

MYTHOLOGY AND NATURE IN SCHELLING'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT. According to a scientist standpoint, mythology holds no value whatsoever. This is nothing but a mass of superstitions: a polymorphic arbitrariness of imagination. On the other hand, in a neo-structuralist reading, the symbolic thesaurus of mythology is pure esthetical arbitrary discourse. Both views are denied in Schelling's philosophy of mythology. His philosophy of nature is a highly speculative attempt to provide a unity that specialized scientific endeavours have long lost. However discarded may this be in the eyes of the scientific establishment it is still very acclaimed by contemporary environmental philosophy or by anti-positivistic contemporary approaches to science. But it is in Schelling's philosophy of mythology that we find a different use and understanding of *nature* which we believe is a very profound although eclipsed or forgotten approach. Schelling argues that mythology is not just an allegorical knowledge of nature. This is something as profoundly embedded in the *original unconscious origins of mankind's self-consciousness as the genesis of language or the genesis of peoples*. These are all original and immemorial constitutive acts in the unfolding of the universal consciousness of mankind. The countless variety of divine images is not to be seen as an infantile *anthropomorphic* description of nature. Quite the contrary: mythology is a *cosmo-morphic* description of the Absolute within the history of the transcendental consciousness. Naive understandings of nature were originally used as elementary building-blocks in the never ending effort of human consciousness to thematise and understand itself and the whole. Even prior to philosophy and science, mythology was the first act of self-consciousness, *Uranfang* that practically constituted humankind. Our purpose is to expose and develop the consequences of this utterly revolutionary reading of nature as a fundamental part of the mythological process.

Keywords: *Philosophy of Mythology, German Idealism, Nature, Consciousness, F.W.J. Schelling*

1. Mythology between hard science and postmodern relativism

The contingency that is imputed to mythological imagination is held to be totally external to science and if there's any mention of it at all is to reduce it to purely infantile pre-scientific endeavour, with no significant truth-value attached to it.

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On the other hand, in a *neo-structuralist* reading², the symbolic thesaurus of mythology is pure aesthetical discourse and fictional artefact of the imagination. *Anything goes* - since narratives are infinitely interchangeable and there's no truth-value whatsoever. Mythology is one possible game-language or vocabulary, so that we could join or not the game. As such, with no intrinsic substantial meaning they are not likely to hold any ontological relevance.

Both views are denied in Schelling's philosophy of mythology. Mythology is deeply connected to nature, although not subordinated since it is already *spirit*, although not completely self-conscious. Mythology is *spirit mediated by nature*, since most of its symbols are extracted from nature itself. What their actual status is, needs however to be considered. Following the successive development of Schelling's reflection on mythology will provide us the key to put into evidence his evolving conception on the *relation of mythology and nature*. This paper is not, however, about Schelling's philosophy of nature – a complicated and separated issue, worthy of a distinct careful approach. Schelling's vision of nature is only taken into consideration insofar as this is relevant for mythology itself. Some remarks on the status of nature are therefore due before we explore our main subject-topic.

2. Short Preliminary Remark of Schelling's Philosophy of Nature

Schelling's philosophy of nature is a highly speculative attempt to provide a *unity* that specialized scientific endeavours have long lost. This concern with nature is controversial, but the study of his work is no easy task. There have arguably been invoked anticipative reflections on polarity, transcending the Newtonian framework, quantum mechanics so that however discarded may it be in the eyes of the contemporary scientific establishment it is still worthy of academic interest.

Some words about his conception of nature will help us better understand why mythology matters for Schelling at least as much as physics or chemistry.

As early as 1797, in his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, Schelling writes that "Naturphilosophie ist speculative Physik" (III, 274) – in opposition of course to empirical physics. This is to say that knowledge of nature should proceed from *a priori* construction of the field within which experience takes place. The mass of contingent experience needs to be ordered within the necessity of a system, since nature is itself a system (according to the principle of continuity). This should be not *abstractly* performed, in an external coercive superimposition of a theoretical

² One of the defining features Manfred Frank assigns to neostructuralism is deconstruction and relativization of meaning and: „the confrontation with a hermeneutics based on the preeminence of *meaning*“, Frank, Manfred, *What is Neostructuralism?*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pg. 27.

order to brute sensations. *Ideality* must be seized within *reality* itself, as its own inner logic. And reality should not be purely “deduced” but simultaneously discovered through intuition and experience. Accidental experience itself does not suffice however unless it is understood within its necessary connections. Nature is therefore conceived *ideally* – or matter itself has an intelligible texture. The theoretical construction of physics means therefore not to extract reality from concept in a solipsist manner, but to make accidental experiences accord with theoretical necessity without abstract violence, by seizing the necessity of laws within accidental experience itself³.

In his *System des Transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800) nature should be carefully deduced from the transcendental Ego (following Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*), but the Ego should conversely be deduced from nature. Both ways – *realizing the ideal and idealising the real* should be simultaneously and symmetrically practiced as complementary approaches. Science itself idealizes crude matter absorbing it into representation every time it discovers a new *law* – a new *ideal law* governing apparently contingent material phenomena.

This is where Schelling’s interest with *equivocal* physical phenomena springs from. Electricity, magnetism or light are persistently analysed because they *immediately* reveal an ideal (not-so-material) dimension, that is: precisely because of their *equivocal materiality*. It is difficult to identify electricity with matter itself, even if it can only appear through matter. (It is no wonder, let us note, that Johann Wilhelm Ritter who discovered the ultraviolet radiation was a follower of Schelling).

“The completed theory of nature would be that whereby the whole nature was resolved into intelligence. The dead and unconscious products of nature are merely abortive attempts that she makes to reflect herself; inanimate nature so-called is actually as such an immature intelligence, so that in her phenomena the still unwitting character of intelligence is already piping through. Nature’s highest goal, to become wholly an object to herself, is achieved only through the last and highest order of reflection, which is none other than man; or more generally, it is what we call reason, whereby nature first completely returns into herself, and by which it becomes apparent that nature is identical from the first with what we recognize in ourselves as the intelligent and the conscious”.⁴

This *identity of being and thinking*, of ideal and real as *Indifference (Indifferenz)* of subject and object – presented as the philosophical result of transcendental philosophy – is not unknown to mythology. If nature is to be conceived philosophically

³ Franz Joseph Wetz, *Friedrich W.J. Schelling zur Einführung*, Junius, Hamburg, 1996, Nautrbetrachtung statt Naturverachtung, p. 33-69.

⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2001, p. 6.

in its ideal *essence*, mythology seems to have done that already, although in a non-scientific way, by means of representations. Schelling's conceptual revitalization of nature has been suspected of "*speculative animism*" or "*pantheism*" – captured in the idea that nature is nothing else than the *dormant spirit*, whereas the *spirit* is nothing else than the awakened nature.

A different important feature of nature's being is its *productive force*. The law of inertia is not accepted as the dominant law of matter. This rejection of mechanistic physics renders nature more close to spirit, bridging the Cartesian impermeable isolation of body and mind. Schelling evokes the notion of a *Weltseele* ("ein allgemeiner Geist der Natur", SW I, 387) that accounts for its intrinsic finality displayed as harmony of parts within the whole. Nature is obscurely alive, ever-moving and striving to actualize itself from the darkness of its lower levels towards a progressive illumination it only reaches in man, and within humankind – especially in artistic contemplation.

To anticipate, it seems that, according to the philosophy of nature, the universe itself is, somehow, intrinsically mythological.

"The immediate object of human knowledge [*Erkennens*] remains nature, or the sensible world; God is only the dark, vague goal that is strived for and that is first sought in nature. The popular explanation through the deification of nature would first find its place here, because at the least an inborn, dark lore of God would always have to take the lead."⁵ (SW11:76).

We could conveniently argue that in overcoming the mechanistic Newtonian representation of nature, Schelling put into evidence intrinsic movement over inertia and organic inter-relation over mechanic causality, which renders us closer to a mythological view of nature within the very language and positive approach of science itself⁶.

"Through the presupposition of a religious instinct it might be conceptualized how man believes to find the God that he seeks initially in the ubiquitous elements or in the stars that exert on him the most powerful or salubrious influence; and how he

⁵ *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, F.W. J. Schelling, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 56

⁶ "More precisely, the externally and independently existing being cannot renounce, according to Schelling's determining of the idea of that-which-exists (*das Existierende*), two fundamental characteristics: firstly, to be a becoming and overall realized, evolutionary produced, and secondly to be corporeal, and therefore to have a spatially extended existence. (...) If we and all surrounding things would have not been the result of developing and becoming, we would lack any anchor and fixity in the context of a nature; we would be like "spots" deploying on the screen of our phenomenon without the roots that tie us with nature". This remark underlines the mobility and the time-factor that Schelling stresses as he strives to "enliven" the inertial mechanistic notion of nature. (Thomas Buchheim, *Die Idee des Existierenden und der Raum. Vernunft hintergründe einer Welt äußerer Dinge nach Schellings Darstellung des Naturprozesses 1843/44*, Kant-Studien, Band 106, 2015, p. 38).

gradually, to bring God nearer to himself, visualizes him as descending to the earth, visualizes him even in inorganic forms, and fancies himself to be able to represent God, first in organic beings, for a time even among animal forms, and finally in purely human form. Thus, here would belong the interpretations that consider the mythological deities as deified natural beings; or in particular only one of these beings, the sun, which in its various positions in the course of a year would each time become a different deity—for example in the explanations of Volney, Dupuis, amongst others.”⁷

3. Schelling's Original Support for the Naturalistic Interpretation of Mythology

Perhaps the most common explanation of myths is the so called *naturalistic* one. Myths are not what they present themselves to be. They should of course not be literally credited with direct truth-value. However, they do have a justification. Given their primitive origin, it is to be supposed that primitive mankind *diverted* the confrontation with exceptionally mysterious natural phenomena through an allegorical interpretation. Metaphysical transcendent fiction would thus be nothing more than a conventional immanent discourse about physical reality. The naturalist approach of myths renders them a physical function while denying them their substantial metaphysical claim. This is to say mythmakers attest to the pre-scientific mentality, and this should be regarded as *infantile* scientific endeavour. The naturalist approach is also a *reductionistic* approach, reducing myths to mere (imperfect) descriptions of nature.

In one of Schelling's first explorations of the nature of myths *Ueber Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der aeltesten Welt* (1793), he tends to subscribe to this Enlightenment approach that most myths are primeval attempts of wise men or geniuses in seeking to explain natural phenomena to render accessible difficult ideas by means of a pictorial language.

During his aesthetical studies Schelling begins to depart from naturalism. In his *Philosophie der Kunst*, he describes mythology as the *material of art*, a sort of intuitive plastic aesthetical philosophy. Mythological beings are nothing but *realized ideas*. But his renewed effort of understanding already leads Schelling to slowly renounce the naturalist approach. Allegory, the main procedure of naturalism, implies the use of pictorial analogies to depict abstract ideas. But mythological figures are more and more individualized as we go from Oriental to Greek mythology. Mythological figures are rather concrete ideas than abstract ideas (they are not just realized ideas, but also individualized ideas). They are not just figurative speech about abstract ideas. They are individualized realizations of ideas. And as such, they are absolutely real. Gods are *ideas* intuited as real (paragraphs 28, 29, 30)

⁷ibid., p.56

“These same syntheses of the universal and particular that viewed in themselves are ideas, that is, images of the divine, are, if viewed on the plane of the real, the gods, for their essence, their essential nature = god. They are ideas only to the extent that they are god in a particular form. Every idea therefore, = god, but particular god. (...) The absolute reality of the gods follows directly from their absolute ideality, for they are absolute, and within the absolute, ideality and reality are one, absolute possibility = absolute actuality. The highest identity is at once the highest objectivity”⁸.

Ideas are not alien to nature itself. Rather they are the ontological texture of nature itself. Mythology does not describe nature. Both nature and mythology reveal the intelligible realm of ideas, and this is why they are congruous. But with this, the naturalistic approach is overcome.

4. Schelling’s Late Rejection of the Naturalistic Interpretation of Mythology

Slowly but surely, Schelling comes to dismiss teachings of wisdom based on *allegory* from the realm of mythology. Mythology expresses itself in symbols. The difference, although thin, is actually fundamental.

Allegory	$U \leftarrow P$	The universal is intuited through the particular
Symbol	$U \leftrightarrow P$	The universal and the particular are implying each other and they interpenetrate each other as being one

The metaphysical claim of mythology is not intellectual, metaphorical or allegorical. It does not hold its characters to be *fictions* standing for elaborate *ideas*. It is ontological in nature. Natural forces are individualized and they are personified and really concretized. In the allegory of the naturalistic approach, the fictional form indicates an ideatic content. In mythology, *the content is identical to its form*, or, as he puts it employing a term from Coleridge „Mythology is not *allegorical*, it is *tautegorical*” (XII, 139).

The naturalistic approach is an *a posteriori* attempt of explanation. It holds, for example that Uranos and Gea are nothing but personifications of the Sky and the Earth⁹. In point of fact, as Schelling argues in his mature ontological *Spätphilosophie*,

⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 35.

⁹ „The physicalist version is of particular interest for Schelling, because the relation of mythology and nature. Supporters of this view are classical philologues as Christian Gottlob Heyne and Gottfried Hermann. Heyne sees in mythology a ‘camouflaged allegorical history of nature’ The content of mythology comprises therefore philosophemes about the *Weltbildung* (...). Divine names signify therefore something different than they say. They are personifications of natural and historical contents. The same perspective is the basis of Hermann’s elucidation of myths (...) where the etymology of divine names is related to nature as far as he tries to establish predicates of nature forces in them”, Sandkühler, H.J. (ed.), *F.W.J. Schelling*, J.B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, Weimar, 1998, p. 159.

following an *a priori* approach, Schelling implies that things are precisely the other way around. Primitive people have not invented some fictional characters to talk about the sky and the earth. It is the primary metaphysical unconscious need and certainty of an immanent (accessible) world and a transcendent (inaccessible) world that prompted men to indicate them in analogy with nature. Uranos and Gea are symbolized by the sky and the earth, not the other way around. *The physical is an a posteriori image of an a priori metaphysical, not the other way around.* The ontological difference is rendered visible in the gap between the „transcendent“ sky and the „immanent“ earth. People didn't invent Chronos to symbolize the physical time, but time symbolizes Chronos. People did not invent a *God* to describe the order of *nature* – it is the order of nature which renders God visible.

5. Mythology as Natural History of Consciousness

Mythology, language and the emergence of consciousness are *equally original*, and they contain both intentional and unintentional constituents. Their origin is not just subjective, but substantial as well. A philosophy of mythology is therefore equally justified as the philosophy of nature because the *ontological source* of nature and mythology is identical. Both reflect an original unconscious unity that was lost through differentiation. The construction of nature in speculative physics is nothing else than contemplating this unity in the manifold expression of nature. The philosophy of mythology has identified an original monotheism that was broken by virtue necessity into polytheism. The emergence of polytheism is a necessary process. It is not the mere creation of a fictionalizing subject. On the contrary, this is something that overcomes the subject and actually happens to him.

“It is a production and a process independent from thinking and will (...) that has an unavoidable reality for the subjected subject”¹⁰.

The strong ontological assertion of Schelling, parallel with the pantheistic turn of his philosophy of nature is that mythical creations are just like natural productivity a *theogonical process*. But the mythological process is a theogonical process realized within consciousness, the doctrine as experience of the real divine realization.

“The creative potencies of nature are simultaneously the potencies that create the consciousness and that become active and real in it, as mythological processes”¹¹.

¹⁰ „Die Mythologie als im Bewusstseyn sich ereignende, aber nicht von ihm hervorgebrachte Tatsache ist hinsichtlich der Notwendigkeit ihres Auftretens das Erscheinen der Natur im Bewusstsein, genauer: das Erscheinen der Produktivität der Natur auf der Stufe und im Medium des Bewusstseins“, (SW, 11:194).

¹¹ Sandkühler, H.J. (ed.), *F.W.J. Schelling*, op. cit., p.163.

Mythology contains nature but it is the first disruption within nature as well. The promethean myth for example signifies the breaking with the closed circle of nature, with the assertion of consciousness against and out of the calm and warm original unity with the gods. Mythology is the first attestation of this original unity with nature as well as the nostalgic evocation of its loss.

“The philosophy of mythology reconstructs the history of consciousness on the level of nature, the philosophy of Revelation reconstructs the history of consciousness on the level of freedom”¹².

6. The Mythological Process: Nature is Supernatural

Researching myths is for Schelling not archaeology of infantile preconceptions of primitive mankind, but a necessity for philosophy itself. Since mythology is not a recent artefact of subjectivity, but comes from a *distant past* (transcendentally, not only chronologically prior) – belonging therefore to the first (*archaic*) constitution of the universal consciousness. Otherwise put - the mythological process is the first process of self-consciousness within the natural sphere that precedes the constitution of the purely theoretical consciousness.

The prospection into the *immemorial*, into the night of time, is required so that the universal consciousness could find itself, by means of an epochal reduction, in the point of the original constitution of meaning. Mythology is profoundly embedded in the original unconscious origins of mankind’s self-consciousness – just like the genesis of *language* or the genesis of *peoples*. These are all original and immemorial constitutive acts in the unfolding of the universal consciousness of mankind. The countless variety of divine images is not to be seen as an *infantile/anthropomorphic* symbolization of nature. Quite the contrary: nature should be seen as symbolization of the divine. The infinite is not a symbol of the finite – the finite is a symbol of the infinite. Mythology is not pure imagination; it is not description of nature or society, or projection of psychological conflicts. Mythology is a *cosmic description* of the *super-cosmic realm*. Mythology is the first act of self-consciousness, *Uranfang*, that practically constituted mankind, as finite subjectivity confronting the limit of the *Indeterminate*. The entire effort within German idealism was to thematise the Indeterminate without betraying deductive rigour and the form of the scientific spirit. The philosophy of mythology is the self-explanation of the mythological process, the awareness of how the *unconditioned Cause* outside the phenomenal world expresses itself within nature and through the finite subjectivity.

¹² Sandkühler, H.J. (ed.), *F.W.J. Schelling*, op.cit., p.166.

Where do myths come from: from outside or from inside? Both: they are objective and subjective, conscious and unconscious. Myths are a relation between a comprehensive subjectivity and an objective comprehended. Gods and mythological figures, as *concretely subjectivised natural objects* attest to the superior unity of subject and object that Schelling determined as *Indifferenz*, negative unity of subjective and objective. Mythology is not subjective discourse about the objective phenomenal world. It is not an objectified description of the subjectivity. It is thematisation of what provides unity to both, as indifference of both, as transcendent actuality that erupts and is present in both finite sides of the world – man and nature.

Myths transpose us in the condition of this *Indifference* whose eruption into subjective awareness and objective immanence is conceived as *Immemorial* through a radical reduction that brings us back to the first awareness and constitution of self-consciousness. Philosophy is comparatively, a *derived* mode of self-consciousness. This is attested by the extraordinary violence and authority with which myths appear at all peoples.

The mythological process is not dependent upon intellect and will, it has a powerful unconscious dimension, as awakening of a power inside the consciousness. The unfolding of the mythological process uses natural images to depict the supernatural, which impregnates the natural history of the universal consciousness.

The mythological process is „die Geschichte der menschlichen Götterbildung“ – the *growing* of God in human consciousness. Externally, these images always retain something contingent – but internally, inside the noumenal core of each phenomenal surface, there's necessity at work, revealing a content that is indissociable from its form.

Nature is therefore *sublated (aufgehoben)* in mythology, thus becoming a more perfected, refined and pure revelation of the supernatural.

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