terms, his account remains productive and useful. After all, one way to read the central claim of Schelling's *System* is that the material world functions as something like the distributed unconscious of the subject.¹⁸⁵ To say that the material world functions as the unconscious of the

¹⁸³ Slavoj Žižek, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Schelling (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)," *The New Schelling*, 30-41 and Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso Books, 1996).

¹⁸⁴ Joseph Carew, "Reading Schelling Psychoanalytically: Žižek on the Fantasy of the Ground of Consciousness and Language," *Symposium* 19:1 (2015): 39-51.

¹⁸⁵ The literature on this subject is enormous. See especially *The Barbarian Principle: Merleau-Ponty, Schelling, and the Question of Nature*, eds. Jason M. Wirth and Patrick Burke (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), but also Matthew Ffytche, *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud, and the Birth of the Modern Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), McGrath, *Dark Ground of Spirit* (n. 44), and *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought*, eds. Angus Nicholls and Martin Liebscher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

subject is a way of indicating how subjectivity emerges as a function of materiality itself, as something that expresses or voices a latency in nature without exhausting that latency.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, explicitly writing on Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, characterizes this claim about the world conceived as the distributed unconscious of the subject in terms of *the flesh*.¹⁸⁶ By this term, he means both “my flesh,” as in the body in its lived experience, and “the flesh of the world,” as in the sole continuum that preserves and produces entitative singularity precisely by virtue of its discontiguous continuity. He writes, “my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world.”¹⁸⁷ This flesh of the world does not efface the singularity or specificity of lived experience or personality. This is precisely because our existence in the flesh is unconscious. As Taylor Carman puts it, flesh refers

to our more basic *unconscious* bodily continuity with the world we perceive. Flesh is the *identity* of perception and perceptibility, even below the threshold of conscious awareness. As bodily perceivers, we are necessarily part of the perceptible world we perceive; we are not just *in* the world, but *of* it.¹⁸⁸

In Merleau-Ponty's terms, “This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our ‘consciousness,’ but in front of us, as articulations of our field” of awareness and perception.¹⁸⁹ He continues: “It is ‘unconscious’ by the fact that it is not an object, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read – It is between them as the interval of the trees between the trees, or as their common

¹⁸⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 248, emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁸ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 133, emphases in original.

¹⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 180.

level.”¹⁹⁰ In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh transitions from his earlier phenomenological project, in which he sought only to recuperate the conditions of embodied consciousness, and turns to a deeper consideration of how the subject is related to the rest of existence – as a part of it, a part of it that nevertheless *retains* its distinctiveness, that generates its discontiguity, precisely by virtue of being continuous with everything else.

Merleau-Ponty shows us what it means to take the material unconscious seriously, and doing so entails two additional consequences. First, it situates the subject as a material expression of nature’s integral subjectivity.¹⁹¹ Second, it indicates the degree to which this placement of the subject imbricates mind and world to such an extent that, while we might reconceive the subject abstractly as a kind of complex transverse effect of the ecological conditions of being, we must also preserve a sense in which the subjectivity in nature exceeds our ability to perceive it directly, as if it were something luminous. On this point, Bowie writes:

The claim of [Schelling’s *System*] is that it is through the encounter with something objective which is not comprehensible in conceptual terms [...] that we can infer how the unconscious workings of nature lead to the workings of mind and to human freedom.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ The term “nature’s subjectivity” occurs throughout Schelling’s *First Outline*, but it is also beautifully elaborated upon in Hans Loewald, *Sublimation: Inquiries into Theoretical Psychoanalysis* (1988) in *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs* (Hagerstown: University Publishing Group, 2000), 439-527. Loewald, a psychoanalyst who foregrounds the relationship between nature and the unconscious, argues that “[i]ndividual human mentation” is best conceived as “one instance or manifestation of *natura naturans*, of nature’s ‘subjectivity’,” rather than as “the inner experience of the individual confronted with the object world” (516, 515). As Sebastian Gardner notes, “Loewald resorts to conceptual figures which manifestly bear the stamp of German Idealism and *Naturphilosophie*” (146). See his “The unconscious: transcendental origins, Idealist metaphysics and psychoanalytic metapsychology,” *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, eds. Nicholas Boyle, Liz Disley, and Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 134-65. Thanks to Melissa Orlie for bringing Loewald to my attention – and especially to her “Impersonal Matter,” *New Materialisms*, 116-36.

¹⁹² Andrew Bowie, “The philosophical significance of Schelling’s conception of the unconscious,” *Thinking the Unconscious*, 73. See again Hayles, *Unthought*, 41-64.

2.5 NOIR MATERIALISM

Repurposing Schelling's materialism into noir materialism emphasizes the degree to which Schelling theorizes and dramatizes emergence as a figural process of structural differentiation. Accordingly, noir materialism serves two functions. First, it materializes the basic ontological framework that transcalar ecology provides. Rather than merely enumerating the intersecting processes of transcalar ecology as abstractions, noir materialism elaborates upon these processes by directing our theoretical attention to the generativity and primacy of materiality in itself. This is what Schelling means when he labels matter as "the general seed of the universe." Noir materialism also situates subjectivity as a core latency in nature from the very start – subjectivity belongs to the night side of nature from whence the subject ultimately emerges. It is easy to overlook this ever since the Cartesian divorce of mind and matter, but Schelling returns the category of subjectivity to the basic inventory of nature. By describing the emergence of the subject as a figural process of structural differentiation, Schelling not only gestures toward subjectivity as a capacity of, or within, nature, but also opens up new resources for showing how the subject takes place materially. Subjectivity is something that happens, and it happens in nature.

In this regard, noir materialism adds two further dimensions to our understanding of matter theorized in terms of creative darkness. First, it alludes productively to the aesthetic, narrative, and structural aspects of film noir that interpreters like Morton and Pippin utilize for various ends. As Pippin writes,

in the best noirs we are presented not merely with a form of life shadowed, as a matter of historical fact, by a growing, shared, heightened sense of fatalism and alienation, but we see what is, in effect, a partially worked-out picture of what it would be to live in such a world, a shared world not wedded to the notions of reflective individuals formulating plans for avowed purposes and then enacting causal powers to effect them. We don't, that is, see only pictures of suffering victims, individuals overwhelmed by forces they cannot

control, and so merely buffeted hither and yon. This is what individual characters fear and what they often find to be true (or at times would like to think in some self-serving contexts), but they still have to continue to live or lead a life, in some sense to plan and decide. They cannot, after all, just wait to see what will happen to them.¹⁹³

Film noir is masterful in its marriage of a set of distinct aesthetic stylistics with a consistent thematic structure. One of its most recurrent themes is the degree to which fundamentally accidental encounters end up implicating agents or perspectives in relational networks from which there is no exit. In film noir, as for ecology, there is no away. It is not possible to leave the dark labyrinth behind – whether you call this labyrinth the city, the human predicament, or the grinding, troubled hell of post-war American decay.¹⁹⁴ Again and again, such encounters drag the protagonist into convoluted, elliptical plots. It is the structure of implication that matters most, for the crimes are petty and the motivations uncertain. Think of Harry Fabian’s desperate scramble for just a little extra cash in *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), or this instructive snatch of dialog from *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955): “They tried to get her last night.” “They? A wonderful word. And who are they? They’re the nameless ones who kill people for the great whatzit. Does it exist? Who cares? Everyone everywhere is so involved in the fruitless search for what?”

The relentless repetition of the fatal implication of the noir protagonist is a powerful synecdoche for the position of the late modern subject in relation to the ecological crisis – that is to say, for our own position, as such subjects. We find ourselves suddenly thrust into a crisis of apocalyptic dimensions. Consequences loom over us abruptly – mass extinctions, tornados, wildfires. A recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change gives a

¹⁹³ Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) and Gyan Prakash, *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

conservative estimate of about twenty years before systemic service disruptions affect more affluent societies.¹⁹⁵ Tell that to the 3,000 Puerto Ricans who died from Hurricane Maria in 2017. It is not possible to step away from this crisis, because it is not merely a crisis occurring “over there” somewhere – across the pond, down south, in the future. To the contrary, the ecological crisis is a crisis that penetrates and constitutes us, that affects and inflects the very matter out of which we are shaped and the ecological relations that make our lives and forms of life possible. Like doomed detectives, it is not merely a cartel or a crime that we discover, but ourselves.¹⁹⁶ Consider the late neo-noir *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker, 1987), in which the protagonist, Harry Angel, discovers that the criminal he has been trailing all along is himself. The process of detection turns out to be a process of self-discovery.

Second, noir materialism also suggests precisely the degree to which this structure of implication obtains for us at an ontological level. In this regard, noir materialism is not merely a metaphor. We emerge from the dark only to find ourselves immersed in a predicament that cannot simply be abandoned or dissolved. Counterintuitively, emergence is ultimately revealed to be a form of immersion. This is what it means to call emergence a figural process of structural differentiation, which gives rise to discontiguous continuities like matter and, eventually, the subject. We are implicated, not only because we are materially or morally responsible for the ecological crisis, but because we are implicated constitutively – that is to say, ecologically and materially. We are thoroughly entangled because we are made of the very stuff that is in crisis. Insofar as we are ecological and material creatures, we are also in crisis. The traditional

¹⁹⁵ Coral Davenport, “Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2018, accessed February 15, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html>.

¹⁹⁶ Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

distinction between us and all the rest breaks down when we start to take the ecological thought seriously. The ontology of film noir embodies this because its narrative and stylistic components combine in such a way as to make a film noir a film in the very first place.

2.6 CONCLUSION

Noir materialism theorizes matter in processual terms, as a figural process of structural differentiation between background and foreground, which enables us to understand better how the free subject emerges in nature. Film noir and dark matter serve as examples or paradigm cases of this process, and Schelling's own materialism allows us to explore it in explicitly ontological terms. The emphasis is always on emergence, and noir materialism emphasizes the degree to which subject and object implicate and coproduce each other throughout the interconnectedness of things. Dynamics of emergence take place reciprocally within a background that appears separate from a foreground populated by emergent phenomena, yet without really being separate at all. As such, the material, processual background remains wholly necessary for the process of emergence in the first place. We get entities, events, and subjects in the foreground only by means of their emergence from such a dark background. Hence why Schelling describes ontological emergence figurally, which is to say, in terms of illuminated differentiation from, yet within "the ground of existence – primordial night, the mother of all things."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, *Bruno, or On the Natural and Divine Principle of Things*, trans. Michael G. Vater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 176.

CHAPTER 3: FREEDOM AND EVIL

3.1 INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND FREEDOM

The relationship between nature and politics informs the tradition of Western political thought since its inception. In its modern formulation, this tradition generally opposes the domains of the natural and the political, of φύσις (*phusis*) and νόμος (*nómos*). It characterizes the “natural” in terms of determinism or necessity and the “political” in terms of decision or freedom. It should be noted that this is not a purely modern innovation. For example, consider the contrast between the Greek term φύσις – which refers to ongoing processes of change or growth – and the Latin translation of that term, *natura* (whence the English word “nature”) – which stems from *nasci*, referring to the act of birthing. For a philosopher like Aristotle, nature encompasses the self-contained but dynamic principles of development that animate or inform every entity.¹⁹⁸ By contrast, after the Roman appropriation of the term, the philosophical discourses of nature increasingly take on the signification of some character of strict necessity that determines the ontological constitution of a given entity, or the pathways of action available to it. In this, we can see the contours of two rather different cosmoi: the cosmos of φύσις is more developmental, or subject to dynamic self-alteration, while the cosmos of *natura* is more determined, or inborn.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ See Sheldon M. Cohen, *Aristotle on Nature and Incomplete Substance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 17-53.

¹⁹⁹ For example, elements of this can be seen in Lucretius’s materialism, although it must be noted that his strange pairing of the *clinamen* with a form of rational determinism makes his *De rerum natura* much theoretically richer than many of his mechanist epigones. Of course, Lucretius is tremendously influential in the early modern period. See David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, and Philip Hardie (eds.), *Lucretius and the Early Moderns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), but also Thomas Nail, *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Typically, philosophies of nature that portray nature in deterministic terms detach the human from the natural in some way so as to preserve a sense of autonomy, control, or self-determination. This is particularly true in the modern period, and the early modern conception of nature that emerges during the scientific revolution in Europe is especially relevant. The early modern conception of nature gets articulated almost entirely in terms of its separation from the category of the human, and the human condition is examined and postulated as if it occurred apart from *or even in conflict with* nature. Nature and culture are conceived as distinct and separate spheres of inquiry and interest.²⁰⁰ Nature is projected as an ontological domain exclusively characterized by causal determinism, mechanism, and necessity. It is base or passive in some way and, therefore, ideally or necessarily subject to human directives. As inheritors of the modern conception of nature, this distinction largely remains with us today.

In this regard, the concept of freedom figures as a prominent paradox or puzzle. If nature is deterministic and necessitarian, then whence freedom – or can there be freedom at all? One popular answer is called compatibilism. Compatibilists argue that determinism and freedom are ultimately compatible with each other. They are compatible because freedom is not practically or theoretically grounded in terms that rely on any particular ontology of freedom. For the compatibilist, freedom is not a metaphysical category or power, but, rather, something that obtains in situations where specific capacities are actualized or specific constraints are removed. For example, both David Hume and Immanuel Kant are compatibilists. For Hume, freedom consists of a “hypothetical liberty” that obtains for every agent insofar as that agent acts without restraint (a form of negative liberty).²⁰¹ For Kant, freedom obtains in terms of an *a priori*

²⁰⁰ For an intriguing argument that complicates this distinction, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1993).

²⁰¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 85.

rationality, the exercise and substance of which exceeds the limitations of material constitution and constraint alike (a form of positive liberty).²⁰²

In my view, however, the compatibilist solution fails to articulate or examine the basic conceptual assumptions upon which it relies. Principally, this involves the assumption that nature is, in fact, the deterministic and necessitarian domain portrayed by the moderns. Ultimately, suppressing this assumption serves as the means by which freedom in any ontologically “thick” sense has been so frequently divorced from discussions of agential and, ultimately, political freedom. This operation simply assumes the divide between nature and politics that is at issue.

If we turn our attention even briefly to the question of nature’s supposedly necessitarian character, the matter rapidly becomes far more complicated. For example, both Quentin Meillassoux and Stephen Mumford argue that nature cannot be construed in necessitarian terms. I give these examples because they illustrate what it means to foreground questions about the concept of nature as such, rather than dismissing or suppressing such questions.

In *After Finitude* and elsewhere, Meillassoux embraces and radicalizes a form of skepticism about causality that, rather than lamenting the loss of a useful explanatory conceptual device, affirms the insight that contingency alone is logically necessary.²⁰³ This means that nature has no necessary characteristics, that nature, indeed, is the chaotic precedent of all characteristics, of their emergence and undoing alike. As he writes, nature so conceived “is not the eternal law of becoming, but rather the eternal and lawless possible becoming of every law.”²⁰⁴ We can equate this idea of nature with F. W. J. Schelling’s aforementioned “dark

²⁰² Hud Hudson, *Kant’s Compatibilism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

²⁰³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2010) and Quentin Meillassoux, “The contingency of the laws of nature,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30 (2012): 322-34.

²⁰⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64.

foundation” insofar as both serve as the agitated or chaotic processual background from whence material forms and regularities emerge.²⁰⁵ By comparison, as Schelling writes,

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 [...] This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things.²⁰⁶

More conservatively, Mumford argues that the laws of nature cannot obtain as laws because laws cannot exist in the same register as whatever the laws govern.²⁰⁷ Laws are higher-order abstractions that obtain for, and regulate, some lower-order set of properties. But, if we are talking about nature, then it is impossible for such laws to obtain. There are two possibilities here, both of which lead to the foundering of realism about the laws of nature. Either the governed properties of natural law do not exist in nature, or else the laws of nature do not exist in nature. In the former case, we lose the idea of nature as containing anything much, while in the latter case, we lose the laws of nature as such – that is to say, nature’s necessitarianism.

In this chapter, then, I address the following question: In what does freedom in nature consist? I argue that attending to elements drawn from Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* helps me recover a theory of freedom that eliminates some longstanding modern concerns about the relationship between freedom and nature. Schelling’s understanding of the relationship between the qualitative, or subjectivity, on the one hand, and the quantitative, or the object, on the other hand, is one of emergence rather than radical *a priori* distinction. Subjectivity is a discontinuous continuity insofar as it is continuous with the material plane of immanence, but discontinuous insofar as it processually individuates by means of the structural differentiation between

²⁰⁵ Drew M. Dalton, “On the Possibility of Speculative Ethical Absolutes after Kant: Returning to Schelling through the Frailties of Meillassoux and Badiou,” *Angelaki* 21 (2016): 157-72.

²⁰⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 29.

²⁰⁷ Stephen Mumford, *Laws in Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

background and foreground. In these terms, a Schellingian theory of freedom in nature obviates and surpasses the characteristically modern divide between nature, conceived in terms of determinism and necessity, and the political, conceived in terms of decision and freedom.

3.2 KANT, FICHTE, SCHELLING

In general, Schelling's speculative approach integrates findings from the natural sciences with philosophical inquiry itself in order to preserve or even produce a concept of nature that serves both generative and normative ends. That is to say, since Schelling does not conceive of nature in deterministic and necessitarian terms, natural artifacts and processes (e.g., matter) do not figure as impingements upon privileges like freedom. Indeed, freedom for Schelling is an ontological power exercised by subjects. Accordingly, Schelling intends to construct a philosophy of nature that attends, first and foremost, to the generative autonomy of nature and, second, to the emergence of the human subject therein as a distinct product. Before we can turn our attention to Schelling's philosophy of freedom, however, we must examine briefly the role given to freedom in the philosophies of Kant and Johann Fichte. Doing so provides a fuller picture of the impoverished conceptions of nature to which Schelling ultimately replies.

One of the problems that Kant endeavors to resolve consists of how to reconcile a conception of moral freedom (that is to say, rational autonomy) with scientific knowledge. To do this, Kant argues that our perception of reality is mediated necessarily by conceptual or cognitive structures characteristic of, and unique to, all rational beings, such as human subjects (but also aliens and angels, according to him). Kant calls these conceptual or cognitive structures "categories," and the categories embody fundamental features of our perception of space, time, and causality. The synthesis of the categories in our lived experience as subjects enables us to

encounter and navigate the phenomenal world. Kant thinks that his transcendental deduction secures this synthesis.²⁰⁸ Since one of the things this synthesis buys him is causality, Kant thinks he has secured the possibility of empirical, scientific knowledge about the natural or phenomenal world.

In part, scientific knowledge is secured because the purview of scientific knowledge claims has been curtailed and reduced to claims about only the natural or phenomenal world. At the same time, nature is defined as the totality of appearances, entirely subject to a rigorously mechanistic logic of cause and effect that we necessarily perceive in rigorously consistent ways structured by the categories that necessarily apply to us. Hence Kant's hostility to "speculative philosophy," which overextends itself by making claims about things that cannot be known, things that transcend the causally ordered world of natural phenomena.

As for moral freedom, Kant thinks this derives from our membership or participation in the noumenal world. The noumenal world is the world as it exists in itself, apart from our mediated access to it. Our experience of the world is purely phenomenal, but insofar we exist, we have both phenomenal selves and noumenal selves – or, put differently, there is a phenomenal aspect and a noumenal aspect to the self. Our noumenal selves are not objects of knowledge, but, by virtue of membership in the noumenal world, they express and retain the capacity for rational judgment. However, Kant assumes that there is a rational structure to the noumenal world.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Paul Guyer, "The transcendental deduction of the categories," *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123-60.

²⁰⁹ Here Kant can be opposed to someone like H. P. Lovecraft, who dramatizes the worry about noumenal reality that stalks the post-Kantian scene. For Lovecraft, as for Kant, we humans live in the world of phenomena. But Lovecraft's noumenon is filled with monsters we cannot perceive. These monsters – he calls them Elder Gods – sometimes break through the veil of perception into the phenomenal world, but such eruptions are hideously traumatic, for they violate the conceptual or cognitive structures that constitute our human perspective. Hence why his stories usually end with characters descending into madness. Of course, Lovecraft does not think the world has a fundamentally rational structure, and he thinks that human rationality is a merely phenomenal faculty and not a very good or secure one at that. Where Kant probably believed that God occupies the noumenon, Lovecraft imagines only monsters.

Accordingly, insofar as we act from our noumenal selves, we act morally. In other words, insofar as we act rationally, rather than for instrumental or phenomenal reasons, such as consequences, desire, or gratification, we are acting rightly. To act rationally is to act morally, and Kant intends his presentation of the categorical imperative to provide us with a decision procedure that enables us to determine the rational and, therefore, moral act to choose in any given situation we encounter. This buys him moral freedom insofar as our actions are decided or selected rationally rather than determined causally or given to us by fleshly or phenomenal sources.

For Kant, then, nature is defined as the totality of appearances, entirely subject to a rigorously mechanistic logic of cause and effect.²¹⁰ Kant argues that this disarticulation of the natural and the normative or rational is necessary for freedom to obtain in any meaningful sense. This radical distinction gives rise to what is sometimes called the deontological subject – or, in more everyday language, that understanding of the human that endeavors to treat human agency as existentially privileged in some fashion above and beyond or apart from nature’s domain. It is worth noting how this privilege gets erected on the very basis of a conception of nature that declares nature to be precisely the domain of causal determinism, mechanism, and necessity.

In contrast to Kant, Fichte, one of Kant’s primary challengers and a so-called “subjective” idealist, attempts to solve the problem of the division between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds by eliminating the noumenon entirely.²¹¹ He argues that, if we eliminate the noumenal world from our metaphysics, we can tell a story about our phenomenal selves that does not need to depart from the world of phenomena. Indeed, all that exists are the phenomena. Accordingly, Fichte thinks that the subject has no basis outside of its own self-consciousness.

²¹⁰ Daniel Warren, *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant's Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

²¹¹ Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 289-306.

Self-consciousness is itself the origin of the subject. It is an originary self-positing, identified by Fichte as the first principle of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, namely, the principle of self-identity, “I = I.”²¹² Starting with this principle, Fichte wants to relate a metaphysical narrative about how to get from self-consciousness to the rest of the phenomenal world. Since, for Fichte, the subject is a subject only by virtue of its own self-positing self-consciousness, it is grounded only in itself, not in anything else.²¹³ As such, Fichte begins to develop a dialectical logic of the I and the not-I (*Ich* and *Nicht-Ich*) intended to extrapolate the remainder of the phenomenal world from the brute fact of self-consciousness.

For Fichte, the system he provides intends to secure scientific knowledge by virtue of grounding the process of dialectical extrapolation in the certainty of self-consciousness, while freedom serves as the fundamental presupposition of this dialectic. On his account, this is precisely because he starts with the subject. His starting point is the subject in itself, and from out of this subject, everything else allegedly can be extrapolated. If the starting point is the subject, then there is no problem about freedom, because freedom logically precedes its own causal or material constraints. By starting with the self-positing subject as an axiomatic component of his system, Fichte thinks he has been quite clever. Any constraints on freedom that emerge as Fichte’s dialectic develops are merely empirical. They do not impinge upon the foundational freedom that conditions the subject and its epistemological trajectory from subject to world. If such constraints are merely empirical – that is to say, natural – then the self can dominate them, negate them, and overcome them.

²¹² Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 93-101.

²¹³ Günter Zöller, “Positing and Determining in Fichte’s *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*,” *New Essays in Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, eds. Tom Rockmore and Daniel Breazeale, (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001), 138-53.

Ultimately, Schelling is both dissatisfied with and inspired by the direction in which Fichte takes post-Kantian philosophy. Fichte argues that subjectivity is entirely self-sufficient. The subject has no basis outside of its own self-consciousness, because self-consciousness is the origin of the subject *qua* subject. Supposedly, the phenomenal world can be dialectically extrapolated from this brute fact. To the contrary, Schelling argues that foregrounding subjectivity as Fichte does presupposes the background of nature.²¹⁴ Schelling's critical insight can be seen as early as 1795, when Schelling, in his "Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge," introduces the absolute as the unconditioned principle of both reality and its investigation.²¹⁵ Where Fichte asserts the conceptual primacy of the empirical subject, Schelling directs our attention instead to the whole of existence, to that which conceptually if not empirically precedes the domain of subjects and objects alike. Whether Schelling calls his multiscalar, processual conception of the whole "the absolute," or "nature," or "the unconditioned," it remains the primary focus of this thinking, and it serves in his *Naturphilosophie* as the conceptual substratum or primary matter from whence both subjects and objects emerge.

In contrast to both Kant and Fichte, then, Schelling claims that nature is such that subjectivity is irreducibly a part of it. Accordingly, Schelling initially develops his *Naturphilosophie* as an intervention in two problem areas simultaneously. On the one hand, he is dissatisfied with the direction in which Fichte takes post-Kantian philosophy. As we have seen, Schelling argues that foregrounding subjectivity presupposes the creative darkness of nature. Schelling wants to situate subjectivity within nature, rather than relying upon the negation of

²¹⁴ Iain Hamilton Grant, "The 'eternal and necessary bond between philosophy and physics:' a repetition of the difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian systems of philosophy," *Angelaki* 10:1 (2005): 43-59.

²¹⁵ Schelling, *Unconditional*, 63-128 and Michael G. Vater, "Schelling's *Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie* as a Reading of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*," *New Essays*, 183-96.

nature in order to construct a systematic theory of the subject, as Fichte does.²¹⁶ Ostensibly, both for Fichte and, later, for G. W. F. Hegel, the subject constructs itself precisely *by negating nature*, whether nature is conceived in terms of the *Nicht-Ich* (for Fichte) or as determinate material externality (for Hegel). On the other hand, Schelling always retains a philosophical interest in the natural sciences – that is to say, in matter and materiality – and he thinks they offer various paradigms and revelations.²¹⁷ However, Schelling also thinks the natural sciences impoverish themselves insofar as they endeavor to reduce nature conceptually to whatever is reducible to mechanism and observation. Investigations of subjectivity that eliminate nature strand the subject in a wasteland of abstraction, while investigations of nature that eliminate subjectivity are impoverished at best and dangerous at worst.

Against both Kant and Fichte, then, Schelling argues that freedom in nature is only possible *because* freedom emerges out of the material conditions and relations that constitute and produce subjectivity in the first place. In this regard, Schelling refuses to conceive of freedom as an acausal domain apart from nature, as does Kant. He also refuses Fichte's conception of freedom as the proactive labor of negating nature's externalities. Rather, Schelling's philosophy of freedom constitutes a decisive break with the modern conception of nature, then, for which the relationship between nature, freedom, and subjectivity has always been troubled.

²¹⁶ Alison Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 2005).

²¹⁷ Discussing this further exceeds my scope, but much of Schelling's oeuvre consists of analyses of and speculations about the theoretical applications and implications of various empirical scientific topics, ranging from electromagnetism to meteorology to sleep science. See Joseph Esposito, *Schelling's Idealism and Philosophy of Nature* (London: Associated University Press, 1977), 125-59 and Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

3.3 FREEDOM AND EVIL

Throughout the foregoing, we can see in Schelling a deep fascination with the night side of nature, that is to say, with those expressions and formations of nature that do not reveal themselves easily (or, perhaps, at all) to the instrumental techniques of the natural sciences.²¹⁸ The night side of nature does not refer to some immaterial specter animating nature, any more than the night side of the Moon refers to a spectral presence that haunts its day side. Rather, it refers to those ways in which nature produces subjectivity as a part of itself, as its emergent interiority, as an occulted aspect or element of excess that remains fully implicated in nature nonetheless.

It is precisely at this point that Schelling discovers the need to provide a philosophy of freedom. Indeed, he expands his *Naturphilosophie* such that freedom emerges as a feature of nature itself. To do this, Schelling does not exile freedom to some conceptually or practically distinct domain, as do those moderns who retain freedom in their theoretical schemas. Instead, he provides a dynamic account in which subjectivity necessarily takes expression in free action and decision. For Schelling, subjectivity emerges in nature as a distinct part of nature, such that we can no longer secure a conception of nature without including subjectivity as a core latency therein. On a broadly Schellingian account, we must also presuppose the dark background of nature in order to acquire a theory of subjectivity at all. In this context, Schelling argues that subjectivity necessarily instantiates freedom.

²¹⁸ I borrow the term from Gotthilf Schubert, a student of Schelling's whose 1808 *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967) employs the term "*Nachtseite*" to refer to natural phenomena which have not yet been explained in terms of the natural sciences, or which, perhaps, simply do not fit into Newtonian, Cartesian, or mechanistic frameworks of explanation at all. See also Klaus Guenzel, "Der Nachtprophet," *Zeit Online*, July 26, 2001, accessed February 15, 2020: http://www.zeit.de/2001/31/Der_Nachtprophet. The expanded phrase I employ is first coined by Catherine Crowe in her 1848 *The Night Side of Nature: Or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), who derives the term from Schubert in order to discuss the natural validity of apparently supernatural phenomena. Thanks to Bruce Rosenstock for drawing my attention to these figures.

If, as Sean J. McGrath quips, Schelling's turn to freedom consists of the "continuation of nature-philosophy by other means," then we must examine Schelling's philosophy of freedom in some detail.²¹⁹ Also, importantly, we must ask how it takes shape in relation to the alternative philosophy of nature discussed I develop. To answer these questions, I turn to a selective reading of Schelling's difficult, even "consciously esoteric," *Freiheitschrift* of 1809, the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*.²²⁰ This text has been read and received in a number of ways, ranging from the argument that it is more or less concordant with Schelling's aims from the very start (e.g., Iain Hamilton Grant, David Krell, Sean J. McGrath, Jason Wirth) to arguments that it represents a complete turning away from both idealism and *Naturphilosophie* toward existential theology or gnostic theosophy (e.g., Frederick Beiser, Robert F. Brown, possibly Bernard Freytag, Michelle Kosch, Dale Snow). I leave these debates aside because, generally speaking, my reading of Schelling situates the contributions of the *Freiheitschrift* only in relation to the main question I think Schelling helps us to answer: In what does freedom in nature consist? It is only because we have sketched out and repurposed Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in terms of transcalar ecology and noir materialism that we can fully put to use the philosophy of freedom that Schelling opens up for us.

Fundamentally, Schelling characterizes freedom as follows:

Man is placed on that summit where he has in himself the source of self-movement toward good or evil in equal portions: the bond of principles in him is not a necessary but rather a free one. Man stands on the threshold; whatever he chooses, it will be his act: but he cannot remain undecided.²²¹

Der Mensch ist auf jenen Gipfel gestellt, wo er die Selbstbewegungsquelle zum Guten und Bösen gleicherweise in sich hat: das Band der Prinzipien in ihm ist kein notwendiges,

²¹⁹ Sean J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

²²⁰ Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 107.

²²¹ Schelling, *Human Freedom*, 41.

*sondern ein freies. Er steht am Scheidepunkt; was er auch wähle, es wird seine Tat sein, aber er kann nicht in der Unentschiedenheit bleiben.*²²²

Straightforwardly, then, Schelling states that freedom consists of the subject's nondetermined existential choice between good and evil. Of course, there is much here that needs to be unpacked. I need to expand upon the basic terms Schelling employs in order to explore why freedom necessitates the real possibility of evil, as well as to answer how and why Schelling thinks that existential choice necessarily takes shape as creative agency. For Schelling, freedom entails creative agency, which is to say, it instantiates or takes place only by means of the free action of subjects.

First, we must examine the role played by evil in Schelling's philosophy of freedom. At first glance, it is perhaps a surprising term to foreground, especially given that I intend my reading of Schelling to be a live option for secular political theorists today. Although a number of philosophers recently have begun to reconsider the history and value of the concept of evil, "there has been a tendency in recent decades, especially among political theorists, to set the notion [of evil] aside as outdated or inappropriate."²²³ Prima facie, this is because the term bears moralistic or religious connotations that potentially could confuse political analysis. However, I argue that attending to Schelling's concept of evil clears up much of this confusion. It also integrates nearly seamlessly with the ecological, materialist ontology implicit to his *Naturphilosophie*. After all, for Schelling, freedom is not an abstraction, like a capacity or a right. Rather, freedom is an ontological power latent in nature itself. As an ontological power, freedom entails action. As Schelling maintains from the very beginning, "the essence of man is

²²² Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke* 1.8., 374.

²²³ *Evil in Contemporary Political Theory*, eds. Bruce Haddock, et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1. See also Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (New York: Polity, 2002) and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

action” (“*das Wesen des Menschen ist Handeln*”).²²⁴ On Schelling’s account, the fundamental action in question consists of the existential choice between good and evil: “the real and vital conception of freedom inheres in the possibility of choosing either good or evil.”²²⁵ Needless to say, this needs to be clarified.

Importantly, Schelling breaks with the Western tradition, instead asserting that evil is ontologically positive, that is to say, that evil exists as a real force or power. Traditionally, the problem of evil is dissolved philosophically by arguments to the effect that either evil is an illusion that exists only as a function of misperception, or else evil is a function of the deficiency of what is good. Evil is error, or evil is a lack of the good. For Schelling, however, “the chief difficulty with denying the reality of evil is that the possibility of human freedom disappears with the denial of its reality.”²²⁶ This difficulty appears because Schelling seeks to theorize freedom as an ontologically productive choice between two voluntary comportments of the subject. If one option of this choice is illusory or inexistent, then the choice is no longer a choice *for* anything, and freedom ceases to be freedom at all. Since the evil with which Schelling is concerned is ontological evil, rather than moral evil (i.e., the mere violation of obligatory moral rules), the question of what the power of evil entails – or, rather, what the subject’s existential choice for evil entails – is paramount.

Chiefly, Schelling characterizes evil as the choice to introduce a specific kind of disorder into the structure of the world. This disorder consists in the willful identification of the subject with the entirety of existence, or the substitution of the subject for the absolute, the ground of all

²²⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10.

²²⁵ Schelling, *Human Freedom*, 23, translated heavily modified. The original German reads: “*Der reale und lebendige Begriff aber ist, daß sie ein Vermögen des Guten und des Bösen sei.*” Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke* 1.8, 352.

²²⁶ Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 158.

possible oppositions. In other words, evil is an ontological operation in which a part of the whole is elevated willfully above the whole of which it is a part.

There is a seamless consistency between Schelling's theorization of evil and how the operationalization of evil interdicts the ecological plane of nature. At this level of abstraction, it would be an error to identify this plane with any particular distribution of tangible things. Evil, however, operates on the basis of the fundamental denial of both dynamic reciprocity and constitutive interconnectivity, because the elevation of the subject in this fashion disrupts both processes. A subject who chooses evil chooses to obliterate or obviate the relational web that makes freedom possible in the first place. In doing so, she destroys the very conditions of possibility for her own emergence, much less the emergence of anything else. Evil is worldbreaking, not worldmaking.²²⁷

Schelling constantly analogizes evil with disease, "a positive perversion or reversal."²²⁸ As Snow puts it, "Disease is the paradigm case of an entity inappropriately subsuming everything to itself [...] Schelling's imagery is [close] to that of cancer, with its overtones of transforming what had originally been orderly into a fearsome and self-destructive disorder, and thereby at least potentially threatening the integrity of the whole."²²⁹ She continues:

Here Schelling is appealing to the experience of being ill, of having, as we say in English, a disorder: an expression which implies a larger order with respect to which this temporary state is an interruption, and if sufficiently prolonged, a threat. (The subtlety and power of this view is if anything more evident in the twentieth century, in contrast with a medical culture most comfortable with crude military metaphors of declaring war

²²⁷ A paradigmatic example of Schellingian evil can be found in Jerome Bixby's 1953 short story "It's a Good Life." The story centers around Anthony Fremont, a child mysteriously endowed with omnipotence. Shortly after being born, he eliminates the entirety of the world save for his hometown of Peakesville, Ohio, the residents of which seek to satisfy Anthony's every whim. Failure to satisfy his desires results in elimination or worse. Although Anthony is never portrayed as affectively malevolent, the direct relationship between reality and his wishes makes the increasingly small world a hellish one. Whenever disappointments or impingements manifest themselves, Anthony simply eliminates the perceived sources. The implication of the story is that eventually Anthony eliminates everything in existence, never even having grasped the utterly destructive nature of his ontological vindictiveness.

²²⁸ Schelling, *Human Freedom*, 35.

²²⁹ Snow, *Schelling*, 166.

on and conquering mysterious “bugs” which are invasive foreign entities to be zeroed in on or eliminated with magic bullets).²³⁰

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, an even better analogy would be an autoimmune response, although cancer is almost equally apt. As an autoimmune response intensifies, it nihilates. It nihilates because it destroys its own conditions of existence. As the immune system attacks the body of which it is a part, immunological functionality breaks down because it elevates its own exertion over and against the health or even survival of the body as such. An autoimmune response is a self-consuming feedback loop. For Schelling, this is precisely what evil is.

In these terms, we can see how Schelling’s concept of evil maps onto our ecological crisis, in which the immediate desires and drives animating collective action and imagination almost wholly eclipse any sense whatsoever of the ecological conditions of being. In other words – to put the point rather provocatively – evil is an ecological disorder, one that takes shape in the willful misidentification of a part of the whole as the whole itself. One very good reason for taking Schelling seriously on the power of evil is that extrapolating its enactment leads to the annihilation of nature altogether – to the war on nature I discuss in the Introduction and to the ecological crisis we are currently undergoing. In this sense, the ecological crisis is driven by evil.

Furthermore, for Schelling, the possibility of choosing evil is premised on the basis of the emergence of the subject in the first place. This is not to suggest that only that which contains some degree of subjectivity is free, but to note that choosing evil is something like an intensification of the principle of subjectivity’s emergence in the first place. Evil is an intensification that comes to assert the primacy of the subject against everything else in nature – even against nature itself. This is what Schelling means when he describes his understanding of

²³⁰ Ibid., 166-67.

radical evil (“contracted through our own act but from birth”), which is to say, the necessary possibility of evil latent in the human condition by virtue of our individuation as subjects.²³¹ In other words, the process of subject formation that transpires with the emergence of subjectivity in nature is the root of evil. Importantly, however, this does not imply that individuation is evil in itself. As Kosch writes: “being an independent particular is itself a temptation, a temptation to put oneself at the center – elevating the particular [or singular] over the universal – in one’s conscious willing.”²³²

It is only by means of the formation of the subject that the freedom to choose evil becomes actualized. The eclipse of nature by an all-consuming subject is only possible if subjects exist. On the other hand, the emergence of subjectivity in nature embodies a process of dissociative individuation, the intensification of which makes (the willful choosing of) evil possible.²³³ By contrast, the possibility of choosing the good means neither adopting a stance of radical passivity nor evacuating or subsuming the personality of the subject back into the extrinsic, productive flow of *natura naturans*. As Schelling emphasizes in the *First Outline*,

It indeed sounds paradoxical, but is no less true, that through the influences which are contrary to life, life is sustained. Life is nothing other than a productivity held back from the absolute transition into a product. The absolute transition into a product is death. That which interrupts productivity, therefore, sustains life.²³⁴

²³¹ Schelling, *Human Freedom*, 53.

²³² Michelle Kosch, “Idealism and freedom in Schelling’s *Freiheitschrift*,” *Interpreting Schelling*, ed. Lara Ostarić (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 157.

²³³ McGrath, *Dark Ground*, 86-95. See also Charlotte Alderwick, “Atemporal Essence and Existential Freedom in Schelling,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23:1 (2015): 115-37, which effectively resolves a longstanding debate in Schelling scholarship about what Schelling means when he claims that subjects must choose good or evil “atemporally,” or outside of time (so as to avoid any determination of the choice whatsoever). Alderwick concludes that the existential freedom of the subject is something that emerges reciprocally – it “arises through her creative engagements with the world and with her essence,” the latter of which is something that a subject shapes through action even as she is shaped by the world into which she is thrown (133).

²³⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 68.

For Schelling, therefore, simply “returning” the subject to nature’s flow – that is to say, disindividuating, or evacuating the subject back into the whole of which it is a part – is impossible. This is a major point of contrast between Schelling and later ecological thinkers influenced by Spinoza, like Gilles Deleuze or the deep ecologists. For Deleuze, the ethical task of the subject results in “becoming-imperceptible,” which is to say, in abandoning the constraints of personal subjectivity in order to affiliate with the impersonal subjectivity inherent to the flux of immanent becoming.²³⁵ Deep ecologists like Warwick Fox and Arne Naess prescribe not the loss of self-identity, but, instead, the expansion of self-identity until it corresponds with the world as a whole.²³⁶ Instead of dissolving the subject into the impersonal flows of the world, Fox and Naess dissolve the world into the subject. In Schelling’s terms, however, simply “returning” to nature in these ways is eliminativism at best and suicide at worst, because the life of the subject only opens up insofar as constraints produce it in the first place.

If the foregoing is true, then what does choosing the good entail for Schelling? The answer to this question is significantly less clear, at least if we forego a theological reading of Schelling’s agonistics of divine love. As Kosch notes in her essay on the *Freiheitschrift*, “What is the cosmic order (the Whole) at issue, and what would respecting one’s place in it amount to? Schelling does not answer this question in the essay.”²³⁷ However, it is at least coherent and defensible to claim that Schelling’s account of the good can entail something like the creative transformation of nature, including the subject herself, in full cognizance of the fact that parts

²³⁵ Rosi Braidotti, “The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible,” *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 133-59 and Elizabeth Grosz, “Deleuze and the Plane of Immanence,” *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 130-68.

²³⁶ Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) and Ecce de Jonge, *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²³⁷ Kosch, “Idealism and freedom,” 156.

remain parts of a whole, while the whole itself does not reduce to any specific part or set of parts. Nature is multiscalar, and action is what we are. It is not the introduction of adjustments or alterations into the world that constitutes evil, but, rather, the willful adoption of a dysfunctional mereological comportment toward nature and, therefore, toward ourselves and our fellow constituents and creatures. (I return to the topic of a normative naturalism in Chapter 5.)

Here we can see how Schelling thinks that the existential choice that freedom is necessarily takes shape as creative agency. Freedom is not merely nondetermination; it is not negative liberty. This is because freedom consists of the freedom to make choices, choices founded upon and repeating the primal choice between good and evil. Existential choice creates ontological novelty at every moment by virtue of the alterations it introduces into the order of things. Freedom is something that takes place; it entails action. Hence, there is nothing supranatural about freedom at all. If this is true, then freedom and nature are no longer divorced (as in Descartes), nor is freedom deflated into a property of correct intellection (as in Spinoza), nor is freedom conceived in purely negative terms (as in traditional readings of Hobbes). Instead, we end up with a very different theoretical conclusion, namely, that nature makes freedom possible, that there is something about nature that is, itself, free. New opportunities and pathways of action appear and disappear as a result of the new states of affairs that subjects produce by exercising free choice. Accordingly, we can finally make sense of the claim that subjectivity instantiates freedom insofar as the subject embodies this choice inescapably and interminably. The subject is nature's giving voice to its own freedom. As D. C. Schindler states, "*Human freedom gives expression to the world because the world itself is already, in some latent sense, free.*"²³⁸ This, then, is the basic relationship between freedom and nature that Schelling provides.

²³⁸ D. C. Schindler, *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), 172.

3.4 NATURE AND NATALITY

At this point, it is useful to draw a comparison between Schelling and Arendt. This is useful because Arendt provides one of the most richly substantive political theories of action and freedom available, and there are generative points of contact and friction between Arendt and Schelling. To explore them, I revisit the theoretical roles played by action, freedom, and natality in Arendt's political philosophy before elaborating on how what I have recovered from Schelling can be used to revise a problematic assumption about nature that haunts Arendt and overly restricts her theoretical imagination. This revision ultimately benefits the salvage of both theorists, as it allows us to see the political theoretical implications or possibilities latent in Schelling and to reintroduce the grand thematic of nature to Arendt's political theory.

Arendt begins *The Human Condition* (1958) by defining action as “the only activity that goes on directly between men *without the intermediary of things or matter*.”²³⁹ Immediately, she begins with the demotion or exclusion of the material. She sees activity as a basic component of the human condition and as the fundamental expression of the political. Unlike labor and work, which interface with and rely upon “the intermediary of things or matter” in various ways, by sustaining human life and transforming the world, respectively, action retains a special status insofar as action contains no element of causal determination.

Central to Arendt's theory of action are two key parts, namely, plurality and freedom. Plurality refers to the fact that politics takes place in public, which is to say, it exceeds the domain of the private or social. If politics takes place as a public action, then there must be a plurality of subjects involved, so as to constitute a public in the first place – that is to say, a

²³⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7, emphasis mine.

collective in one sense or another. Importantly, however, any collective is also necessarily composed of individual actors or singular subjects. In other words, what Arendt retains in her sense of plurality are the twin concepts of distinction and equality. On the one hand, subjects are distinctive and singular personalities; no subject can be replaced by another. On the other hand, human beings are similar enough that speech is possible as an interactive medium. Action and speech are intimately related to each other insofar as political action is collective, and collective action flows from decisions and deliberations that require speech in order to take shape.²⁴⁰

As for the second part of action, Arendt articulates a relatively novel conception of freedom. By freedom, Arendt refers to our capacity to engage in a collective process of beginning, a kind of founding or refounding rooted in the speech act of the promise. For Arendt, freedom only gets actualized in action: “the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Men are free [...] as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same.”²⁴¹ Accordingly, the exercise of freedom is necessarily collective and public, which is to say that freedom in the relevant sense only happens in genuinely political contexts. Furthermore, Arendt clarifies that action is its own end. Although action is neither arbitrary nor aimless, it is not subsumed to an end, nor instrumentalized in any way – without ceasing to be action and falling back into the realm of mere determination. Freedom does have an aim, however, namely, the founding or refounding of a collective project.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 178-79.

²⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 152-53, emphasis in original.

It is important to note here that Arendt grounds her philosophy of freedom on a curious concept, which she calls “the fact of natality.”²⁴² On the one hand, natality refers to the “miracle” of beginning that characterizes the human condition – that is to say, to the fact that humans

are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.²⁴³

On the other hand, natality is “inherent in all human activities” and, especially, in action, “the political activity par excellence.”²⁴⁴ This makes natality the “central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.” Natality, however, also takes on ontological connotations for Arendt. It is, as she calls it, the “ontological root” of the faculty of action, that is, “the capacity of beginning something anew.”²⁴⁵

This capacity to begin is a real capacity, one that takes shape in the endeavors and projects composing the world of politics. To act is to make a beginning. It is to make a beginning together, by means of a compact or promise voiced freely among and between political actors or subjects. In this regard, beginnings do not derive in subsidiary fashion from the past. In other words, they are not determined by whatever historical influences or legacies they may inherit. To the contrary, a beginning is precisely an “unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time.”²⁴⁶

What we should note about Arendt in relation to Schelling is the degree to which so much in their theoretical accounts of the human condition concur. For Arendt, action and freedom,

²⁴² Arendt, *Human Condition*, 247.

²⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 211.

²⁴⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 9.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 205. See also Anne O’Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

rooted in the natal condition of being human, are paramount to the concept and conditions of the political. Similarly, for Schelling, action and freedom coincide robustly, as well, albeit in a fashion that emphasizes the existential or ontological grounding of these terms instead of their political theoretical signification or consequences. As Schelling writes, “the essence of man is action” (“*das Wesen des Menschen ist Handeln*”).²⁴⁷

That being said, it is entirely fair to point out that Schelling largely fails to direct much attention to the collective aspect of human experience, at least in the texts I discuss in this dissertation project.²⁴⁸ At the same time, it is worth pointing out the degree to which Arendt articulates and valorizes a form of dramatically existential politics that necessarily exceeds any given instantiation of the political in the world.²⁴⁹ For example, Arendt addresses numerous instances of free political beginning in *On Revolution*, such as the American Revolution, or the early soviet councils in revolutionary Russia. Although these examples may tend toward decay or even catastrophe, this is fundamentally secondary to Arendt’s interest in foundational and revolutionary moments. That an experiment or a project ultimately fails does not invalidate its origin any more than breaking a promise obviates the responsibility incurred when the promise first was made.

It is precisely at the juncture between nature and action or freedom that Schelling helps me make a small but significant intervention in Arendt’s theoretical framework. This intervention involves Arendt’s reliance upon the modern conception of nature that Schelling discards. For Arendt misses, or dismisses, the generative function of processual nature because

²⁴⁷ Schelling, *Ideas*, 10.

²⁴⁸ Later texts like F. W. J. Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* (1841-1852), trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) do address the collective dimension of human experience, but I discuss this no further here.

²⁴⁹ Andreas Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” *Political Theory* 32:3 (2004): 320-46.

her imagination remains captured by the modern conception of nature and the subject's averse or emancipated relationship to nature.

Arendt views invocations of nature with intense suspicion due to how she thinks they function as the legitimating instruments of political and social structures of domination. For Arendt, invoking nature in political contexts indicates the presence of totalitarian aspirations.²⁵⁰ This is because any appeal to nature gets conceived as an appeal to necessity. Appealing to necessity forecloses upon the conception of freedom integral to her theory of action.²⁵¹ We can see here Arendt's embrace of what is sometimes called the deontological subject, or what is called in more everyday language that understanding of the human that endeavors to treat human agency as existentially privileged in some fashion above and beyond, or apart from, nature's domain. It is worth noting how this privilege gets erected on the very basis of a conception of nature that declares nature to be precisely the domain of causal determination, mechanism, and necessity – or what Arendt refers to as “the dark background of mere givenness” that precludes action altogether.²⁵²

What Schelling introduces in the philosophy of nature I have been reconstructing and repurposing is a conception of nature that does not function as the enemy or source of impingement that a theorist like Arendt conceives it to be. Instead of being a “dark background of mere givenness,” nature, on my broadly Schellingian account, functions as a “dark foundation” upon which, or within which, free subjectivity emerges. Indeed, as I explored in Chapter 2, the dark background of materiality is not “mere givenness” at all, but, rather, an active and processual agitation that enables the emergence of free subjectivity in the first place.

²⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

²⁵¹ Arendt, *Human Condition* and Hannah Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 142-69.

²⁵² Arendt, *Origins*, 301.

Initially, my critical intervention in Arendt's political theoretical framework may seem like a relatively minor correction, but in the context of the ecological crisis, the immediate significance of the shift becomes clearer. If our false apprehension or occlusion of nature in political theoretical frameworks contributes to the annihilation or destruction of nature, then resetting the basic conceptual terms in which we apprehend nature may help us alter our course. Furthermore – and this point carries even more weight, I think – if nature serves as the necessary ground of politics in the first place, then the details of our philosophy of nature do not only affect how we see things, but how politics and possibilities get articulated theoretically and pursued practically. If theoretical assumptions structure our imagination or vision, then they must ultimately form a crucial part of any environmental praxis.

3.5 ONTOLOGICAL FREEDOM AND POLITICAL FREEDOM

In summary, we can see a distinction between ontological freedom and political freedom that ultimately neither Arendt nor Schelling traverses explicitly. On Arendt's account, political freedom consists of the exercise of collective action rooted in the human condition of natality and never subsumed to instrumental ends. Agential freedom and political freedom coproduce each other. Agents are free when they act politically, and political freedom obtains when agents decide to meet the conditions of action and act. However, she secures her theory of freedom on the basis of a conceptual elimination or occlusion of nature. As we have seen, her implicit philosophy of nature identifies nature entirely in terms of determination and necessity.

By contrast, Schelling provides us with a theory of ontological freedom entirely rooted in human choice or decision. Although there are obviously rather strong normative dimensions to Schelling's philosophy of freedom (hence the stark language of evil), it is not explicitly related to

the political in his work. For Schelling, the decision in which freedom obtains is a fundamentally existential decision. Accordingly, its effects do flow into various modes of action. Given Schelling's emphasis on the centrality of action to the human condition, then, it is not unreasonable to ask how his philosophy of freedom links up with politics.

Consider briefly the problematic implications of Martin Heidegger's attempt to employ Schelling for political theoretical ends.²⁵³ For Heidegger in 1936, Schelling's decisionism serves as an occasion to show how Being manifests political decision points of tremendous historical and philosophical implication.²⁵⁴ Heidegger's reading of Schelling emphasizes that it is the autoproduction of such decision points that characterizes freedom as the articulation of Being in time. Precisely by giving freedom such philosophical priority, Schelling, Heidegger argues, allows the undoing of a certain programmatic form of Western metaphysical thinking.

As Jean-Luc Nancy points out, however, Heidegger fails to take seriously Schelling's so-called "system" of freedom.²⁵⁵ He fails because he subordinates the idea of freedom to the category or ground of Being itself. As Patrick Roney writes, "Such a subordination would in effect hold freedom in reserve, meaning that the free generosity of being's disclosure, of truth – of letting beings be and belong to a world – would always be subject to a withdrawal of this same free gesture."²⁵⁶ In other words, Heidegger reworks Schelling's idea of freedom into a perverse philosophical justification for deciding in favor of a specific political regime, namely, German National Socialism in the 1930s. As is his wont, Heidegger builds his philosophy so that

²⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise: On the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985).

²⁵⁴ Frank Schalow, "At the Interface of Destiny and Freedom: The New Locus of History in Heidegger's 1936 Schelling Lectures," *Clio* 28:1 (1998): 53-69.

²⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

²⁵⁶ Patrick Roney, "Evil and the Experience of Freedom: Nancy on Schelling and Heidegger," *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009), 380.

it bends toward his specific historical moment. There may be a sense in which we are always doing this when we think, but there nevertheless remains a distinct conceptual divide between Schelling's idea of freedom and the use to which Heidegger puts it.

As I show above, Schellingian freedom involves a decision between two relational modes. However, the idea of freedom itself should not be confused with either of these two modes. Yet Heidegger, it seems, identifies freedom with the two modes in question:

The 'and' [i.e., in what Heidegger calls the possibility of good *and* evil in Schelling's idea of freedom], the possibility of this ambiguity, and everything hidden in it is what is decisive. [...] Evil itself determines the new beginning in metaphysics. The question of the possibility and reality of evil brings about a transformation of the question of Being.²⁵⁷

In this way, Heidegger smears together the idea of freedom with that to which freedom applies. This is a category mistake, at best, if not an attempt by Heidegger to contort this chapter of his so-called "history of Being" to justify the new beginning he thought National Socialism embodied. Of course, the results of this are disastrous.

My proposal, ultimately, is that we replace the modern conception of nature that Arendt assumes with the alternative process philosophy of nature that my repurposing of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* allows me to articulate. If nature is no longer conceived as the domain of determination, mechanism, and necessity, but, instead, in terms of the dark ecological and material background within which free subjectivity emerges, then we can start to examine in more detail how we might conceive of core political theoretical concepts. These concepts principally include the subject and normativity. Freed from the modern conception of nature, we can now elaborate upon these dispositives in ways that do not endorse or imply the annihilation

²⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise*, 97.

of nature. Placing freedom and nature into a properly reciprocal relationship is the first step toward breaking the affective, conceptual, and political deadlock posed by the ecological crisis.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Schelling's philosophy of freedom and evil illustrates how freedom in nature is possible. For Schelling, it is only in the domain of nature that freedom can take place. Freedom is an ontological power that takes shape as the creative agency of the subject who emerges within the dark background of nature. Ecological, processual materiality precipitates freedom. By defining freedom in terms of the subject's decisive relational comportment toward nature as such – that is to say, toward the ontological whole of which the subject is an emergent part – Schelling helps me salvage a conception of freedom that is grounded in nature. On this view, nature gets reconceived as the dark landscape in which existential freedom takes place rather than as the clockwork vista of which so many late moderns remain fond. Ontological evil plays a privileged role here because it opens the doorway to a reconsideration of the relationship between nature and normativity. Redefining freedom in terms of an existential decision that issues forth ontological alterations in the order of things means that nature and politics need no longer be severed from each other. To the contrary, nature and politics implicate and inflect each other in every action taken by the free subject, who emerges within nature's creative darkness and then navigates it with others. Freedom in nature is therefore not just possible, but *only* possible because freedom emerges out of the material conditions and relations that constitute and produce human subjectivity in the first place.

CHAPTER 4: COMPANION ECOLOGIES

4.1 INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND THE SUBJECT

Numerous attempts to articulate theories of the subject have been proposed in political theory. These range from minimalist theories that posit the subject as a pure rational actor to post-Hegelian theories that portray subjectivity in terms of identity and its recognition, from materialist arguments emphasizing embodiment to poststructuralist and psychoanalytic accounts in which the subject exists as a plurality, more like a flock or a parliament than a discrete entity. In the context of the natural sciences in the modern period and up to the present, the subject gets hypothesized initially as an immaterial or interdicting agency – either as the abstract “thinking thing” of Descartes’s *Meditations*, or else as Francis Bacon’s ideally domineering “new scientist.”²⁵⁸ After the common acceptance of various forms of evolutionary theory, however, these abstractions often materialize into some version or another of Friedrich Nietzsche’s portrayal of the human as a “clever animal.”²⁵⁹ Hence, one of the major theories of subjectivity after Charles Darwin depicts subjectivity in terms of animality rather than rationality, which is to say, in terms of its material or natural qualities instead of any supranaturally individuating features.²⁶⁰

In political theory, we can observe two representative responses to this early proto-biopolitical materialization of the subject. It should be noted that these responses do not appear

²⁵⁸ Desmond Clarke, *Descartes's Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Julie Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” trans. Ronald Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 141.

²⁶⁰ Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For two very different uses of Darwin in this context, contrast Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) with Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

ex nihilo, but have important precedents throughout the history of theories of the subject, precedents that largely exceed my scope at present. On the one hand, there are deontological theories of the subject that employ whatever theoretical framework necessary to rescue human agency from the causal determinism, mechanism, and necessity conceived as intrinsic to nature itself, animal or otherwise. These deontological theories purport to save the subject by removing her from nature's domain altogether. Instead, the subject is projected into some abstract space governed by law, principle, or the tribunal of reason. Conceding judgment to nature is likened to a primal crime or even radical evil, insofar as nature must be bracketed off in order to preserve the subject's unique or valuable qualities. On this view, it is only by escaping from nature, or else by negating it, that any felicitous sense of the political gets preserved.

On the other hand, there are poststructuralist theories of the subject that effectively make human interiority wholly extrinsic by evacuating the subject into external flows or networks, be they affective (e.g., in much contemporary affect theory), material (e.g., for Gilles Deleuze and many of the posthumanists), or semiotic (e.g., for Jacques Derrida and proponents of the sociogenic principle, perhaps especially in recent critical race theory).²⁶¹ Although deontologists and poststructuralists respond very differently to the modern biopolitical materialization of the subject, both shy away from any reconsideration of the philosophy of nature such as that which I propose. Consequently, the deontologist displaces the subject outside of nature in some capacity, while the poststructuralist conceptually eliminates the subject in favor of some alternative (de)construction.

²⁶¹ *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2010); Constantin V. Boundas, "Deleuze: Serialization and Subject-Formation," *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy: Critical Essays*, eds. Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1994), 99-116; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (New York: Polity Press, 2013); Thea Bellou, *Derrida's Deconstruction of the Subject: Writing, Self and Other* (Pieterlen and Bern: Peter Lang, 2013); and Demetrius L. Eudell, "'Come on Kid, Let's Go Get the Thing': The Sociogenic Principle and the Being of Being Black/Human" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 226-47.

Contrary to both the deontological and poststructuralist positions, I argue that it is only by theorizing the subject as a singular emergence in nature that we can articulate or salvage a meaningful sense of the political at all. Where the deontologist argues that the subject must be withdrawn from nature in order to secure the space of the political, I hold that political subjectivity can be secured best if we situate it within the context of the alternative process philosophy of nature I have been constructing. Where the poststructuralist argues that placing the subject in relation to her exteriority reveals her to be but an eddy in being or time, a propitious fiction, or a violent illusion, I claim that such exteriority is precisely the condition of possibility for the emergence of interiorized subjectivity in the first place.

The figure of the subject I theorize in this chapter remains possessed of a creative, porous interiority (its imagination stimulated by and open to the real) that is necessarily discontiguous but continuous with its exteriority. Furthermore, the subject retains her cohesion as a succession of free actions that is constrained by generic and specific ecological conditions. It is important to preserve an awareness that while such constraints do block certain pathways or possibilities, they also produce every opportunity by giving any situation its distinctive modal shape. As such, I propose a theoretical innovation – *companion ecologies* – which refers our attention to the biological and inorganic agencies, both material and semiotic, that environ and affect our existence as distinctive personal subjects with political agency and social identity. Companion ecologies constitute the lively and multiple contexts within which the biologically embodied human subject emerges. Considering them reveals that the individuation of the subject is a process that, surprisingly, takes place in the context of ecological plurality. Accordingly, this innovation allows me to sketch an ecological theory of the subject that opens up new pathways for political action and speculative imagination.

4.2 COMPANION ECOLOGIES

Companion ecologies constitute those lively contexts within which the human subject emerges. In general, they consist of suites of abiotic and biotic agencies that form the ecologically porous conditions of the human, that environ and affect our existence as distinctive personal subjects with political agency and social identity. It is my goal to make the best possible case for the theoretical innovativeness of the concept of companion ecologies. To do this, I provide a set of theoretical criteria intended to help us identify companion ecologies. Next, I discuss a range of specific possible examples of the concept. Last, I examine the generative force of the concept in terms of constituting and constituted powers, terms I repurpose to ontological ends. The concept of companion ecologies is valuable on its own terms, but I intend for it to lay the groundwork necessary for the theory of the ecologically conditioned subject I provide in the last part of this chapter.

The term ecology here refers to the complex array or mosaic of our material conditions, but it also functions as a distinct referent. Nevertheless, the term is not a mere scientific explanandum, but, rather, an ontological category of surprising elasticity and power. Hence, the word does two jobs simultaneously. On the one hand, it refers to the contextual features of any situated emplacement. In the most general sense, then, any ontological manifestation whatsoever, any entity or event, exists ecologically – i.e., as part of an ecology. On the other hand, *a companion ecology embodies a composite, multimodal, yet entitative plurality*. Each of these descriptive terms functions alongside the others to provide a set of theoretical criteria by which we can define and identify companion ecologies.

First: A companion ecology is *composite* because, unlike a mere aggregate, the various parts of an ecology are irreducibly layered upon each other, like trophic levels. A composite produces different effects than any of its component parts considered in isolation. In terms of materials science, consider the example of concrete. Concrete is comprised of a coarse aggregate, like sand, combined with hydraulic cement. On its own, sand is a very poor construction material. Likewise, hydraulic cement is mere adhesive goop. Combined into a composite like concrete, however, the two materials provide one of the most common and robust construction materials in the world. “Concreteness” emerges from the composite, and we can view architecture constructed from concrete as an emergent quality of concrete, shaped and structured in specific ways.

Ontological composites differ from both aggregates and assemblages. An aggregate is a mere sum or gross amount, comprised of individuated members interpolated within a set. An assemblage, however, is a multiplicity, which is to say that it is neither an aggregate nor a whole. As Gilles Deleuze writes, “in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what is ‘between’ them, the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other.”²⁶² By contrast, a composite is neither a set of individuated members, nor a set of constitutively interconnected relations, but rather a mode of existence that generates novel, multiscale effects irreducible to the effects of its parts alone.

Second: A companion ecology is *multimodal* because its parts do not necessarily belong to the same physical modes and orders. Companion ecologies regularly transect conventional scales of effect. For example, the rich network of interacting agents and processes that compose

²⁶² Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), viii.

what we call “the soil” do not exist at the same scales of effect.²⁶³ Nitrogen load and parent materials (i.e., the mineral substrate) operate at chemical and geological scales, respectively, while microfauna and microflora have their own metabolic rates. Despite these different scales – indeed, because of them, because of the intersection of different physical modes and orders – the nitrogen cycle, for example, exists in a relationship of dynamic reciprocity with all the other agents and processes comprising soils. As nitrogen cycles, it occurs in parent materials due to various forms of deposition and fixation (e.g., atmospheric or biological fixation, crop residues, precipitation, organic byproducts of soil microorganismic function, etc.). In turn, this affects both the capacity of parent materials to retain depositions of nitrogen and the ability of nitrogen-fixing organisms to continue the process. The transaction of nitrogen throughout a soil ecology both affects and is affected by climate, topography, weather, and other events, all of which contribute to the processes of accumulation and erosion that animate terrestrial soils.

Third: A companion ecology is *entitative*, insofar as we can refer to “a companion ecology” as something that is, at least, heuristically distinct. Of course, any given ecology is going to be ecotonal, which is to say that ecologies interact like pieces of a mosaic without radically distinct borders.²⁶⁴ Ecotones are spaces of mutual imbrication in which diverse ecologies overlap messily, producing transitional zones. A seashore is a paradigmatic ecotone, as it comprises the materially ambiguous space in which sea and land meet.²⁶⁵ Since ecological boundaries are fundamentally porous, and since constitutive interconnectivity is intrinsic to the ecological, there is a relevant sense in which all ecologies are ecotonal. However, this in no way

²⁶³ Frederick Kirschenmann, “Comprehending Soil within the Context of the Land Community” in *Soil and Culture*, eds. Edward R. Landa and Christian Feller (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 227-38.

²⁶⁴ *Ecotones: The Role of Landscape Boundaries in the Management and Restoration of Changing Environments*, eds. Marjorie M. Holland, Paul Risser, and Robert Naiman (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²⁶⁵ Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998).

implies that distinctions, e.g., between various biomes or habitats cannot be made. In no way do I intend to suggest that the concept of boundaries is ecologically meaningless.²⁶⁶ While biomes and habitats may not be entirely fixed spaces, they remain heuristically and temporally distinct, for the most part evidencing common, identifiable features.

Likewise, companion ecologies are heuristically distinct. They are entitative, albeit with somewhat fluid boundaries. As I show in the examples I discuss below, while companion ecologies may be distributed and multiscale, the term is not intended as a generic signifier of ambient conditions. A companion ecology can be distinguished from other things. Even if you cannot simply point at a companion ecology waddling past, like a badger or a vicar, neither badgers nor vicars could do their waddling in a world without the companion ecologies of which they are comprised.²⁶⁷

Fourth: A companion ecology is a plurality because its parts both appear and exercise themselves as distinct, yet interdependent entities that operate in conjunction with one another. A plurality refers to a number greater than one, to a multitude. It is important to characterize a companion ecology as a plurality because it is not just or merely an ostensive entity, like a badger or a vicar.

While it is important to see how companion ecologies are composite, multimodal entities, it is equally important to see how each companion ecology is comprised of constellated entities. To grasp the concept, it is necessary to see its two aspects at the same time. There is a difference between a companion ecology viewed as such and the interdependent agencies and entities that

²⁶⁶ To the contrary, empirical studies provide many reasons to proceed cautiously here. For example, acknowledging that the introduction of invasive species into native ecosystems can be destructive does not commit one to a vision of primal ecological purity. For a nuanced discussion of this, see *Fifty Years of Invasion Ecology: The Legacy of Charles Elton*, ed. David M. Richardson (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

²⁶⁷ Charles Elton in his *Animal Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) writes, “When an ecologist says ‘there goes a badger’ he should include in his thoughts some definite idea of the animal’s place in the community to which it belongs, just as if he had said ‘there goes the vicar’” (64).

give any companion ecology its distinctive ontological shape. These two aspects are not reducible to each other. To the contrary, they supplement each other necessarily. Entities do not exist apart from companion ecologies, and companion ecologies do not exist without material constituents. Indeed, like nesting dolls, they populate each other as constitutively interconnected dynamic reciprocities.

Fifth: We must consider why the ecologies in question should be viewed in terms of the companionate, as well as what it means to view them as such. The vocabulary of the companionate originates, in part, with Donna Haraway's theorization of companion species.²⁶⁸ For her, companion species consist of all the fellow travelers and significant others that accompany her – me, you, us, the human as such – as we make passage through the world. Indeed, this accompaniment is so intimate that we humans and our numerous companions interpenetrate each other materially and semiotically. Haraway uses the relatively common example of the dog as a companion animal, proceeding to show the many ways in which dogs and humans inform and shape each other in various ways, from the affective to the genetic. As Haraway begins one text: “Ms. Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells [...] I bet if you checked our DNA, you’d find some potent transfections between us.”²⁶⁹ She intends to refer our attention to genetic mosaicism, perhaps microchimerism, prevalent if not universal phenomena in which we bear cells with genotypes that are distinctly not our own – those of mothers, pets, lovers.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Donna Haraway, “The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness” in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 92-198.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁷⁰ James R. Lupski, “Genome Mosaicism – One Human, Multiple Genomes,” *Science* 341 (2013): 358-59 and Carl Zimmer, “A Pregnancy Souvenir: Cells That Are Not Your Own,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2015 accessed February 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/science/a-pregnancy-souvenir-cells-that-are-not-your-own.html?_r=0.

The point of introducing the vocabulary of the companionate, borrowed from Haraway and repurposed, is not to anthropomorphize our ecologies, nor is it to de-anthropomorphize ourselves. Nor do I intend to suggest that parsing our ecologies in companionate terms matters only because it allows us to view them as kin, which is to say, beings to whom we are morally obligated.²⁷¹ Nor do I intend merely to draw our attention once again to the degree that we are entangled creatures.²⁷² Our companion ecologies are not necessarily our friends, and nor is inculcating affection for them my principal goal.

I do, however, intend to emphasize the degree to which we are accompanied continually and necessarily by the ecologies we traverse and which traverse us. The point is ontological; the conditions of possibility for the subject are thoroughly ecological. Accordingly, the vocabulary of the companionate serves three purposes. It foregrounds the irreducible omnipresence of companion ecologies. You can't get away from the fuckers. Even if you fled into space, you'd still be taking them along with you – *inside* you, as an inextricable part of you. They are you. Accompaniment is the prime condition of ecological being. Next, it circumscribes the ecologies that surround us in such a way that we can identify and refer to them explicitly – precisely as ecologies, as both composited pluralities and compositing singularities. Last, it also reminds us that our companion ecologies provide the material conditions of possibility for action itself, for our very existence as bodies and as subjects. Companion ecologies compose the generative context in which the human takes place. This lattermost point cannot be stressed enough. No material possibility or practice is possible for us without the coordination and even the cooperation of companion ecologies.

²⁷¹ Donna Haraway, "Making Kin: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene" in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulhucene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 99-103.

²⁷² William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

4.3 ARCHITECTURE, THE MICROBIOME, AMAZONIAN INDIGENOUS ONTOLOGIES

To flesh out the concept of companion ecologies, it is useful to discuss some examples, which serve as applications or instantiations of the idea. The examples I discuss are architecture, the human microbiome, and indigenous Amazonian ontologies. I have selected such a heterogeneous array of examples to illustrate how elastic the concept is, but also to emphasize the degree to which it can inform our world at multiple scales ranging from the microscopic to the urban, from the cosmological to the quotidian. I employ architecture, first, to show how crucial elements of our lived environment can be transformed if we apprehend them in terms of companion ecologies. Examining the human microbiome internalizes the concept both ideationally and materially. We have companion ecologies inside of us. Without them, our bodies would not even hold together as bodies. Last, I turn to recent ethnological and theoretical work on indigenous Amazonian ontologies because there we can find provocative examples both of cognate concepts and of what such concepts do practically and socially in contexts alternative to late modern Western society. Surely its uses are not exhausted here.

Architecture may seem like a strange place to start. Stereotypically, we think of architecture as the product of a distinctly human form of artefactual or technical construction, in which we place the built environment on top of the so-called natural environment, often destroying or modifying the latter. Of course, this radical divide between the human and the natural is one of the distinctions I am endeavoring to obviate.

In any case, we can find numerous examples of architectural form throughout nature, even when viewed in a traditionally modern way. For example, many other animals constantly build and construct architectures, ranging from dams, nests, and webs to bridges, roads, and

traps.²⁷³ Derisively referring to such constructions as products of mere “instinct” not only betrays a misunderstanding of the term instinct, but also misses the tremendous adaptability, responsiveness, and variability in the world of animal architecture as such. Beyond the parallels that exist between human animal architecture and other animal architectures, there are further reasons to begin with architecture as the first application of the concept of companion ecologies.

First, we need to confirm that the case of architecture fits the theoretical criteria established in the previous section. Architecture is necessarily composite in its structure because architectural form emerges from geometrical and material processes of composition and juxtaposition. To some extent, this applies even at the level of construction materials, but it applies most primarily in the process of construction itself. Construction materials are placed in physical, processual relations with each other such that the buildings constructed retain their structural coherency or form over time. This directly relates to the multimodal quality of architecture insofar as no building exists except as a coproduction of extension and void. In other words, at the very least, to have a building at all, it is necessary to have extensional constraints (e.g., arches, pillars, or walls), but it is equally necessary to have voidal artifacts and passages (e.g., aisles, doorways, or spandrels). Architecture is as much about the organization of empty space as it is the assembly of materials. To quote the architect Louis Kahn, “Architecture is the thoughtful making of *spaces*.”²⁷⁴

Architecture is also fundamentally entitative insofar as we both construct and inhabit specific buildings. There is no such entity as architecture *in general*. Even as we traverse the

²⁷³ Mike Hansell, *Built by Animals: The Natural History of Animal Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁷⁴ Michael Merrill, *Louis Kahn: On the Thoughtful Making of Spaces: The Dominican Motherhouse and a Modern Culture of Space* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010), emphasis mine.

entirety of the built environment, we move from building to building. Buildings necessarily exist at our scale (whether or not they complement our scale is a different issue).

Last, architecture is a plurality. Rarely, if ever, is only one building at stake for us, as any and every building is always placed relationally. This is the design component of architecture, or what is sometimes called landscape architecture. In other words, whether the architect intends it or not, a building, by virtue of being placed here and not there, irreducibly instantiates transformations of its architectural context. Buildings are parts of distributions or gatherings of buildings. As such, when we refer to architecture, we refer to the plural and the singular, to the ecological conditions of the entitative, to the building itself and to its composite, multimodal form. Architecture is always irreducibly landscape architecture.

In Chapter 1, I emphasized the degree to which when we are talking about the ecological, we are talking about the world of the living. “Ecology” is not a mere synonym for “relationality.” Accordingly, what is there of the living in architecture? For, typically, we do not consider buildings to be alive. On the one hand, this issue is easily resolved. “Architecture” – its use in reference to the built environment stemming from the 1610s, the word itself originating from the Latin *architectus*, meaning “master builder” – refers us to elements of the landscape that have been constructed by living agents. There is no architecture in the relevant sense without life. All architecture originates with the designs and implementations of living creatures, one way or another. Even a radically austere architectural modernist like Le Corbusier identifies the house as “a machine for *living in*.”²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 160.

On the other hand, some architects, such as the vitalist Christopher Alexander, argue that architecture as such evidences the structural features or properties of life itself.²⁷⁶ For Alexander, life is a function of structural order evidencing specific features, and he intends the enumeration of these features throughout his body of work to make his theory of architecture and life conceptually clear and scientifically precise.²⁷⁷ Regardless of the degree to which we are comfortable identifying or imbricating architecture and life, they remain intertwined and overlapping.

We can see here the value of reconceptualizing architecture in terms of companion ecologies. Because of the elasticity of both terms, this could mean either specific buildings or the built environment altogether and at a range of scales – e.g., the plot, the site, the neighborhood, the town, the city, the megalopolis.²⁷⁸ Reconceptualizing architecture as a companion ecology makes the processes of design and implementation explicitly political – or, rather, it makes visible the degree to which this process was always already political. I do not mean this only in the sense that people contest land use all the time. Rather, the relationship of dependence is even more foundational.

If we were to view politics in terms of Harold Lasswell’s classic locution – who gets what, when, and how – then the distribution of buildings serves as one of the core material substrates (food, shelter, and clothing) of human life. We could expand Lasswell’s pithy phrase, then, asking: *Who gets where?* One reason why this question is fundamentally ecological is because it foregrounds the degree to which we humans only ever exist *in places* – that is to say,

²⁷⁶ Christopher Alexander, *Nature and Order*, especially *Volume One: The Phenomenon of Life* and *Volume Two: The Process of Creating Life* (Berkeley: The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, 2006).

²⁷⁷ Robert Rosen, *Life Itself: A Comprehensive Inquiry into the Nature, Origin, and Fabrication of Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and Robert Rosen, *Essays on Life Itself* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

²⁷⁸ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 2011).

in ecological contexts, in landscapes or locales with specific material features that contribute to, or else detract from, our quality of life.

For place is not abstract space; built spaces even less so. Viewing architecture in terms of *companion* ecologies – and not just ecologies – also affectively and conceptually blocks the reduction of architecture to merely inert or fungible structural presence. It redirects our attention to the fact that architecture accompanies us constantly as a mute companion. Architecture is something we navigate and negotiate. We build it (well or badly), maintain it (well or badly), and occupy it (well or badly). Complementarily, it affects our physical and psychological health, constrains our bodies, and shapes our capacities.²⁷⁹

Switching our focus from architecture to the human microbiome entails a dramatic shift in scale, but it is one that evidences further the elasticity of the concept of companion ecologies. Architecture tends to be big, and the microbiome is very small. However, as many scientists and theorists alike have started to argue, reconsidering our relationship to the microbiome is an increasingly important task. Arguments to the effect that organisms at a range of scales only (co)exist due to constitutive or intrinsic relations with other organisms are not exclusively new. For example, over the past twenty years alone, Lynn Margulis, Myra Hird, and Ed Yong have argued and documented the degree to which creaturely life at animal scales is dependent upon and interpenetrated by the microbiotic.²⁸⁰

Central to Margulis's argument is the claim that symbiogenesis, or the formation of eukaryotic cells from the cooperative synthesis of prokaryotes, contributes to the emergence of

²⁷⁹ For example, see A. J. Hoisington, et al., "The microbiome of the built environment and mental health," *Microbiome* 3:1 (2015): 1-12 and Steven Kembel, et al., "Architectural design influences the diversity and structure of the built environment microbiome," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Microbial Ecology* 6:8 (2012): 1469-79.

²⁸⁰ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), Myra Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life* (New York: Eccos Press, 2016).

evolutionary novelty. If so, then mutualism lies at the very foundations of life itself. For Hird, the human subject as such is situated at one scale of a spectrum extending from the micro-level of genes (along within their epigenetic contexts) to proliferating bacteria up to the human and beyond. Specifically, Hird takes Margulis's theory of symbiogenesis and endeavors to "think alongside" the microorganismic in order to cast light upon the foundations or origins of sociology. In a slightly different vein, Yong reviews the state of affairs in contemporary microbiology, illustrating the degree to which animal life at our scale interacts with and relies upon faunal and floral multitudes we rarely apprehend directly.

The fact of the matter is that we exist at a turning point in our scientific apprehension of the microbiological. The recent (June 2012) completion of the Human Microbiome Project only contributes to the mountain of data complicating our understanding of transcalar relations. By transcalar relations, I refer both to the ways in which microbiological organisms affect us and to the ways in which we affect them. As Gregory W. Schneider and Russell Winslow argue, the findings of the Human Microbiome Project should affect how we conceive of the individual human subject. As they write, microbiology "raises important questions about what it means to be a whole individual organism, especially if that individual involves a community of some hundreds of trillions of others."²⁸¹ As we have seen, the point is not entirely new. Indeed, for some time now, the concept of the individual human subject has been undergoing a process of scientific reexamination.

Scott F. Gilbert and his colleagues argue that the material boundaries of the animal body are so porous and traversed by microorganismic agencies that the biological individual as such needs to be reconceptualized as a "holobiont." A holobiont is the "anatomical term that describes

²⁸¹ Gregory W. Schneider and Russell Winslow, "Parts and Wholes: The Human Microbiome, Ecological Ontology, and the Challenges of Community," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 57:2 (2014): 208-09.

the integrated organism comprised of both host elements and persistent populations of symbionts.”²⁸² More recently, Gilbert writes: “We develop, not as ‘individuals’ from the single genome of fertilized eggs, but as consortia of numerous different organisms containing distinct genotypes. We are all ‘lichens’.”²⁸³

There are good reasons to utilize these findings not simply to break down some older concept of the human subject as abstract, immaterial, or radically singular, but to seek the foundations for new ontological modes of the subject. On the one hand, as Joshua S. Madin and his colleagues argue, one principal way in which scientific knowledge advances is through the development of ontologies that operationalize and stimulate empirical findings in complex, novel ways.²⁸⁴ Similarly, I argue that we can adapt some of these findings into new ontological frameworks, or, rather, into ontological frameworks that have yet to be sufficiently articulated. Perhaps, finally, long after F. W. J. Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, transcalar ecology is coming into its own. On the other hand, some scientific theorists are starting to do this, as well. For example, Schneider and Winslow make the following claim, which I take as fundamental:

Insofar as the wholeness and health of an individual organism remains secured by the activities of a multitude of more-or-less genetically distinct living beings, we suggest that *individuality in organisms emerges, paradoxically, as a consequence of plurality*. The individuality of an organism does not exist in either a static form or with clear barriers that preserve the singularity of the organism from the outside world; instead, current research suggests that individuals exist within a pluralistic ecosystem, where they are delineated by various functions and processes. Individuality, it appears, manifests as an emergent property within community.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87:4 (2012): 328-29.

²⁸³ Scott F. Gilbert, “Ecological developmental biology: environmental signals for normal animal development,” *Evolution and Development* 14:1 (2012): 24.

²⁸⁴ Joshua S. Madin, et al., “Advancing ecological research with ontologies,” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 23:3 (2008): 159-68.

²⁸⁵ Schneider and Winslow, “Parts,” 209, emphasis mine.

This claim is stronger and more ontologically suggestive than the one made by Gilbert above. In the holobiont model, the human body, for example, is like a house filled with occupants. For Schneider and Winslow, however, there is a much deeper point being made. For them, microbiology tells us not only about the function and structure of the microbiome, but about ontology itself – namely, that ontology is always already a form of being singular plural.²⁸⁶

We can see how the microbiome fits the conceptual framework provided by companion ecologies. For the sake of simplicity, consider the human gut. The intestinal microbiome is composite insofar as the interaction and intersection of microfaunal and microfloral communities produce and make possible higher-order effects, such as digestion, but also other behavioral and health effects, ranging from bone health, heart disease, and obesity to various psychological states.²⁸⁷ It is multimodal insofar as distinctions between the intestinal “environment” and its “inhabitants” blur. The digestive tract is not a smooth ontological space occupied by temporary or transient microorganisms. To the contrary, it is a complex, dynamic equilibrium of competing, cooperating microbiological and tissual agencies. As such, the microbiome is both entitative and plural. It is entitative because we can refer both to functionally distinct microbiomes (e.g., yours and mine) and to specific organisms or species (i.e., of microfauna or microflora). It is plural because these microbiomes are as tiny leviathans unto themselves, hosting trillions.

To view the microbiome in terms of companion ecologies does not require that we relinquish our sense of self, but it does require that we alter it rather significantly. Indeed, this will always be the case whenever we acknowledge a companion ecology. We must acknowledge

²⁸⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁸⁷ John F. Cryan and Siobhain O’Mahony, “The Microbiome-Gut-Brain Axis: From Bowel to Behavior,” *Neurogastronenterol Motil* 23 (2011): 187-92 and Rana Samadfam, “How Your Gut Affects Your Bones: The surprising new science of how intestinal bacteria control bone strength,” *Scientific American*, February 10, 2016, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/how-your-gut-affects-your-bones/>.

not merely that we carry companion ecologies inside us – that they are swarming over and within us – but that we emerge as subjects in our own right only within these pluralistic contexts. If this is true, then it should have profound effects upon how we apprehend our conduct and place within these numerous ecologies. For example, a common referent in economic, political, and psychological discourses today is “self-interest,” which signifies a bounded range of conceptual and practical possibilities including choice, preference, or utility maximization. Traditionally, the concept of self-interest holds constant a minimalist sense of self as some kind of atomic, singular agent who is, in principle, radically distinct from other agents. A self who is conceived in terms of companion ecologies, however, requires us to reexamine what self-interest could or must be. If, in order to be a self at all, the self necessarily overlaps and relies upon a dark background of ecological plurality, then self-interest must include that plurality within its purview. It is important to note that this conclusion is not a moral appeal, but an ontological consequence.

Likewise, not only should our cognitive and theoretical maps change, but our affective comportment toward the world should also shift. The degree of dissociation that enables the emergence and individuation of the subject in the first place can only go so far without pathologically dissociating the subject from herself – that is to say, from the companion ecologies that affect, inflect, and even permit her existence. Accordingly, reconceptualizing the microbiome as a companion ecology transforms our very understanding of what it means to be a body. As embodied subjects, this necessarily transforms our sense of what it means to be ourselves. Instead of being Cartesian mental machines trapped in meat golems, or disembodied rational actors abstracted from, or tangential to, our bodies, or even ideological or symbolic interpolations somehow thrust by culture upon the flesh, we become a different sort of subject altogether – chimerical, hybrid, lichenous, and, thereby, distinct.

The shift to indigenous Amazonian ontologies may seem even more surprising than the shift from architecture to the human microbiome. There is certainly a sense in which I am unable to provide anything like a comprehensive account of any general or specific such ontology. However, my intention in this shift is to offer several allusive and prefatory sketches of what such ontologies look like and of how they reorder the human subject in relation to a world composed of agencies formatted very much like companion ecologies.

Of course, no indigenous Amazonian tribe has the concept of companion ecologies, *per se*, especially given the historical, philosophical, and scientific genealogy necessarily attached to the term. That being said, following the work of Eduardo Kohn and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro enables my appeal to aspects of alternative ontological frameworks as a provocative contrast to our own habitual ways of worldmaking. Indeed, in the ethnologies provided by these anthropologists, there are powerful decompositions and recompositions that offer speculative insights into the scope and possible impact of the concept of companion ecologies.

Common to the work of both Kohn and Viveiros de Castro is the notice each gives to the prominent roles played by metamorphosis and perspective in various indigenous Amazonian ontologies. Kohn treats one mode of metamorphosis memorably by reference to the conditions of possibility for communication between creatures as conceived by the Runa people of Ecuador. For the Runa, all creatures exist in an extended, multimodal “ecology of selves.”²⁸⁸ The Runa identify as distinct selves, but they also impute selfhood to the multitude of other agencies that surround them. This ontological dispensation is not an act of charity. Indeed, Kohn spends a great deal of time tracing out how the Runa struggle to dissociate themselves from the prey

²⁸⁸ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 16.

animals that they simultaneously acknowledge, hunt, and kill. Rather, it is a function of the Runa's ecological cosmology.

As an example, Kohn foregrounds the social meaning of the Runa's attempts to interpret the dreams of their dogs. As Kohn writes, it is not that the Runa pamper or worship their dogs. Instead, "imagining that the thoughts of dogs are not knowable would throw into question whether it is ever possible to know the intentions and goals of any kind of self."²⁸⁹ For the Runa, that creatures have any form of communicative access to each other at all entails some degree of ontological slippage. To communicate with you, to know you or your dreams, we must transform into each other to some extent. Identities blur together. Accordingly, interpreting the dreams of dogs is both dangerous (for both parties, as the Runa feed their dogs poisonous hallucinogens) and fundamentally important. It is dangerous because of the possibility that one might become lost, unable to return to the social world of the Runa from being a dog. It is fundamentally important because the interpretation of canine dreams figures as one of the central dispositives that grounds the possibility of communication between all creatures. If we cannot interpret the dreams of dogs, then we cannot speak to each other, either. If we cannot speak to each other, then the very world of sense falls apart.

In this way, the Runa ground the anthropological possibility of human community – that is to say, of being Runa (or "human") – in the necessary risk of ongoing ontological congress with the spectrum of life and the materiality of the surrounding rainforest. This figures as an acknowledgment of both the dependence of the human upon its ecological conditions and as a warrant for the assertiveness of distinctly human aims and programs. As Kohn writes, "There is a constant tension, then, between the blurring of the interspecies boundaries and maintaining

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 132.

difference, and the challenge is to find the semiotic means to productively sustain this tension without being pulled to either extreme.”²⁹⁰

Approaching the matter of perspective differently, Viveiros de Castro argues that “Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds along the lines that the *point of view creates the subject*, [that] whatever is activated or ‘agented’ by the point of view will be a subject.”²⁹¹

Viveiros de Castro’s goal (at least, in his “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere”) is to provide a cognitive map of what he terms the indigenous conceptual world and its various internalized differences. In his lengthy discussion of animist subjectivity, he captures a rather important, if difficult point, claiming that the imputation of human qualities to nonhumans (by animists) reflects a generalized anthropomorphism that effectively centers subjectivity in nature by decentering the human cosmologically. Viveiros de Castro writes:

We need to have it quite clear: it is not that animals are subjects because they are humans (humans in disguise), but rather that they are human because they are subjects (potential subjects). This is to say *culture is the subject’s nature*, it is the form in which every subject experiences its own nature. Animism is not a projection of substantive human qualities cast onto animals, but rather expresses the logical equivalence of the reflexive relations that humans and animals each have to themselves: salmon are to (see) salmon as humans are to (see) humans, namely, (as) human. If, as we have observed, the common condition of humans and animals is humanity not animality, this is because “humanity” is the name for the general form taken by the subject.²⁹²

To some extent, the central point here is the degree to which any embodied perspective whatsoever entails the self-indexical formation or instantiation of a subject, as well as the position of necessary differentiation that each perspective, or subject, adopts vis-à-vis every other (possible) subject. This entails for the animist not only an awareness of oneself as both subject (i.e., as or for oneself) and object (i.e., for the other), but also the thoroughgoing

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 140.

²⁹¹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere” in *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 244, emphasis in original.

²⁹² Ibid., 245, emphasis in original.

awareness that this complex, shifting web of subjects and objects means that the two override and traverse each other constantly.

Viveiros de Castro returns again and again to the same formulation: for indigenous Amazonian tribes, material bodies are clothing, envelopes – that is to say, exchangeable, interchangeable, and metamorphic. Perspectives shift. Indeed, such shifts make perspectivism possible in the first place.²⁹³ It is precisely on these grounds that any particular creaturely identification (i.e., the formation of any particular subject) originates.

What is striking and theoretically valuable about these two examples is that Kohn and Viveiros de Castro are not studying peoples whose interest is in breaking down the subject into its ecological or external components or flows. To the contrary, the indigenous Amazonian ontologies endeavor to preserve what is distinctive about specifically human subjectivity, yet precisely on the very basis of its ecological, relational status. Both Kohn and Viveiros de Castro report that, for the Amazonians, the theoretical preservation of the human is accomplished only given the necessity of its ecological contextualization. This is done without collapsing into so-called “primitive narcissism” or simplistic forms of romanticism.

We can also see how indigenous Amazonian ontologies operationalize something very much like the concept of companion ecologies. There are elements of the composite latent in every given entity in the rainforest, such that communiques and encounters have the potential to bring forward new forms of subjectivity.²⁹⁴ There is multimodality insofar as identities exist across a wide ontological range. Since communication is premised upon partial metamorphosis, each identity exists on a creaturely spectrum, capable of adopting temporary guises, of switching

²⁹³ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, trans. Catherine V. Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially 252-72.

²⁹⁴ Indeed, this is intrinsic to practices of shamanism throughout the Amazonian rainforest. See Frederique Apffel-Marglin, *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

modes. At the same time, subjects exist entitatively, insofar as identity is not a category that the Amazonian tribes in question endeavor to discard or obviate. That the entitative and plural coexist is evident in the mutability of perspective that Viveiros de Castro documents. As Phillippe Descola notes in a paper on the matter, in the context of indigenous Amazonian ontologies, there is the potential for “stone adzes and quarks, cultivated plants and the genome map, hunting ritual and oil production [to] become intelligible as so many variations within a single set of relations encompassing humans as well as non-humans.”²⁹⁵

It is true that appeals to ethnic particularity or indigenous wisdom often feature prominently in discussions of the ecological. Indeed, environmentalism itself has often been plagued by nostalgic or romantic constructions of the “native” that all-too-often stray into colonizing or predatory mentalities. It is worth noting, therefore, that I employ the examples above purely as instances of an alternative possible ontology, one that separates the constituents of the world in a different sort of way. In this regard, I am following the cue of Viveiros de Castro, who argues extensively that the decolonization of anthropology (and perhaps even philosophy) necessitates that ontologies such as those of the Araweté or the Runa can be used reflexively to interrogate our own ontological commitments and frameworks.²⁹⁶ It may or may not be the case that, as Bruno Latour argues, we have never been modern (by which he means that the modern division between nature and the human has always proceeded on the very basis of their mutual imbrication), but we certainly are not destined or doomed to be.

²⁹⁵ Phillippe Descola, “Constructing natures: Symbolic ecology and social practice” in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Philippe Descola and Gisli Pálsson (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.

²⁹⁶ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014).

4.4 THE ECOLOGICALLY CONDITIONED SUBJECT

In my view, a theory of the subject must contain at least three components. The first component consists of an account of the conditions of *ontogenesis*. By ontogenesis, I refer to the emergence of the subject as a distinctive ontological form or shape unlike other forms or shapes in nature. This answers the following question: How does the subject come into existence? The second component consists of a general account of *morphogenesis*. Morphogenesis refers not merely to conditions of origination, but to the material, symbolic unfolding of the subject in all its generic specificity. This answers the following question: How does the subject change or take shape? The third component consists of the framework of a theory of *action*. Action matters because it encompasses all the ways in which a subject expresses herself in and throughout the world, thereby answering the following question: What can a subject do? The framework of a theory of action necessarily will be somewhat minimal, simply because we are not concerned here with the contents of any given action as much as the theoretical definition of action and the securement of its conditions of possibility in the subject as such. Taken altogether, these components provide for a theory of the subject that finally answers the question that occupies this chapter: What is the ecological subject?

The first component of this theory of the subject is ontogenesis. The subject emerges from a congeries of companion ecologies, ranging from more traditionally conceived ecosystems to the more hybrid, speculative examples discussed above. Accordingly, there is at least some sense in which the subject exists as an effect or a product of those underlying processes of interactivity that constitute and regulate the congress of companion ecologies across multiple scales. That being said, this product – i.e., the subject – is itself incomplete, ongoing, and processual. I say this because subjects change over time. We alter ourselves, and we are altered

by circumstances causally visible and invisible. To name only a few such alterations, conversions, habits, and tragedies all reshape the subject in a patchwork fashion. Patterns of action, contention, and cooperation reproduce the subject continually through time.

Regarding ontogenesis specifically, consider the analogy of a mosaic. The pieces of a mosaic come together to form an image, and that image is not itself reducible to any given set of mosaical pieces. To sharpen the analogy further, consider a mosaic that forms an autostereogram. An autostereogram is a peculiar kind of image composed of pixels organized into a two-dimensional image in such a way that, viewed from the appropriate angle, a three-dimensional image appears. Examples of autostereograms can be found in the popular series of *Magic Eye* books.

On the one hand, an autostereogram is just an array of two-dimensional pixels on a plane. These pixels, organized into pattern strips, encode depth maps into that array, such that, on the other hand, the autostereogram provides the necessary conditions of convergence for the appearance of the three-dimensional image. An autostereogram is not a mere illusion or perspectival trick. To the contrary, it is an emergent product of intersecting algorithmic processes.²⁹⁷ Many people (such as myself) with a strongly dominant eye, or with various common misalignments in vision, cannot perceive the three-dimensional image that the autostereogram encodes, but the image remains latently present nevertheless. Is an autostereogram therefore a two-dimensional image or a three-dimensional image? The correct answer is that it is both.

Analogously, the subject comes into existence like the three-dimensional image that emerges from the underlying two-dimensional array of pixelated pattern strips. This is what it

²⁹⁷ Jacques Ninio, "The science and craft of autostereograms," *Spatial Vision* 21:1/2 (2007): 185-200.

means to say that a subject emerges from a congeries of companion ecologies. The subject exists in conditions of discontinuous continuity. The analogy with the autostereogram clarifies the degree to which this is a genuinely ontogenetic account, rather than an attempt to decompose or demote some sense of the subject into more basic or determining factors. To the contrary, I am suggesting that starting with the ecological conditions of being provides the necessary framework for the emergence of the subject in the first place. In Chapter 2, I define emergence in terms of a figural effect of the structural differentiation between the background and the foreground. This is precisely what we are seeing in this account of ontogenesis, as this lurching perspectival creature called the subject emerges from the background of its ecological conditions, like a specter against the backdrop of night.

The second component of this theory of the subject is morphogenesis. The term morphogenesis originates from developmental biology and refers to those underlying adaptive processes that contribute to the development of biological form or shape. It is also the term used by Alexander to refer to what he calls “structure-preserving transformations.”²⁹⁸ As such, morphogenesis refers not merely to conditions of origination, but to the array of material and symbolic transformations of the subject in all its generic specificity – by which I mean: we are talking about the subject as a specific subject, but we are not talking about any subject in specific.

In morphogenetic terms, the subject figures or unfolds as a chimerical site. A chimerical site, like the two-dimensional plane necessary for autostereogrammatic emergence, consists of overlapping pattern strips in which the various companion ecologies in question give rise to the subject’s capacities and opportunities alike. A subject is a site. Another way of saying this is to

²⁹⁸ Alexander, *Process of Creating Life*, 51-84.

describe the subject in terms of its *taking place*, as taking place captures both a sense of situatedness (i.e., *in* a place and *as* a place) and a sense of action as transformation over time, for subjects are both materially and temporally extended.

Accordingly, we can schematize the morphogenesis of the subject in terms of its traversal of the three following dispositives: structure, community, and distribution. It is worth noting that I abstract these three terms from the three examples of companion ecologies discussed above. Each of those examples operationalizes all three dispositives, but each also exemplifies one *in nuce*. Respectively, architecture exemplifies structure, the human microbiome exemplifies community, and indigenous Amazonian ontologies exemplify distribution.

The structure of the subject is first instantiated by means of its ontogenesis. It is important to note that the subject is neither reducible to its circumstances, nor decomposable into some set of more basic or determining factors. Subjects emerge at points of convergence, but they are not reducible to mere convergences. There remains a structural relationship between the subject and its ecological conditions, however, insofar as the subject is distinct from those conditions but not radically distinct. This is not to suggest that there is no difference. To the contrary, the significance of the subject lies in the very fact of its individuation. However, the difference in question is functional and scalar rather than supranatural. The subject may be unable to escape from the structural constraints of its ecological conditions, but it is not determined by them, either. Indeed, these structural constraints provide the range of pathways of action available to any given subject. Pathways of action are not possible in an acosmos.

A similar point obtains regarding the relationship between subject and community. The community concept ultimately refers to an ontological condition that disrupts all claims to radically distinct identity, but it also resituates the very concept of identity in relation to

constitutively interconnected and dynamically reciprocal relations between various agencies. Return to the example I discuss above regarding the relationship between the human microbiome and the human organism as a whole. What is most important to grasp about that example is the degree to which individuation – e.g., of a specific subject – takes place only within the context of community.²⁹⁹ It is not that ontological singularities simply “pop out” of unindividuated plena as if by some *clinamen* or miracle, but, rather, that individuation is a process of emergence that relies upon fundamentally plural conditions.

Finally, we can examine causal distribution as the final dispositive characterizing the morphogenesis of the subject. By causal distribution, I refer to the subject’s capacity to affect the world around it. In no small part, this transpires simply by virtue of the mere existence of the embodied subject in the first place. Place is always already composite; in the most general sense, places are intersectional composites of various bodies at various scales. As such, the mere presence of any given body affects its locale in a variety of ways. In the case of human subjects, this penumbra of effects ranges from the microbial to the architectural and beyond.³⁰⁰ As is often referred to in the context of the ecological crisis, our penumbra of effects now even extends to the geological. The Anthropocene itself testifies to the causal distribution of the subject. This issue of causal distribution figures even more prominently when we turn to the third component of our theory of the subject – action.

The third and final component of this theory of the subject consists of the framework of a theory of action. Action matters because it encompasses the full range of means and modes by

²⁹⁹ Here is a classical formulation of this insight from Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): “The city is thus prior by nature to the household and to each of us. For the whole must of necessity be prior to the part [...]” (4).

³⁰⁰ For example, human bodies are constantly and necessarily attended by what James F. Meadow, et al., refer to as a “personal microbial cloud.” See his “Humans differ in their personal microbial cloud,” *PeerJ* 9 (2015): 3.

which a subject expresses herself in and throughout the world. In the expanded sense of action I am advocating, action can be defined as ontological transformation effected by an agency, that is to say, by a subject of some kind.

For us humans, action refers to the chains and complexes of effected transformations in ourselves and the world around us, either individually or collectively. Action can be conscious or unconscious, which is to say that we may not always be aware of the transformations we effect. That being said, there must necessarily be some causal horizon of responsibility, for it would be absurd to prosecute directly the butterfly in Tokyo for a hurricane currently hammering the Gulf Coast, even if the causal map linking the two were ultimately transparent to us. The framework or a theory of action necessarily must be somewhat minimal, simply because we are not concerned here with the normative contents of any given action. Principally, what matters for this theory of action are the following four conditions: (1) action must be free, (2) action necessitates lateral engagement, (3) action flows from affective schemata, and (4) action is simultaneously singular and plural.

First, action must be free. Otherwise, it is mere behavior or programmatic execution. Recall the primary question answered by Chapter 3: Is freedom possible in nature, and how? The answer was that freedom consists of the (infinitely iterated) choice between the willful identification of the living subject with the entirety of existence and a robust acknowledgement of the constitutive interconnectivity and dynamic reciprocity in the ground of its existence. This draws our attention to the ways in which freedom is neither negative nor positive, in any traditional sense. Nor is it either “free will” or the selection between arbitrary or given alternatives. Rather, freedom in this sense is an ontological power latent in nature itself. Ultimately, one mode in which freedom takes place is in political action. There is conceptual

reciprocity here, for action consists of the exercise of freedom and freedom receives its expression only in the form of subjects acting.

The second condition for action is lateral engagement, namely, with the subject's companion ecologies, the latter being conceived as broadly as possible. The point is fundamentally non-normative, at least insofar as lateral action implies neither the lack nor presence of force or violence. Even the most violent act requires implicit, if perhaps mindless or unintentional cooperation from the ecological and material agencies that bloom and buzz around us. This is one reason why strong redescriptions of events can be so theoretically useful.³⁰¹ In the case of something like fracking, there is certainly a lateral engagement, e.g., with the shale rock, but fracturing the shale to release natural gas not only blocks the possibility of repetition (you can't frack the same place twice), but of landscape restoration itself. Regardless of the example, action is more like navigation than it is like sovereign imposition. In navigating, one "reads" the landscape in order to determine various locations (e.g., one's own location, points of reference, the desired destination), conditions (e.g., of passability, of visibility), and pathways forward. Every navigation entails some degree of negotiation with constraints, and, indeed, constraints make navigation possible in the first place.

The third condition for action is that its roots are passional. In other words, our actions flow from the schemata of our unconscious attachments and valuations. By flow, I mean to suggest not that our actions simply are dictated by unconscious forces, but that the very perspectival range of what seems possible or even visible for us often is constrained and shaped by affective attachments of which we often have little conscious awareness. This is precisely

³⁰¹ See Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 2000) and Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), although the tradition of such strong redescription extends back to the *Annales* school, at least.

where the vagaries of affect relate directly to the pragmatics of problem solution. A problem is only (potentially) soluble given a set of underlying assumptions related to the definition and identification of that problem. Hence why the solution to a well-formed problem is generally coded into the problem itself, in the way that a lock shows you what key it needs by virtue of the keyhole's inverse shape. Similarly, our affective attachments and comportment – or what I am calling the passional roots of action – constrain the space of actions one can take. It follows from this that affective transformations change the contours of that space.

The fourth condition for action is that it is simultaneously singular and plural. In creaturely terms, it manifests in both individual and collective action. Put differently, individual and collective action inform and penetrate each other in very specific ways. Given that we exist in collectives of human creatures, individual actions constantly take place against the background of collective comportments. Likewise, shifts in collective action necessarily rely upon patterns of individual action, one way or another. Individual and collective action exist at different scales. It is therefore unsurprising that we would trace their passage by different means. This fourth condition, of course, returns us to the fundamentally ecological circumstances of the human subject.

4.5 CONCLUSION

Companion ecologies constitute the lively contexts within which the subject emerges. The term refers not only to our conditions, however, but also functions as a referent, for an ecology is a composite, multimodal, yet entitative plurality. Companion ecologies are companionate insofar as they necessarily attend the emergence and formation of the subject. In short, companion ecologies reveal that individuation is a process that only takes place, paradoxically, because of

ecological plurality. So what is the subject, then, or what is a subject like? A subject is a materially and temporally extended and causally distributed morphogenetic site, which emerges within the context of interactive, multiscale, and overlapping companion ecologies.

Characteristic of the subject is its autostereogrammatic or composite form, existing in multiple modes (e.g., affective, material, semiotic), a form which nevertheless grants the subject a singular agentic or entitative shape that only appears on the basis of its plural ground. It is in this regard that the human subject – itself a peculiar kind of companion ecology – is a free subject of nature. If creative darkness provides the ecological background from whence the subject emerges materially, then companion ecologies are the media in which the subject appears as a distinctly individuated agential form in nature.

CHAPTER 5: ECONORMATIVITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND NORMATIVITY

Substantive engagements with normativity typically contrast the normative with the descriptive. After all, normative language invokes determinations or judgements of what ought to be, or what ought to happen, while descriptive language purports to provide a relatively neutral characterization of what is the case. As Judith Jarvis Thomson indicates, normative statements can be directive or evaluative – which is to say, respectively, that normative statements either impel someone to do something, or else assess some state of affairs in terms of its goodness (or badness), its desirability or preferability.³⁰²

The scope of normative statements is very wide, encompassing but not restricting itself to moral statements, either directive or evaluative. Accordingly, we can see how even descriptive statements rely upon a pre-existing normative architectonic. For example, an ostensive statement such as “the cat is on the mat” implies the operationalization of decisional criteria ranging from contextual selection to object identification to word choice. My point is that descriptive statements have a normative penumbra; we could say that all descriptive statements are normatively-laden. The meaning or relevance of descriptive statements can be determined only when the speaker clarifies the importance of the statement, usually through elaboration or explanation, or else via reliance on pragmatic contextual features, and statements about importance are normative claims. Hence, there is always a normative remainder.

However, an important philosophical question about normative claims involves the source of normativity itself. In other words, what gives a normative claim any purchase at all?

³⁰² Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Normativity* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2008).

This is a question about normativity rather than any specific normative claim. We can characterize normativity as the metaprescriptive force implicitly invoked by all normative claims, but this remains rather abstract. Philosophers have endeavored to answer this question in a variety of ways. For example, Immanuel Kant and the Kantian tradition argue that normativity is grounded in reason alone. Specifically, this means that normative judgments fundamentally constitute the space of reasons.³⁰³ Hence, judgments are irreducibly normative. As such, consciousness, or rational subjectivity, always already is implicated in normative business. Normativity is sited in reason itself, and, according to the Kantian view, this ultimately cashes out into decision procedures or principles – e.g., understanding (practical reason), the categorical imperative (theoretical reason), and the assumption of purposiveness (aesthetic reason) – that justify and legitimate specific normative statements.

Another popular strategy for grounding normativity, both in ordinary language and in philosophy, involves the appeal to nature. We often consider unsophisticated appeals to nature to be a kind of informal fallacy, betrayed by some degree of conceptual sloppiness. For, typically, the claim that what is natural is good is exceptionally unclear. After all, if the concept of nature is considered to be all-encompassing, then both the good and the bad must be perfectly natural. Furthermore, if nature is all-encompassing, it is unclear what it could mean to identify any possible referent as unnatural. In contrast, if some natural order is identified as the source of normativity, then we already have slipped from the appeal to nature *qua* nature to an appeal to some kind of order (i.e., an order extant within nature) that is structured according to other emergent, internal, or supervenient directives.

³⁰³ Konstantin Pollok, *Kant's Theory of Normativity: Exploring the Space of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Throughout the history of modern philosophy, then, it often has been argued that nature and normativity cannot be reconciled, or that normative claims can have no grounds in nature. For example, both David Hume and G. E. Moore argue that descriptive ontological claims cannot justify or warrant normative claims. For Hume, the gap between fact and value is simply impassable because what is does not logically imply what ought to be.³⁰⁴ Likewise, for Moore, the identification of natural and normative properties always admits of doubt. It is an “open question,” which he takes to mean that natural and normative properties cannot be identical.³⁰⁵ In the framework of Western intellectual history, then, this divide between the natural and the normative reflects both the common sensibility that modern scientific reasoning necessitates the renunciation of naïve Aristotelian teleology and the late modern (or postmodern) suspicion that conflating facts and values always disguises ideological domination, hegemony, or violence.

However, some philosophers, who identify themselves as adherents to naturalism in some form or another, endeavor to characterize nature, or else structure the normative appeal to nature, in such a way as to avoid these errors and traps.³⁰⁶ For example, Thomson argues that normative directives ultimately reduce to normative evaluatives, which is to say that “evaluative properties are intimately connected with our understanding of the nature of the things to which they are ascribed, and these in turn form the basis for directive thought about how things ought to be.”³⁰⁷ Another prominent contemporary naturalist is Philippa Foot, who effectively

³⁰⁴ Daniel Propson, “Grasping at Normativity: Epistemic Justification in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 30:3 (2013): 215-32 and Jessica Spector, “Value in Fact: Naturalism and Normativity in Hume’s Moral Psychology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41:2 (2003): 145-64.

³⁰⁵ Richard Fumerton, “Open Questions and the Nature of Philosophical Analysis” and Robert Shaver, “Non-naturalism” in *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, eds. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 227-43, 283-306.

³⁰⁶ For example, see *Naturalism and Normativity*, eds. Mario De Caro and David MacArthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and *The Normative and the Natural*, eds. Michael P. Wolf and Jeremy Randel Koons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³⁰⁷ R. Jay Wallace, “‘Ought’, reasons, and vice: a comment on Judith Jarvis Thomson’s *Normativity*,” *Philosophical Studies* 154 (2011): 451.

grounds her understanding of natural norms on something akin to a concept of “life form” or species-being (what Marx calls *Gattungswesen*).³⁰⁸ As she writes, “‘natural’ goodness [...] is intrinsic or ‘autonomous’ goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the ‘life form’ of its species,” because goodness takes shape as flourishing, and what qualifies as flourishing depends intimately upon the natural features and structures of an organism or subject.³⁰⁹

However, for my purposes in this chapter, I am less interested in how professional philosophers construct their naturalisms than I am in how often unspoken concepts of nature and normativity become confused and entangled inside of other theoretical frames – specifically, in the biopolitical frame. There remains a distinct strand of normative theorization that grounds itself in the natural by means of the appeal to the biological or the vital. Call this idea bionormativity. Bionormativity refers to the attempt to derive, justify, or warrant normative claims on the basis of either (a) the strong or weak identification of the biological as the register or source of normativity or (b) a vital imperative expressed by or through the biological body. As examples, take the German vitalist Ludwig Klages and the American sociobiologist E. O. Wilson.³¹⁰ For Klages, there is a vital imperative latent in nature itself – the imperative to intensify, maximize, and proliferate life and its virtualities. The vital imperative grounds normativity itself. Likewise, for Wilson, it is the biophilia hypothesis - which he characterizes as the instinctive “urge to affiliate with other forms of life” – that situates normative claims made by humans.³¹¹ Despite the many complicated differences between Klages and other vitalists

³⁰⁸ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

³¹⁰ On Klages, see Michael Uhall, “From biocult to bioculture: the strange case of Ludwig Klages,” *Configurations* 27:1 (2019): 177-20.

³¹¹ E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 85. See also Stephen R. Kellert, “The Biological Basis for Human Values of Nature” in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, eds. Stephen R. Kellert and E. O. Wilson (Washington D. C.: Island Press, 1993), 42-70.

(such as Henri Bergson or Hans Driesch), or Wilson and other forms of illuminated scientism (e.g., especially as expounded by other popular intellectuals or public scientists like Richard Dawkins, Loren Eiseley, or Carl Sagan), all of these figures integrate elements of bionormativity into their core theoretical platform.³¹²

One political theorist who begins to theorize bionormativity in ways I find particularly useful is Roberto Esposito, and it is worth examining his diagnostic project, as well as the intellectual historical context that inflects it. Unlike Klages or Wilson, however, Esposito situates his contribution in sophisticated ontological and political theoretical terms. Where both Klages and Wilson suture their conceptions of bionormativity to deeply problematic political or theoretical agendas, Esposito endeavors to disrupt the discourse of biopolitics by providing a compelling philosophical narrative in which the dialectical relationship between two terms – *communitas* and *immunitas* – generates one of two possible trajectories: either “global nihilism” (i.e., a condition very similar to what I call the ecological crisis, albeit characterized in a different vocabulary and with a very different emphasis), or else a reclamation of normativity that derives its theoretical force from the singular conditions of vital materiality itself (i.e., nature).

To be clear, I largely agree with Esposito’s diagnosis, and his alternative communitarian vision is well worth appropriating and engaging. Indeed, doing so enables me to provide a snapshot of how the alternative process philosophy of nature I provide allows us to recapture a sense of nature’s normativity. That being said, there remains in Esposito’s project a degree of metaphysical abstraction that calls for its reconstruction within more specific material conditions.

³¹² Jürgen Klein, “Vitalism, empiricism, and the quest for reality in German and English philosophy” in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 190-229 and Bruce Rosenstock, “Hans Driesch and the Revival of Naturphilosophie,” *Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1-41.

One of my contentions is that the ecological crisis materializes what Esposito refers to in terms of global nihilism, or what I call pathological modernity. After all, we are not endeavoring to rejoiner a philosophical maladjustment, but to address a deadly political predicament. My second contention, which I address at the end of this chapter, is that expanding Esposito's theoretical vision in this way allows me to propose the basic terms of a new normative naturalism – grounded on *econormativity*, or the appeal to the normative implications of our irreducibly ecological condition – that can inform our politics without simply introducing unwanted elements of determinism, coercion, or violence.

5.2 AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITARIANISM

In the Anglophone context, there is a longstanding argument between advocates of communitarianism (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor) and advocates of liberalism or libertarianism (e.g., John Rawls and Robert Nozick). Whereas liberals and libertarians tend to emphasize individual freedoms, responsibilities, and rights, as well as the normativity of calculative rationality, communitarians dissent. Speaking broadly, Anglophone communitarians often criticize how liberalism misconstrues the subject as a detached, individualistic, rational agent (Sandel), how liberalism deploys forms of abstract universalism from its argumentative armamentarium (MacIntyre), and how liberalism is alleged to contribute to modern pathologies like alienation or social atomization (Taylor).³¹³

³¹³ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 2nd ed.), as well as Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981) (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 3rd ed.), Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

In contrast, communitarians provide affirmative or positive theoretical characterizations of the community concept intended to complement or even constitute the political as such. For example, all three of the Anglophone communitarians I mention emphasize the importance of inherited attachments, or else formal or informal membership in a community as the very precondition for political action or judgment. This longstanding argument between communitarians and liberals can be fairly characterized as a stalemate insofar as each tends to deny the basic assumptions upon which the other proceeds.

Unlike Anglophone communitarianism, however, the alternative communitarian paradigm to which Esposito belongs starts with a deep anxiety or concern about the very conditions of possibility for community in the first place. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the French philosopher Georges Bataille pursued a line of theoretical inquiry into what he terms “the conditions of affective communal life.”³¹⁴ Bataille offers us an incomplete communitarianism. I say it is incomplete because his explorations into the topic are never systematized. Indeed, Bataille has no “theory” of community. Rather, his contribution to the alternative communitarian paradigm consists of two intertwined trajectories of thought.

On the one hand, Bataille is both fascinated and repulsed by what appears to him to be the spectacular and violent grounds of community formation. For Bataille, it is descriptively true that community formation occurs on the basis of an excess, a shock, or a wound, like a murder, a sacrifice, or a war. As he writes, “I propose to admit, as a law, that human beings are only united with each other through rents or wounds [...]”³¹⁵ This enables the community to incorporate a

³¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “What We Have Undertaken...” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, eds. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 190.

³¹⁵ Georges Bataille, “The College of Sociology,” *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 251.

certain negative exteriority into itself instead of simply identifying itself in contrast to some external threat that may dissipate or overtake the community in question. His flirtations and fallings out with the Surrealists, the Collège de Sociologie, and the “secret society” Acéphale all reflect his insistent desire to examine and even realize communitarian forms of life that break with pathological modernity without simply regressing to nostalgic premodern ideals.³¹⁶ Particularly throughout the Collège de Sociologie writings, Bataille’s deep interest in how communities are formed is evident. He is fascinated by negativity, but repulsed by how negativity becomes operative (or “positive”) in specific historical contexts. For him, this meant both the emerging peril of Nazism and the incipient institutionalization of Stalinist communism. This leaves Bataille in a dilemma. Descriptively, communities form on the basis of the incorporation of some negative exteriority (“death”), but, concretely or historically, this generates only further hideous violence.

On the other hand, Bataille begins to explore the possibility of community formation that does not merely intensify foundational violence. The question here is how to incorporate negative exteriority without triggering such intensification. Specifically, Bataille gestures toward and hints at a communitarian form of life grounded not upon accumulation, association, or production, but, rather, disavowal and withdrawal. Where Marxists articulate community in terms of class association, or the unleashing of human productivity through revolutionary progression, and Nazis (following after Karl Haushofer) identify community in terms of the accumulation of *Lebensraum* and racial association intended to generate power and purity, Bataille valorizes *désœuvrement*, or idleness.

³¹⁶ *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, eds., Alastair Brotchie and Marina Galletti, trans. John Harman and Natasha Lehrer (London: Atlas Press, 2018).

The point here is largely conceptual, not material, which is to say that Bataille is not proposing a plan of inaction. Rather, Bataille inverts a basic assumption about what a community is or must be. This basic assumption is that community is best understood in terms of groups, or forms of association between individuals on some basis. Dissatisfied with this answer, Bataille changes the conceptual frame, suggesting that the community concept refers instead to a condition or a mode more than it does to a group or an identity. Indeed, for him, “community” exists in ontological tension with “identity.” We could say that Bataille begins to disaggregate the community concept from the identity concept.

It is Jean-Luc Nancy who picks up these scattered insights from Bataille and places them within a more systematic philosophical framework. In the early chapters of his *La communauté désoeuvrée* (1983), Nancy provides a reading of Bataille that makes much of the foregoing clearer and more explicit.³¹⁷ Nancy begins by noting the fact that many political theorists have complained that one of modernity’s pathologies is the decay or dissolution of community, but he rejects the attempt to substantialize the community concept in terms of a positive association, production, or relation. For example, although Nancy does not address MacIntyre directly, he doubtlessly would characterize MacIntyre’s call for what Rod Dreher later calls the “Benedict Option” as a form of reactionary nostalgia at best.³¹⁸ Nor does Nancy’s contention reduce to an empirical concern about the violence that political quests to achieve pure group identity seem to entail. Rather, Nancy argues that Bataille’s reflections on the constitutive power of incorporated

³¹⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³¹⁸ MacIntyre concludes *After Virtue* by writing, “We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict” (263). For a practical elaboration of this invocation, see Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Random House, 2017).

negativity contain and transmit a theoretical framework that Nancy calls “the inoperative community.”

First, we must note that Nancy’s aim with this framework is primarily negative. He rejects all attempts to valorize community as a product, e.g., of association, membership, or work. Hence his unilateral rejection of reactionary nostalgia and futural projection alike. By “inoperative” (*désœuvrée*), Nancy does not refer to inertia or lassitude, but, instead, to the ineluctable and spontaneous conditions of co-incidence that he thinks characterize the human condition as such. He refers to community as “an experience that makes us be,” writing “[o]ne does not produce [community], one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude.”³¹⁹

Ultimately, these conditions are *désœuvrée* because they do nothing and produce nothing in and of themselves. In other words, Nancy argues that community is first and foremost an ontological condition. This is the fundamental state he later describes as “being singular plural.”³²⁰ As Nancy writes:

Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an originary or ontological ‘sociality’ that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being (the *zoon politikon* is secondary to this community).³²¹

For Nancy, then, the community concept gets transformed into a flat ontology, one that includes the human and which remains accessible to the human by means of an analytic of finitude, on the one hand, and through our passion for sharing experiences, on the other hand.

³¹⁹ Nancy, *Inoperative*, 26, 31.

³²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³²¹ Nancy, *Inoperative*, 28.

It would seem that a host of political theoretical concerns appear almost immediately. After all, at least at first glance, the flat ontology in question looks like it lacks the conceptual verticality necessary for making normative claims and judgments. However, although Nancy disavows any specific normative political program, he does provide us with the means to dissolve the concern in question.³²² Principally, Nancy notes that while the radical finitude characteristic of human (or animal, as he clarifies in an aside) experience negates the possibility of what he calls “communion.” Communion refers to the organic self-identity of the group or the individual. It is, in fact, this constitutive negation that makes *communication* possible, instead.

As Nancy writes:

In place of such a communion, there is communication. Which is to say, in very precise terms, that finitude itself is nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it exists as communication. In order to designate this singular mode of appearing, this specific phenomenality, which is no doubt more originary than any other (for it could be that the world appears to the community, not to the individual), we would need to be able to say that finitude co-appears or compears (*com-parait*) and can only compear: in this formulation we would need to hear that finite being always presents itself “together,” hence severally; for finitude always presents itself in being-in-common and as this being itself [...] communication consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the interpellation that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common – precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being.³²³

Here again we see the depth of Nancy’s indebtedness to Bataille. After all, for Bataille, the alternative communitarianism he seeks after roots its sense of community precisely in the difficulty, negativity, and risk latent to all communicative acts, to the very conditions of possibility for communication as such. As Bataille writes, “With temptation, if I can put it this

³²² A detailed engagement with the question of the normative in Nancy can be found in Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 152-80.

³²³ Nancy, *Inoperative*, 28-29.

way, we're crushed by twin pincers of nothingness. By not communicating, we're annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life. By communicating we likewise risk being destroyed."³²⁴

In a number of ways, Esposito caps off and culminates this alternative communitarian tradition by fundamentally transforming it. He culminates it insofar as he positions his explicit dialogues with Bataille and Nancy as only part of a very detailed engagement with the Western philosophical tradition. As with many other European philosophers (like Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida), Esposito thinks that our conceptual or philosophical frameworks and our political predicaments are intimately intertwined. Accordingly, much of his work involves close, deconstructive readings of major intellectual figures. However, his project is principally conceptual, and I intend to treat it as such, bypassing for the moment most of his historical interlocutions.

5.3 *COMMUNITAS AND IMMUNITAS*

So what is Esposito's diagnostic project? In general, Esposito argues that, since the advent of early modernity (i.e., since approximately the 1600s), a series of philosophical mistakes are contributing to, or even producing, a biopolitical trajectory that is destroying our bodies and bodies politic alike. Unlike Agamben, who characterizes our biopolitical condition in entirely negative terms – for him, biopolitics always leads to thanatopolitics – Esposito thinks that a reconstructed affirmative biopolitics offers us the only means to fix our condition.³²⁵

³²⁴ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press) 24. See also Alphonso Lingis, "Contact and Communication" in *Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, 119-32.

³²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1998) for the start of his own diagnostic project.

Esposito begins by deconstructing the seemingly familiar concept of community.³²⁶ Typically, political theorists who talk about community use community as a name for collective identity or for a group of people. At stake for these theorists is creed, heritage, membership, or some other shared property. To be part of a community, then, means that some element of your own identity contributes to, or is constituted by, the community of which you are a part. As discussed briefly above, Anglophone political theorists in particular have developed various forms of communitarianism that operationalize and rely upon these terms.

To the contrary, much like Bataille, Esposito argues that a community is not a group at all. He claims that examining the word more closely allows us to see that mainstream communitarians miss what the community concept actually means. To sharpen this distinction, as well as to capture his transformation of the term's meaning and to preserve its hopefully defamiliarizing effect, Esposito substitutes the term *communitas* (from the Latin *con-* and *munus*, meaning "with" the *munus*, see below for a discussion of this latter term) for community.

For Esposito, *communitas* names a general ontological condition. We do not *have* a community. Instead, we are always already *in* community with others, with each other, and with everything else in existence. This means that, in the context of *communitas*, the very concept of identity starts to break down. After all, if a collective or individual identity is entirely and irreducibly in common with all other identities, then operable distinctions between identities become impossible. As Esposito writes:

[...] community isn't an entity, nor is it a collective subject, nor a totality of subjects, but rather is the relation that makes them no longer individual subjects because it closes them off from their identity with a line, which traversing them, alters them: it is the "with," the "between," and the threshold where they meet in a point of contact that brings them into relation with others to the degree to which it separates them from themselves.³²⁷

³²⁶ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

³²⁷ Ibid., 139.

Esposito means that the condition he calls *communitas* is a negative condition of disruption and finitude that abuts and penetrates everyone. Existing means existing in a commons from which “there is no away,” to borrow a phrase commonly heard in environmentalist circles, for the commons in question constitutes absolutely everything, all knotted together. There is no such thing as an identity that cannot be decomposed into its constituents, or that does not depend necessarily upon dark and seemingly alien materials. We are made of strange, often uncooperative matter that is not our own. Even our cellular composition is mosaical.³²⁸ Considered in isolation, this negative condition easily can appear quite threatening. After all, we come to *communitas* with a particular sense of identity, a sense of ourselves that this concept proceeds to challenge and imperil. Esposito captures the insight as follows:

[...] the community is never a point of arrival but always one of departure. Indeed, it is the departure itself toward that which doesn't belong to us and can never belong to us. For this reason *communitas* is utterly incapable of producing effects of commonality, of association, and of communion. It doesn't keep us warm, and it doesn't protect us; on the contrary, it exposes us to the most extreme of risks: that of losing, along with our individuality, the borders that guarantee its inviolability with respect to the other [...]³²⁹

However, Esposito argues, it is impossible to understand what *communitas* really means without introducing a second concept, which he calls *immunitas* (from the Latin *in-* and *munus*, meaning “apart from” or “exempt from” the *munus*).³³⁰ The two concepts are reciprocally dependent, which is to say that each necessitates the other and that neither can function alone. For Esposito, if *communitas* names our general ontological condition of constitutive relationality,

³²⁸ Carl Zimmer, “Every Cell in Your Body Has the Same DNA. Except It Doesn’t,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2018, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/21/science/mosaicism-dna-genome-cancer.html>.

³²⁹ Esposito, *Communitas*, 140.

³³⁰ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (New York: Polity Press, 2011).

then *immunitas* names an immanent dynamic that describes how identity forms under such conditions in the first place. Esposito is very clear that the dynamic he calls *immunitas* can produce one of two possible outcomes, which is to say, one of two modes of identity formation.

The first mode of identity formation both constitutes and intensifies the condition of pathological modernity with which Esposito is so concerned in his political theory. In general, Esposito argues that identity formation only happens immunologically. Therefore, much depends on how we understand immunological processes. Historically – and, although this history still inflects the theory of immunology, it appears to be contested increasingly in the face of an empirical paradigm shift from the self-nonself theory (originating with Frank M. Burnet) to the continuity theory – the immune system was understood as a means of differentiation between “self” and “other” (i.e., non-self) bodies.³³¹ According to this older logic, the immune system enables the formation and survival of its host body by means of asserting or preserving functional integrity against incursions of pathogenic exteriority. Likewise, albeit more abstractly, in this first mode, identities are formed by violently excluding everything classified as other and by preventing any further incursions.

There is a problem with this older understanding of immunological function, however.³³² If existence is irreducibly communitarian – that is to say, if Esposito’s *communitas* accurately characterizes our general ontological condition – then this first mode of identity formation ultimately produces a kind of auto-immune disorder. This is because the very conditions of identity formation get misperceived as a threat that must be eliminated in order for identity to form and endure.

³³¹ See Thomas Pradeu, *The Limits of the Self: Immunology and Biological Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) for an empirical and philosophical review of this paradigm shift.

³³² Alfred I. Tauber, *Immunity: The Evolution of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) for an extensive conceptual argument to this effect.

The origin of this misperception is precisely the apparent threat that *communitas* poses to the concept of identity. For *communitas* threatens to undermine this very concept of identity, so this immunitarian mode premises itself on the elimination of *communitas*. Red alert; destroy the threat. The irony here is that what gets perceived as a threat is actually a condition of possibility even for the very threat response itself. Hence, *in extremis*, we must destroy the world in order to save the world. For Esposito, this auto-immunitarian spiral generates the negative biopolitics of pathological modernity – and, starting with the biopolitics of Nazi Germany, the apogee of a negative biopolitics, Esposito provides numerous contemporary examples ranging from abortion politics and “humanitarian” bombardments to immigration policy reforms and mass inter-ethnic rapes.

The second mode of identity formation, which Esposito only begins to sketch in his final arguments, entails the partial incorporation of disruption, or of potentially disruptive elements, into a mode of finite, porous existence that welcomes the exchange relation such incorporation initiates. This second mode produces identities as sites of passage and traversal, acknowledging that resilient identities form only on the basis of a critical openness. By refusing to figure motility or penetration as pure threat, the auto-immunitarian spiral sketched above stalls before it even starts. While Esposito emphasizes the degree to which the first mode of identity formation is passive and reactive, the second mode is interactive and productive. As he writes, on his view,

[...] the body is understood as a functioning construct that is open to continuous exchange with its surrounding environment. Moreover [...] the immune system may very well be the driving force behind this exchange. [...] the immune system cannot be reduced to the simple function of rejecting all things foreign. If anything, the immune system must be interpreted as an internal resonance chamber, like the diaphragm through which difference, as such, engages and traverses us. As we were saying: once its negative power has been removed, the immune is not the enemy of the common, but rather something more complex that implicates and stimulates the common. The full significance of this necessity, but also its possibility, still eludes us.³³³

³³³ Esposito, *Immunitas*, 17-18.

In other words, the second mode of identity formation blocks the destructive incursion of its own total dissolution, but it does this only by producing identity as a continuous process of structured responsivity to the world around it. Accordingly, it becomes increasingly evident that not all incursions are destructive, or even disruptive. Indeed, many incursions are benign, or even beneficial. If we turn to empirical immunology, the analogy becomes even more apparent. The processual continuity of immunitary identity entails both immune responses to so-called “self” components (e.g., the auto-regulation of T lymphocytes and the consumption of dead cells) and the lack of immune response to so-called “nonself” components.³³⁴ Identity that is not premised upon its own self-consumption is always an ongoing negotiation between whole hosts of agencies in motion. Such negotiations allow collective and individual identities to emerge and to navigate the novel and turbulent circumstances that life in a processual world entails.

We can also consider a parallel example, namely, that of the real function of geographical, political, and social borders. In a recent monograph, Thomas Nail argues that we misunderstand what borders are at an ontological level when we characterize them merely in terms of imporous dividers.³³⁵ Borders divide things, yes, but they are also unique sites of connection and transit that participate of both adjacent entities (e.g., states). In this regard, it might be useful to describe borders as political or social ontological ecotones. Accordingly, borders provide boundaries that indicate the extension and shape of a place, but they also force

³³⁴ Thomas Pradeu and Edgardo D. Carosella, “The Self Model and the Conception of Biological Identity in Immunology,” *Biology and Philosophy* 21:2 (2006): 235-52 point not only to the phenomenon of chimerism, but also the extensive tolerance of bacteria, certain parasites, the developing fetus, and grafts. One also recalls Esposito’s reading in *Immunitas* of Jean-Luc Nancy’s discussion of his experience of living with a heart transplant, as well as the degree to which both discussions reflect Donna Haraway’s seminal argument to the effect that the material site of the body is always already a site of distribution, transfer, and transit. See her “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1:1 (1989): 3-43.

³³⁵ Thomas Nail, *A Theory of the Border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

that place into relational adjacency with the place next door. As Nail points out, a border simultaneously divides and provides a site through which the meaningful circulation of bodies, goods, symbols, and weathers transpires. A step might be just a step, but a step across a border may trigger all sorts of material and political consequences. Again, we see the immunitarian dynamic made manifest in the figure of the border insofar as the border demarcates the outside of a territory by means of including its own limits. As such, we return to the robustly immunitarian insight that conceiving an identity appears to require the operationalization of these insights into finitude and porosity as the conditions of possibility for identity in the first place. As Esposito writes:

[...] rather than acting as a barrier for selecting and excluding elements from the outside world, [the immunitarian dynamic] acts as a sounding board for the presence of the world inside the self. The self is no longer a genetic constant or a pre-established repertoire, but rather a construct determined by a set of dynamic factors, compatible groupings, fortuitous encounters; nor is it a subject or an object, but rather, a principle of action [...] Its boundaries do not lock it up inside a closed world; on the contrary, they create its margin, a delicate and problematic one to be sure, but still permeable in its relationship with that which, while still located outside it, from the beginning traverses and alters it. We could say that, contrary to all the military interpretations, the immune system is itself the instrument of this alteration – even if, or precisely because, it seems to resist the alterations: every time it goes into action, the body is modified with respect to how it was before.³³⁶

5.4 THE *MUNUS*

Recall that Esposito partially warrants his arguments about *communitas* and *immunitas* by critically reconstructing the etymology of the words in question. Although he begins *Communitas* with an etymological discussion, it is worth revisiting this argument because there he plants the seeds of a deeper, stronger argument about the force of normativity that never fully blossoms in his later work. Or, rather, he never makes the normative consequences of his

³³⁶ Esposito, *Immunitas*, 169.

argument entirely clear, except in terms of introducing changes into our philosophical vocabulary. However substantive these changes may be, I think there are more radical conclusions to be drawn from his claims.

So: “*communitas*” comes to us from the Latin *con-* and *munus*, meaning “with” the *munus*. “*Immunitas*” comes to us from the Latin *in-* and *munus*, meaning “apart from” or “exempt from” the *munus*. It should be evident by now that this latter term – the *munus* – occupies a privileged position for Esposito, although it admits of no direct translation into either English or Italian.

Specifically, Esposito characterizes the *munus* in terms of its relation to the terms *donum*, *officio*, and *onus*. Accordingly, the *munus* – a term which originates from the ancient Roman legal tradition – connotes a gift, an office, and an obligation.³³⁷ It names a rather complex form of normativity. I say it is complex because the normative weight of the *munus* is not conceived merely as a burden, but as a possibilizing constraint. It is an *onus*, yet not an onerous one. Recall that constraints block some possibilities, but it is only by blocking some possibilities that any possibilities appear whatsoever. In other words, because we are subject to the *munus*, we are able to act meaningfully – that is to say, normatively and specifically – in the first place. Meaningful action is normatively-laden because it is specific. By selecting specific pathways of decision and action, we are irreducibly committed to various normative principles and standards, whether or not we are consciously aware of them, or can provide a coherent account of them.

Hence, the element of *donum*, or a “gift” that we are given precisely by virtue of existing as the creatures we are. This gift refers both to the ontological plenitude of plurality that makes possible our emergence and to the given fact of individuated subjectivity as such. In other words,

³³⁷ Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

we are given our subjectivity precisely as ecologically conditioned, embodied subjects. In this regard, the *donum* reflects the double aspect structure of the gift form first described by Marcel Mauss in his *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950). There, Mauss writes that “in theory [gifts] are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.”³³⁸ The relationship between ontological plenitude – that is to say, the processual conditions of creative darkness – and individuated subjectivity evidences this double structure. On the one hand, there is the voluntary aspect of the free subject’s emergence from the dark background of nature. Free subjects are vomited forth by nature. On the other hand, there is the framework of irreducible normativity that environs and structures the subject as such.

Accordingly, in being the creatures we are, subject to the *munus*, we also necessarily occupy an *officio*, an “ontological office” or a modally constrained position that forces us to bear normative obligations. (Inversely to the *donum* of existence, consider *dono*, or the gift that one gives without remuneration.) In other words, to be a subject entails action, and taking actions requires the intervention of normative decision-making. Being a subject means being forced to reckon with the freedoms and trials that necessarily appear in the space of normative reason. This is the obligatory aspect of the *donum*, namely, the normatively-laden *officio* of the subject position.

Etymologically, then, both *communitas* and *immunitas* depend upon the *munus*. Esposito takes this to be philosophically significant in the following way. On the one hand, the *munus* informs *communitas* insofar as our general ontological condition is marked by an obligation (*onus*) that necessarily accompanies the formation of identity. There is an obligation incurred by a collective or individual subject when that subject comes into existence. Bearing this obligation

³³⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950), trans. W. D. Hall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

effectively appoints the subject in question to an “office,” which is to say, a position in which decisions are normatively-laden and significant. This places the subject at a certain nexus. It is both the recipient of a gift (*donum*) and obliged to give (*dono*), although the relationship here between the two forms of gift can never be equivalent.³³⁹ It can never be equivalent because the contributions of a subject can never match the fullness of the conditions of her own emergence. You can’t give the whole world back to itself.

At the same time, the *munus* informs *immunitas* insofar as it is only as an identity – that is to say, a subject – that the gift (*donum*) takes shape, that the obligation (*onus*) can be borne, and that the office (*officio*) can be occupied. In other words, normative dimensions of the *munus* obtain only because immunological processes produce subjects to whom normative constraints can apply. *Communitas* “without” *immunitas* would describe an oceanic, Parmenidean universe in which there are no identities at all – what G. W. F. Hegel calls “the night in which all cows are black,” that is to say, a condition so all-inclusive that any material or meaningful differentiation is lost within it. Conversely, as we have seen, *immunitas* “without” *communitas* generates auto-immunitarian and self-consuming feedback loops that destroy their own conditions of existence.

What all this means, I think, can be summarized in ordinary language as follows. Esposito thinks that merely coming into existence necessarily entails normative obligations. We are thrown into the space of normative reason precisely by virtue of being the ecologically conditioned subjects that we are, composed by and entangled with our companion ecologies in the dark, striated domain of nature. Perhaps existence is normatively indifferent until creatures like us arrive. Because existence encompasses everything that is, we are inextricably a part of it, but because of the operation of immunological processes, we experience ourselves as apart from

³³⁹ Lorna Weir, “Roberto Esposito’s political philosophy of the gift,” *Angelaki* 18:3 (2013): 155-67 and Thomas F. Tierney, “Roberto Esposito’s ‘Affirmative Biopolitics’ and the Gift,” *Angelaki* 33:2 (2016): 53-76.

it, as well. Only immunological processes make it possible to be simultaneously a part and apart. It is certainly true that we come into existence only because existence precedes us. Therefore, we are radically dependent upon the irreducible remainder of existence. Accordingly, it is merely because we exist – and recall that existence is always singular, that one exists in a certain and specific way, not another – that we are subject to normative obligations in the first place.

5.5 ESPOSITO’S AFFIRMATIVE BIOPOLITICS

Ultimately, Esposito thinks that the consequences of misunderstanding the relationship between *communitas* and *immunitas* are severe, for the immunitarian logic of pathological modernity directs auto-immunitary mechanisms against *communitas* as such. As he writes, “Modern individuals truly become that, the perfect individual, the ‘absolute’ individual, bordered in such a way that they are isolated and protected, but only if they are freed in advance from the ‘debt’ [i.e., the *munus*] that binds them one to the other [i.e., the condition of *communitas*].”³⁴⁰ However, because the two concepts are inextricably intertwined, his diagnosis of pathological modernity is that it has produced what is effectively an auto-immune disorder in political terms.

Esposito thinks that modern politics instantiates a kind of negative feedback loop, then, one that stems from conceptual misunderstandings that have devastating material and political effects. However, from this rather dire position, there stems the conceptual possibility of what he calls an affirmative biopolitics. Affirmative biopolitics takes its cue from the generative and vital bio-logic of the body itself. Admittedly, Esposito can be somewhat allusive (and elusive) about what precisely this means. It seems that Esposito wants to argue to that, if we understand properly how bodies relate to their environments, and to themselves, we can retrieve a paradigm

³⁴⁰ Esposito, *Communitas*, 13.

of bionormativity that does not result in auto-immunity and the negative feedback loop in question.

It is not that Esposito makes a simple comparison between healthy bodies and healthy polities, although he does belong to the genealogy of political theorists who draw such analogies. Rather, he wants to elucidate the conceptual and theoretical definitions and logics that comprise the immunitary paradigm altogether. Recall that “immunity” starts as a Roman legal and political concept, one which by following a crooked developmental path becomes a technical term in the biomedical sciences, ultimately giving rise to the discipline of immunology in the 19th century).³⁴¹ Esposito wants to recuperate the term as a political theoretical one, but he wants it to be informed by a vital sensibility of biological function. Hence why what he wants to make possible is an affirmative biopolitics, one that attends to conditions of function, health, and vitality without falling into the determinism or reductionism characteristic of pathological modernity.

Furthermore, he claims that the very worst effects of negative biopolitics operate on the basis of a misrecognition of the biopolitical as such – a maladjusted and vicious relation between *communitas* and *immunitas* that directs the forces of life against life itself. This is the condition that Esposito characterizes in terms of a global nihilism. “Nihilism and community mutually exclude each other,” he writes, directing our attention toward the “war” on community that an overly intensified immunitarian dynamic entails.³⁴² Consider how this negative feedback loop intensifies in the context of the ecological crisis. Here, we respond to the intensification of the ecological crisis not by scaling back development or extractivism, but by accelerating these trajectories. It is as if we unconsciously believe that the only solution to the effects of the

³⁴¹ Arthur M. Silverstein, *A History of Immunology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

³⁴² Esposito, *Communitas*, 135.

ecological crisis is to redouble our efforts.³⁴³ The “solution” to the problem ends up perpetuating the very terms that produce the problem initially. It is therefore no surprise that the problem is getting worse.

By contrast, Esposito argues that an affirmative biopolitics requires the reconstruction of our negative biopolitics in such a way as to correct this deep misrecognition. By working through the negative biopolitical operationalization that he characterizes as the politics of nihilism, or pathological modernity – which culminates in Nazi biopolitics – Esposito seeks to transform our understanding of biopolitics. As such, Esposito seeks to recuperate an affirmative biopolitics grounded in bionormativity itself. Esposito does this by carefully reconstructing the biopolitics of Nazism, endeavoring to answer the question of how the auto-immunitarian dynamic of pathological modernity climaxes in this historical realization. He concludes that Nazism operates philosophically on the basis of three conceptual formations or dispositives: degeneration, eugenics, and genocide.³⁴⁴ In this context, the absolute norming of life, that is to say, the identification of specific normative rankings with the natural order itself, drives a theory of degeneration, which poses the central problematic for Nazi biopolitics. Degeneration leads to eugenics by means of the identification of the body as the embodiment of a norm. Ultimately, genocide becomes the strategy of choice, ranging from the extermination of degenerate bodies to the preemptive suppression of birth, intended to prevent the continuation of degenerate strains.

For Esposito, these three conceptual formations are the philosophical inversions, or perversions, of three affirmative biopolitical principles. Accordingly, a major purpose of his genealogical reconstruction of thanatopolitics is to deconstruct each formation in order to invert and recuperate its vital meaning. In this regard, Esposito is trying to recuperate bionormativity

³⁴³ Vaclav Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

³⁴⁴ Esposito, *Bios*, 110-94.

itself from its thanatopolitical capture, from its negative biopolitical operationalization. As he asks, “How can this terrible thanatopolitical *dispositif* be finally broken? Or, better perhaps, how can we overturn its logic into a politics of life?”³⁴⁵ Ultimately, he argues that each conceptual formation admits of an inversion or a transformation that frees it up for use.

First, the absolute norming of life that makes possible the theory of degeneration becomes instead a process of reciprocal immanence. As he writes, “norm and life cannot mutually presuppose one another because they are part of a single dimension in continuous becoming.”³⁴⁶ Drawing upon engagements with Gilles Deleuze, Georges Canguilhem, Gilbert Simondon, and Baruch Spinoza, Esposito argues that the co-incidence of norm and life means that neither can be asserted ruthlessly over the other. Norms exist “not *over* life nor *beginning from* life, but *in* life, which is to say in the biological constitution of the living organism.”³⁴⁷ Normativity is “the immanent impulse of life.”³⁴⁸

Regarding the identification of the body as the embodiment of a norm, Esposito contrasts what he terms the double enclosure of the body characteristic of Nazi biopolitics – namely, the total identification of the subject with the body’s extensionality and the total identification of that body as an extension of the German ethnic and national body politic – with what Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others call a philosophy of the flesh.³⁴⁹ Recall (from Chapter 2) that Merleau-Ponty focuses on the fact that material embodiment is something that *takes place* – it takes place *in* a place, namely, the body’s environs. The flesh is Merleau-Ponty’s term for the entirety of the

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 184.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 185.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 186.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 194.

³⁴⁹ Although Esposito does not emphasize this, it is worth noting the degree to which Merleau-Ponty is engaged in a close reading of Schelling in his attempt to develop precisely an alternative, Schellingian philosophy of nature. See especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

immanent distribution of the sensible, which is to say, existence as such, both “my flesh,” or the body in its lived experience, and “the flesh of the world” as one continuum that preserves and produces discontiguous entitative singularity precisely by virtue of seamless continuity. Merleau-Ponty writes, “my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world.”³⁵⁰ This seamless contiguity that is the flesh of the world does not efface the singularity or specificity of lived experience or personality. Accordingly, Esposito notes, “*flesh* doesn’t refer at all to an interiorization of the body, but if anything to its exteriorization in another body.”³⁵¹ This explodes the restrictive transcription of the body as the mere vessel of a specific norm and, instead, opens up the site of the body as a somatic landscape both generating and traversable by normativity.

Last, Esposito inverts the conceptual formation of the preemptive suppression of birth intended to terminate normatively prescribed forms of life by means of an extensive engagement with the conceptual and material conditions of birth itself. Working through Arendt’s conceptualization of the political as grounded fundamentally in natality – “Inasmuch as man had a beginning (and therefore is himself a beginning), he is the condition of beginning something new, of giving life to a common world [...] a beginning that repeats itself an infinite number of times” – Esposito grounds the eventality of birth in a Simondian ontogenetic framework.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 248, emphasis in original.

³⁵¹ Esposito, *Bios*, 163.

³⁵² Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, trans. Thomas LaMarre (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012). Esposito quotes the following passage from Simondon’s *L’individuation psychique et collective* (1989):

The individual concentrates in himself the dynamic that gives birth to him and which perpetuates the first operation in a continuous individuation; to live is to perpetuate a birth that is permanent and relative. It isn’t sufficient to define the living as an organism. The living is an organism on the basis of the first individuation; but it can live only if it is an organism that organizes and is organized through and across

Esposito argues that “Each step in a [developmental] phase, every individuation, is a birth on a different level [...] so that one could say that birth isn’t a phenomenon of life, but life is a phenomenon of birth” [i.e., natality, read as a metaphysical principle of immanent and variegated productivity].³⁵³ Therefore, by suturing Arendt and Simondon together and thus identifying something like a natal transindividuality within nature itself, Esposito concludes that birth, understood properly, cannot be preemptively suppressed insofar as it is part of the ongoing natural process of life, rather than merely one moment in the biological expression of an atomized body.

5.6 ECONORMATIVITY

In the foregoing sections, I reconstruct Esposito’s project in purposefully partial terms. Indeed, I endeavor to abstract the structure of his argumentation from the historical and philosophical context in which he works it out. For example, in *Communitas*, Esposito articulates himself by means of relatively close readings of Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger, and Bataille, as well as subsidiary figures like Elias Canetti, René Girard, and Simone Weil. In *Immunitas*, his readings deconstruct traditions ranging from contemporary debates in political theology to Helmuth Plessner’s philosophical anthropology. Esposito’s engagements are neither irrelevant nor uninteresting, but there is a structural form – a conceptual skeleton – hiding under the deconstructive flesh.

time. The organization of the organism is the result of a first individuation that can be called absolute. But the latter more than life is the condition of life; it is the condition of that perpetual birth that is life. (*Bios*, 187)

³⁵³ Ibid., 181.

My intention, then, is to excavate this structural form in order to put it to a somewhat different use. I want to make the skeleton dance a different dance. This is what I have called *the work of salvage* – that is to say, the recovery of elements from the deep in order to build new things. However, a salvage project is not just about stripping down something old in order to make something new, for a repurposing must always integrate functional elements from what is being salvaged into the new product. In this regard, the world is made of salvage.

As discussed above, elements of metaphysical abstraction in Esposito cause him to diagnose pathological modernity in almost entirely philosophical terms. His gestures to concrete political situations are intended as comparatively brief case studies that exemplify the auto-immunitarian spiral in which we find ourselves. To understand our condition, according to Esposito, we must trace the conceptual slippages by which *communitas* and *immunitas* have become so misunderstood.

Contrarily, my basic claim is that we can transform Esposito's diagnostic project into a more powerful and useful set of political theoretical tools if we reformulate elements of it in relation to the ecological crisis. Esposito constructs a theory of pathological modernity. He then advocates an inversion of the negative biopolitics it produces into a positive biopolitics that draws insight and vitality from the register of the biological itself, freed from malformed assumptions and imperatives. However, he ultimately fails, forgets, or refuses to place the biological in relation to the ecological, which is a problem insofar as we cannot actually study or theorize one without the other. On the one hand, this replicates a bias common to the life sciences throughout the twentieth century, although it is conceptually curious how the discourse of biology possibly ever could have conceived of a body apart from its ecological or

environmental context (whether that context is a forest or a laboratory, a city or the deep).³⁵⁴ On the other hand, the capaciousness of his concept of *communitas* immediately suggests an ecological reading to me. In this regard, I suggest that we expand and build upon Esposito's diagnostic project rather than chastising or correcting it. What Esposito offers is a starting place for the formulation of a new biopolitics that encompasses the ecological rather than bracketing it off for whatever reason.

So what does this adaptation of Esposito look like, and what does it give us? To start, we can translate *communitas* into the terms of a process philosophy of nature. The irreducibly communitarian condition in which we exist as living bodies, as collective and individual subjects, is nature. We emerge in nature only by means of immunological processes that make the formation of identity possible. Think of *communitas* in terms of nature; think of *immunitas* in terms of politics. As I argue, we need to reformulate how we understand nature and politics in relation to each other if we are to break out of our contemporary gridlock. However, because we respond to our radical dependence as if the companion ecologies upon which we depend were a threat, we, in effect, have institutionalized an auto-immune response. Our politics – *our planetary civilization* – is trapped in an auto-immunitarian spiral. This is what I have been calling the ecological crisis. Of course, why we have decided to respond to the conditions of our existence in this way poses its own set of questions.

One approach – indeed, the approach Esposito favors – is to reconstruct the history of our philosophical errors and how to rectify these errors. However, such a reconstruction ultimately

³⁵⁴ Contemporary developments in postgenomics appear to be starting to address this division on numerous fronts. See *Postgenomics: Perspectives on Biology after the Genome*, eds. Sarah S. Richardson and Hallam Stevens (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), but also Maurizio Meloni, "Disentangling life: Darwin, selectionism, and the postgenomic return of the environment," *Studies in History & Philosophy of Biological & Biomedical Sciences* 62 (2017): 10-19.

requires a warrant, and that warrant needs to have normative force in order to have any theoretical purchase. In other words, I think we need to be able to make strong normative claims about how we ought to respond to the ecological crisis. If we cannot do this, then all that remains is the sorry work of documenting our lamentable trudge toward extinction – and perhaps huddling together for warmth as the event horizon approaches. Luckily for us, Esposito's reflections on the *munus* foreshadow what such a normative response looks like.

Remember that Esposito thinks that merely coming into existence necessarily entails normative obligations. Although he never expresses himself in these terms, this suggests the possibility of a new normative naturalism. My intention is to take this suggestion and sharpen it as ruthlessly as possible.

First, to make this claim that merely coming into existence necessarily entails normative obligations firmly situates normativity within nature, but without making the mistake of simply identifying the natural and the normative with each other. In other words, like the subject – indeed, *with* the subject, in the very form of the subject – *normativity emerges*. Conceiving normativity in this manner lets us avoid the trap of simply inscribing our ideology into the stones, or into our *Gattungswesen*, at least in the way it typically has been misunderstood. Hence the newness of this new naturalism. I am making a claim for novelty here not because there is no precedent for such a naturalism, but because of the degree to which the naturalism under discussion breaks with our common theoretical assumptions (e.g., about nature and politics).

Second, the warrant for this claim is ontological, not deontological, intersubjective, or utilitarian. This is why it is a genuinely naturalistic claim. The warrant is ontological insofar as the source of obligation is the structure of our own existence in relation to existence as such. Translating Esposito's terms (*munus*, *onus*, *donum*, *officio*), we are subject to normative

obligations because of our constitutively relational – that is to say, ecological – position as emergent living bodies, as pieces of places, composite places that move alongside, through, and with us. This position is one of radical dependence, rather than dominion, and this dependence is materially discernable. We are environed and made possible only by our companion ecologies: “individuality in organisms emerges, paradoxically, as a consequence of plurality.”³⁵⁵ This is an implication of being apart by virtue of being a part.

Third, the normative naturalism in question does not prescribe mere caution or humility, as do numerous environmental moralisms, but action. This is one major area where Esposito’s recommendations do not suffice. Esposito wants us to see differently by philosophizing differently, which ostensibly yields different programs to execute. By contrast, I propose that only action – that is to say, political action – ultimately enables this transformation of our sight into properly ecological vision. As I write in Chapters 2 and 4, action is transformation. It remains true that the roots of action are passionate, but the cultivation of normative claims is no mere analytic exercise. Normative imperatives are to be felt; a sense of ontological obligation is a passionate force that can enliven and motivate.

Fourth, let me clarify the nature of the normative obligation in question: *Act revisably in such a way as to acknowledge and preserve the metabolic and vitalizing capacities of your conditions of existence.* Each of the principal terms here can be elaborated. Revisability means that actions and programs update when new knowledges or modes of knowing appear. Action refers to the intentional programs by means of which collective and individual subjects express themselves agentially in the world, and such expression entails ontological alterations in the order of things. To acknowledge means to be informed affectively in such a way that affections,

³⁵⁵ Gregory W. Schneider and Russell Winslow, “Parts and Wholes: The Human Microbiome, Ecological Ontology, and the Challenges of Community,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 57:2 (2014): 209.

affinities, and attachments flow from contact with real conditions. To preserve means not to perpetuate mere sameness, but to conserve, experiment with, and stimulate material powers of alteration, resilience, and self-renewal. Here the methodological concept of wild pragmatism recurs. Metabolic capacities refer to the fact that our conditions of existence evolve and shift under conditions of constrained chaotic interaction. And, finally, vitalizing capacities refer to the ongoing emergence of ontological novelty that, in turn, generates only further novelty.

In other words, “accepting the *munus*” means that we are obligated to care about, and to care for, our thoroughly ecological conditions of existence. Recall that care refers to the compulsion to act, to disturb, to organize, and to respond. Care is a compulsion that impels action. Refusing the *munus* – which is to say, rejecting the *donum* of existence, abdicating the *officio* of the subject, and ignoring the normative *onus* it levies upon us – is precisely what produces and sustains the ecological crisis. Accordingly, we can say that there is a normative obligation we must fulfil. As a civilization, we are facing a rather dramatic disjunction: *Accept the munus, or die*. This is also a very practical reason for undertaking such an obligation. The earth is dying, and if we do not alter our path and ourselves, then we will die along with it. There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new modes of action and association.

This new normative naturalism is highly minimal, but it grounds itself on a conception of *econormativity*. Captured and summarized in the imperative above, *econormativity* flows from and synchronizes with the alternative process philosophy of nature I provide. The role of *econormativity* is not to outline a discrete program for action (as if to say, do this thing, or that thing), or a platform for institutional political reform. Instead, it levies a philosophical and theoretical claim upon us. This claim requires that we reconfigure our sense of normative obligation such that it operates only and precisely on the basis of our status as free subjects who

emerge only within the ecological, material conditions of nature. We are subjects of creative darkness. What this means for politics is that this alternative concept of nature can no longer be omitted from political reason at the most fundamental level. Nature does not exist *for* us, yet it is the domain of politics. And politics therefore necessarily involves nature as its ground and its referent. This means that our political theoretical categories and concepts must be reformed, as I have endeavored to do throughout this dissertation project. Hopefully, such reform can free up our affective and theoretical imaginations so as to generate new pathways of action and feeling. That endeavor, it seems to me, is the intervention of theory, and its success or failure is the gamble a theorist always makes.

CONCLUSION: SHOOTING A BLACK ELEPHANT

This project provides elements of an alternative process philosophy of nature intended to address, redescribe, and unsettle the affective and conceptual gridlock so characteristic of the ecological crisis. What I hope to have accomplished, then, is to have shown how this alternative process philosophy of nature, underwritten by the metaphor of nature as creative darkness, helps us adjust significantly how we theorize freedom, subjectivity, and normativity. These concepts and terms, in my view, are the sources and substance of the concept of the political as such. If we have no defensible or practical theory of freedom, then it immediately becomes unclear that free action is possible. Without the possibility of free action, then collective action – politics – ceases to be action at all. Instead, it becomes mere behavior or programmatic conduct, as action without freedom is reduced to chains of causally determined events. Likewise, on my view, politics implies a subject, for actions and decisions are enacted and exercised by means of subjectivity's free interventions in the world. As with freedom, if there is no subject – that is to say, no actor acting, or no agent for whom agendas and outcomes are at stake – then politics becomes gossamer. Finally, because politics is not a random walk, but, instead, an interactive agential field, some conception of normative obligation necessarily operates within, or even structures, that field.

There are three specific conclusions that follow productively from the foregoing theoretical interventions. In this regard, it is useful to reconsider the *econormative imperative* I propose above: Act revisably in such a way as to acknowledge and preserve the metabolic and vitalizing capacities of your conditions of existence. Each of the three conclusions in question refers to the three central terms I discuss above: freedom, subjectivity, and normativity.

First, the structure of the econormative imperative is such that it forecloses on certain misinterpretations or misuses of itself. For example, we might worry that the imperative could generate, imply, or sustain programs of systemic exclusionary or destructive action. If we are merely trying to preserve ourselves, then what is to stop our efforts from becoming domineering and even violent? After all, self-preservation is often associated with competition, conflict, desperation, and warfare. In this regard, we can turn to the features of the theory of freedom and evil I develop in Chapter 3. Recall that evil is an ontological operation. In other words, evil is something a subject *does*. It happens when a part of the whole is elevated willfully above the whole of which it is a part. A subject who chooses evil chooses to obliterate or obviate the relational web that makes freedom and subjectivity possible in the first place. Such a subject is destroying her own conditions of existence, or else the metabolic and vitalizing capacities of those conditions. Accordingly, the econormative imperative directs attention to those conditions and to the conceptual tools we use to describe, enact, and model those conditions.

Such a misinterpretation of the econormative imperative presupposes precisely the theory of the subject's ontological constitution that I seek to replace. As such, second, my theory of the ecologically conditioned subject both contributes to the formulation of the econormative imperative and benefits from it. It contributes to this formulation insofar as, if we take companion ecologies into account, then we cannot consider the subject at all, without considering its conditions of existence or possibility. This has profound consequences for how we think about decisional and strategic pathways moving forward. Perhaps one of the most common referents in economic, political, and psychological discourses today is "self-interest," which signifies a bounded range of conceptual and practical possibilities, including choice, motivation, preference, and utility maximization. Traditionally, the concept of self-interest holds

constant a minimalist sense of the subject as some kind of atomic, singular agent who is, in principle, radically distinct or separable from all other agents.

If we were to accept or even register a sense of self conceived in terms of companion ecologies, however, then this would require us to reexamine what “self-interest,” in fact, could or must actually be. This is because if, in order to be a subject at all, the subject necessarily overlaps with and relies upon the dark background of ecological plurality, then “self-interest” must include that plurality within its purview, and the boundaries of selfhood need to be redrawn. It should be noted further that that this conclusion is not a moral appeal. Rather, it is an ontological consequence of the subject’s constitution and the immediate, practical relevance of that constitution for deciding upon actions and determining interests. If our selves not what we had assumed – but, instead, they are mobile complexes of companion ecologies that emerge within mosaics or networks of other companion ecologies – then how we determine our interests needs to be revisited in a serious way. Merely appealing to “self-interest” can no longer work conceptually as a diagnosis of the driving factors of the ecological crisis, nor as a reply or a solution to the crisis itself.

Finally, normativity itself is perhaps most fundamentally at stake in all of this. When we make political decisions – e.g., about action, compromise, exit, federation, prohibition, and other political operations – we do so on the basis of normative criteria, which is to say, on the basis of values that inform and structure the decisions in question. If we cannot reclaim or reconstruct a conception of normativity that enables us to respond directly and evaluatively to the ecological crisis, then we lose the ability even to say that the damage it is inflicting is bad or undesirable. Building upon the foregoing conceptual revisions – of nature, of freedom, of subjectivity – we are able to draw a further conclusion about normativity. This is the insight that

the emergence of the subject into existence necessarily entails or generates normative obligations. There is no such thing as a subject who exists non-normatively. At stake in its very existence are questions about action and decision, which is to say, about politics. Accordingly, every political theory implies and relies upon a philosophy of nature, regardless of how clearly or openly it articulates this fact. Likewise, every philosophy of nature cashes out into political theory.

Ultimately, the difficulty of undertaking a project such as this one – in which a strong program of redescription draws upon and refigures complex theoretical archives and formations in order to address an aspect of the ecological crisis – involves the inherent difficulty of shooting a black elephant. Dougald Hine and Vinay Gupta describe a black elephant as

an unholy union of two boardroom clichés: the Elephant in the Room, the thing which everyone knows is important, but no one will talk about; and the Black Swan, the hard-to-predict event which is outside the realm of normal expectations, but has enormous impact. The Black Elephant is an event which was quite foreseeable, which was in fact an Elephant in the Room, but which, after it happens, everyone will try to pass off as a Black Swan.³⁵⁶

A black elephant is a hybrid, then. It is both an event that takes place and a reaction formation that intends to help us avoid or circumscribe the event in question. There is some state of affairs that gets ignored effectively until it intrudes so visibly into the lifeworld of perception that it must be acknowledged. This state of affairs then gets disavowed. No one could have foreseen this! It is likened to a miserable miracle.

What is our black elephant, then? We know that the ecological crisis is materializing around us, like smoke in a burning building. It is even accelerating. Every day brings new dread

³⁵⁶ Dougald Hine and Vinay Gupta, “Black Elephants and skull jackets: a conversation with Vinay Gupta” in *Dark Mountain: Issue 1* (2011): 34. Thomas Friedman also discusses the term in his “Stampeding Black Elephants,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2014, accessed February 15, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/opinion/sunday/thomas-l-friedman-stampeding-black-elephants.html>.

reports from the front, with the most immediate consequences being exported to the Global South. In 2014, the World Wildlife Foundation and the Zoological Society of London declared that approximately 50% of the world's wildlife has been lost since the 1970s. June 2016 heralded the first mammalian extinction directly attributable to anthropogenic climate change. From 2015 to the present, Indonesian wildfires constitute one of the greatest environmental disasters of the 21st century. In addition to vast habitat destruction, each day of the burn emits as much carbon as the entire United States economy does in the same time span. Describing this, George Monbiot writes, "I've often wondered how the media would respond when eco-apocalypse struck. [...]" What I did not expect was that they would ignore it."³⁵⁷ And things are only getting worse.

In short, we live amidst an ecological crisis we have created, a slow-motion apocalypse the costs of which are incalculable. We know the crisis is happening, but we do not yet believe it. Our very political subjectivity seems to be founded upon our inability to register the crisis appropriately, because we apprehend nature and the political as constituting radically distinct or separable domains. If we believed it, we would have to become a different kind of subject altogether, subject to new obligations that break with old normative frameworks and imperatives. This is the elephant in the room, which does not enter our perceptual field, even as we keep rearranging all the furniture around it. As long as it can be ignored, we ignore it. Then, when the real intrudes upon us, we call it a black swan in a panic.

The ecological crisis is our black elephant.

We know how to address both an elephant in the room and a black swan. You acknowledge the elephant in the room by speaking its name, by pointing it out. To prepare for a

³⁵⁷ George Monbiot, "Indonesia is burning. So why is the world looking away?" *The Guardian*, October 30, 2015, accessed February 15, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/30/indonesia-fires-disaster-21st-century-world-media>.

black swan, you hedge strategically, cultivating resilience so as to endure unexpected disasters. Describing and redescribing problems is an absolutely integral part of addressing them. How we describe the problems we face affects or perhaps even generates the range of possible solutions. If we cannot produce redescrptions of the ecological crisis and how to derail and survive it, then we will continue to enact it unto our own extinction.

But how do you shoot a black elephant? To shoot a black elephant, first, treat it like an elephant in the room and speak its name, but do so continually with variations, like a firewatch sounding the alarm in multiple registers and tones. Consider the history of the emergency siren. Emergency sirens are designed to cut through acoustic environments dense with noise. To do this, they layer multiple sirens simultaneously at intersecting frequencies and rates. After all, a siren is intended to capture attention, to impel a response, and to signal the passageway to an exit.

Some propose that the difficulty of our task is “how to sound the alarm without being alarmist,” but I recommend otherwise.³⁵⁸ Intellectuals of all kinds ought to be much more emphatic about the ecological damage already incurred and the further risks entailed by anthropogenic climate change. To borrow the image from Walter Benjamin yet again, we must be as a fire alarm “that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.”³⁵⁹

To help a black elephant grow stronger, simply let it fade into the background.

To shoot a black elephant, however, turn toward it and endeavor to elucidate the underlying assumptions and conditions that generate and sustain such disavowal or imperception as leads to one, as has led us to the unfolding catastrophe of our present. This is exceptionally

³⁵⁸ Paul Hoggett, “Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 16:3 (2011): 262.

³⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism” (1929), *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 239.

difficult to do for the ecological crisis because there is too much illumination already. Even as we accelerate the crisis, we already speak about climate change and the environment a great deal. This is what it means to know that the crisis is happening, but not yet to believe it. We see, but we do not see. To see this crisis in the right way, it is necessary to “shine a black and obscuring light.” I borrow the phrase from James R. Martel, who writes of Benjamin’s hermeneutic method that it is like a black flashlight intended “to ward off the meaninglessness of the fetishisms that would otherwise form the content of our experience.”³⁶⁰

Hence, my turn in this project to the metaphor of creative darkness has multiple dimensions. Returning to key moments in the development of an alternative process philosophy of nature makes possible the existential task of imagining and occupying political forms of life that can survive and navigate the very difficult conditions of the present. To do this, I have shown how freedom and subjectivity can be situated within nature in ways that remove many of the snares and traps associated with theorizing nature and politics together. This allows me to resolve (or, rather, to dissolve) a false dilemma that has captured the Western theoretical imagination for a long time.

Creative darkness also gives us a new theoretical account of what nature is and of how the natural and the political can be intertwined productively and, perhaps, provocatively. If nature provides the material context in which freedom emerges, then nature makes collective action possible. Likewise, nature provides the ontological resources that shape imagination. If nature ecologically conditions the subject, then human subjectivity remains distinctive while retaining absolutely integral interconnections with other forms of life. Human subjectivity emerges out of a background of motile impersonality and cannot be abstracted therefrom.

³⁶⁰ James R. Martel, “Walter Benjamin’s Black Flashlight: Promoting Misreading over Persuasion to Decenter Textual and Political Authority,” *Political Theory* 43:5 (2015): 576.

Accordingly, normative political principles or strategies can be derived from this alternative conception of nature, and they speak directly to our manifold crises. Specifically, these principles or strategies intimate possible existential alternatives that can alter our condition so as to engender flourishing political ecologies rather than debilitated landscapes and devastated subjects.

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