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**April, 2010**

### **The New Mythology: Romanticism between Religion and Humanism**

Romanticism sought to create a new mythology capable of transforming the fragmented echoes of the Enlightenment into a symphonic age of scientific knowledge, *Bildung*, and political freedom. Uniting the discordant notes of reason and sensuous nature into a symbolic narrative of hope, this new mythology would beget a “new religion” which, unlike its predecessors, would be one that integrates humanism as it creates ideas whose aesthetic power would sanction the new normative values of this coming age. Such was the intoxicating vision advanced in the inadequately named but perfectly mystifying “Oldest System Program of German Idealism.” As Beiser concludes in *The Romantic Imperative*, due to the fact that this proposed marriage of religion’s divine necessities and the freedoms of humanism was never consummated, “the problems that so troubled the romantics ... are still with us”.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most serious problem still with us is that of our relationship to the natural world– a problem whose consequences are far from academic. As Frank has repeatedly warned us, to surrender the reality and value of our subjectivity and free-will to the deterministic vocabulary of the natural sciences will not only undermine the personal accountability that is the basis of moral behavior, but it will also lead to a “political fatalism” that

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative* (Harvard: 2003) 151. (Hereafter *RI*.)

damages the legitimacy of society's defining institutions.<sup>2</sup> More acute however, is the damage and destruction we are doing to nature itself. Schelling's warning that the course of modernity will lead to "the annihilation of nature" now seems very prescient.<sup>3</sup>

Accepting this warning as collateral, I would like us to extend to Schelling's thought a line of credit to support a very brief examination of how he treats these topics. For as I hope to show, the organic form of philosophy offered us by this most enigmatic member of the Jena Circle not only dissolves what Beiser calls 'the paradox of romantic metaphysics,' but the resources of his thought also provides a new mythology of nature whose utopian potential may, in formal terms, provide the emancipatory power required to liberate hope from cynicism, and thereby restore the creative possibilities of our future.

Beiser convincingly argues that the paradox of romantic metaphysics occurs when one attempts to integrate the opposing polarities of thought, be it idealism and realism, freedom and necessity, criticism and dogmatism, or Fichte and Spinoza. His account of how Herder's organic framework was effectively used to negotiate this integration of opposing forces goes a long way in restoring "the organic ... to its rightful place ... in romantic thinking" (*RI*, 133). Essential to this negotiation was Kant's dynamic categories of Relation, specifically that of *Wechselwirkung und Gemeinschaft*, since it is the non-linear dynamic of reciprocal causation that best accounts for the self-

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<sup>2</sup> Manfred Frank, „Ein Gespräch mit dem Tübinger Philosophen Manfred Frank über die Illusionen der Hirnforschung und ihre zweifelhaften politischen Folgen“, Von Ulrich Schnabel & Thomas Assheuer, *Die Zeit*, 29.8.2009. <http://www.zeit.de/2009/36/Hirnforschung>

<sup>3</sup> (F.W.J Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke (SW)* ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: 1856-1861) I/5, 274.

organizing of part and whole characteristic of organic life. When parsed through this category idealism and realism become parts of a larger whole that is sustained by their reciprocal interaction. The resulting organic universe, sacred in its living power, is thus fundamentally monistic, in that any dualism we throw at it can be transformed into a continuum of self-organisation. For example, inanimate matter is but mind unconscious, whereas mind is this matter become conscious. Yet when it comes to the dynamic of freedom and necessity Beiser concludes that here the romantics' allegiance to naturalism necessitates the abandonment of Fichte's radical freedom. According to Kant and Fichte both spontaneity and self-positing "exclude determination by natural causes," and instead "presuppose the noumenal-phenomenal dualism," which of course "the romantics reject" (*RI*, 11). Consequently, due to their allegiance to Spinoza, the romantics held that since "everything is simply a mode of God," and "God acts from the necessity of his nature," then human agency is actually divine agency, thereby undercutting any claim to autonomous action (*RI* 53). The degree to which they abandon freedom falls short of Spinoza's fatalism, but only barely, since it is the optimistic form of fatalism - quietism - that is Beiser's concluding characterization of the romantics' position (*RI* 151).

Schelling, I submit, might not recognize himself in this portrayal, due in large part to his radical usage of the organic form of causation to account for even humanity's relation to the divine. In his *System of 1800* Schelling inverts Kant and argues that god and humanity are "co-poets" - *Mitdichter* - "collaborators" of our history, each of us so necessary to this process, that if "our own freedom" in creating our parts were denied,

“even ... [God] himself would not be” (I/3 602). Far from being a powerless spectator of God’s grand unfolding, the existence of the divine itself somehow depends on our free actions. Schelling’s conception of freedom does of course differ from Kant and Fichte’s due to his position that freedom is built into the very fabric of nature, which, following the thesis of his first book, *On the World Soul*, leads to his programmatic statement that *life is the schema of freedom*. Due to the non-linear dynamic of self-organization, life so conceived “manifests the appearance of freedom,” no matter how faint and seemingly chaotic (I/5, 527). Employing Kant’s definitions to elaborate a freedom that does not depend on the noumenal-phenomenal divide, Schelling reasons that life characterizes any being that “is cause and effect of itself” (I/2, 40). This irreducibly chaotic factor of reciprocal causation suggests an organic system which, unlike a mechanistic system, exhibits the progressive creation of new and original actions, and is thus capable of accounting for what Schelling calls the “individualization of matter” and the “dynamic evolution” of nature (I/2, 520). “Even within the same type” he writes, “nature knows of a certain unmistakable freedom, which maintains a certain leeway for differentiation ... so that no *individuum* is ever absolutely equal to another” (I/10, 378). By positing this low-level freedom in nature as a type of chaotic force that propels the evolutionary differentiation of life, Schelling generates the conceptual resources required to integrate freedom and necessity into a unified account of nature, in which both intertwine in an organic, and thus chaotic, process of self-differentiation. No need for the explanatory concepts of dualism and metaphysical noumenon.

The ramifications of such a radical organic form of philosophy are major. Epistemologically, if we accept the irreducible interconnectedness of nature and acknowledge our starring role in this world (demonstrated not in our power for creation, but rather proven by the distressing fact of our seeming infinite capacity to destroy life), then we become faced with the prospect of what Schelling termed our *conscientia*, or *Mitwissenschaft* with nature. Refusing to accept as meaningful “the skeptical problems that motivated Cartesian epistemology” – problems such as “how do we *know* that there is a nature or history beyond consciousness?” (RI 132), -- Schelling reframes modernity’s epistemological quandary in accordance with the reciprocal dynamic of self-organizing systems and our status as an organ of knowing within this system. From this standpoint we can explain why we are capable of knowing with “direct certainty” that “there are things beyond us,” even though this knowledge “refers to something quite different and opposed to us” (I/3, 343). We are capable of knowing that which shows itself to be other than we are because we are “of this world,” having been created through the very same dynamic organization that has brought our entire cosmos into being. What unifies knowing subject and known object is this underlying order of organic nature that bonds us with the phenomenal world we live in. Our power to appreciate “the unfathomable intentionality, the unbelievable naiveté of nature in the achievement of its purposes,” points to “the view of a true inner history of nature” in “whose formation humanity can look into as into that of a related being” (I/10, 378; I/10, 381). Most clearly demonstrated by the works of the genius, in