

Schelling's Philosophical Ethnology: History, Mythology and the Question of South America

James F. Depew

The Transcendental Problem of Human History

The Kantian attempt to ground knowledge put history in a unique role, one defined by the problem of the mediation of transcendental conditions and empirical agency. Kant's essay, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, in an attempt to express the exoteric core of transcendental critique to a general readership, opens by remarking that however one forms the concept of freedom of the will, human actions are determined by natural law, just like other natural events. History, while concerned with the mere narration of these appearances, which belie the influence of causes that can only properly be understood metaphysically, nevertheless raises the possibility that if considered from a sufficiently broad perspective, regularities might be discovered. In this way, "what meets the eye in individual subjects as confused and irregular,"¹ in the whole species might be viewed as the development of its original capacities in the continuous advance towards a condition of right that will ultimately hold throughout the world.

Yet it remains that the relation of nature and freedom cannot, for Kant, in principal at least, be explained; it can only be described. Insofar as human action is determined by a kind of natural necessity, freedom can never be understood as originating in an intelligible cause, and belongs only to the realm of appearances. In other words, if the subject is part of nature there would seem to be no way of explaining how a nature which we can only *know* as deterministic can give rise to a subject which seems to transcend determinism in its knowing and in its ethical doings. As a result, Kant refused to ground his approach in explicitly transcendental terms, especially when it came to the philosophy of history, and relegated the knowledge of freedom to a practical ideal.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, in Amélie Rorty and James Schmidt, eds., *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: a Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

Fichte saw the notion of nature “in itself” as the problematic source of Kantian dualism, and argued that the question of the condition of possibility of synthetic judgments was a question of why there is a realm of judgments, that is, a world requiring synthesis by the subject for knowledge to be produced, in the first instance. Fichte inquired into the way in which the subject, in absolute freedom, might go out of itself and oppose itself to nature, to that which is not itself. Fichte maintained that the condition of knowledge was the positing by an absolutely free “I” of that which is opposed to it, since, for the subject to be an “I” it must be conscious of an other, entering into a relationship with its object as other. The problem, then, becomes how to explain the relationship between subject and object, freedom and nature, that makes judgments possible, and this cannot be achieved simply in terms of a subject having thoughts, which merely correspond to an object that is essentially separate from it.

Transcendental reflection is understood as the unconditional moment of transcendental idealism in which the subject, freely positing itself, reveals subjectivity as conditioning every encounter with the world. Crucially, Fichte argues that subjectivity can only emerge in such an encounter, since nature must be practically posited as the constitutive limit of self-consciousness. There is, thus, in reflection, a practical unity of necessity and freedom that appears to release history from that disjunction which prevented it from being, philosophically speaking, anything but descriptive. The necessary conditions, which for Kant were strictly independent of free historical events, for Fichte become part of the very structure of a subjectivity, which is thought to condition the development of the human species as a whole.

By deducing the conditions of human consciousness from the very act of self-consciousness that Kant introduced in the transcendental unity of apperception, Fichte opened transcendental reflection into the realm of the practical and claimed that by means of such reflection the self can determine both its object *and* its agency. In other words, Fichte broke decisively with the distinction between theoretical grounding and practice that had convinced Kant that the philosophy of history must be left as popular pedagogy. For Kant, reflection could not enjoy the same *a priori* necessity that belongs to the conditions of knowledge that it uncovers. For Fichte, to the contrary, reflection is the constitutive act whereby the subject gains a unity of consciousness. Fichte argued that the human mind need only look within itself to recognize that it is already organized in a way that makes it possible for it to acquire properly scientific knowledge in the *a posteriori* encounter with the world. With Fichte, the idea of the practical perfection of the human species is introduced directly into the internal systematic structure of transcendental philosophy itself. And with this, history is no longer simply universal history, as interpreted from the global regularity of the species, but is the philosophical history of the human spirit coming to full awareness of itself in and as the system of philosophy.

However, in his early essay, “Is a Philosophy of History Possible?” Schelling argues that the structural relation of the Fichtean self-positing subject ultimately undermines all philosophy of history since, “If man therefore

possesses history (*a posteriori*), he only does so because he has no history (*a priori*); in short, because he does not so much bring his history with him, as first bring it forth through himself . . . Everything that we cannot ourselves determine *a priori* . . . becomes history for us.”² If the “fact that we have history” is “an effect of our own limitedness,” the overcoming of the limitedness that still binds humanity in favor of complete self-determination through which systematic philosophy attains its completion (where knowledge and actuality would correspond with one another entirely) would imply the disappearance of history. As Schelling puts it, “The more the limits of our knowledge are extended therefore, the narrower the limits of history become.”³ This means that for a Fichtean system the complete development of the human species announced by Kant would imply the impossibility of thinking history philosophically. As long as humanity has yet to reach the point of completed knowledge, it remains dependent upon new and unanticipated events of knowledge acquisition, and history continues. Yet if history only continues so long as human knowledge is imperfect, then the systemic closure of knowledge would bring history to an end. There is a futility to the philosophy of history, then, insofar as its object exists only insofar as historical knowledge is still lacking, while this lack prevents the certainty required for systematic grasp of its object. As Rüdiger Bubner puts it, “This lack allows the object to exist, while eliminating the lack would merely eliminate the object.”⁴

Schelling agreed with Fichte that the structure of subjectivity is grounded in an act of self-production. Free action proceeds from the intelligible aspect of humanity, and is in this way indeterminate in relation to past action precisely insofar as this aspect is thought to precede all that becomes within it. However, in this sense, it is unclear how this intelligible aspect should determine itself out of its state of causal indeterminacy. In order to be able to determine itself, Schelling suggests, it would already have to be determined in itself from within, but not, he maintains, according to some empirical necessity. It would have to be determination itself in its essence, in its own nature, such that intelligible being, as certainly as it acts freely, acts in accordance with its own nature. In other words, “free is what acts only in accord with laws of its own being and is determined by nothing else either in or outside itself.”⁵

Only such an act, both Fichte and Schelling argued, can accede to the unconditional and thereby prevent thought of the conditions of knowledge from falling into dogmatism; transcendental reflection, as intellectual intuition, does not concern itself with an already given object but with the act of producing an object. However, beginning with his *First Outline for a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling will move away from the way in which Fichte located this

² Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, I/1, 464.

³ SW I/1, 464.

⁴ Rüdiger Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003),

⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), 50.

production strictly in the self-presentation of the subject, towards its location in nature. In his early work Schelling, closely following Fichte, argued that nature does not have the same “power” [*Kraft*] that reflection grasps as self-production, and that nature, in this sense, does not have inner activity. Material nature possesses no interiority [*ein Inneres*] and is turned outward, whereas only a self that can turn back into itself and thus produce itself can be known through reflection.⁶ However, in the *First Outline*, Schelling conceives of nature as a self-producing organic whole, and as having within itself the capacities that both he and Fichte had previously only conceded to the self.

Schelling now argues that the being of nature cannot be reduced to the products of nature; it is an organic whole in excess of its parts. Not being a mere aggregate or composite of parts but a *system*, nature must be thought of as what constitutes these parts. In other words, nature cannot be thought merely as product, but also as productivity, as that which produces the products. Moreover, conceiving of nature as both product and productivity suggests that nature holds within itself an original duplicity or diremption. Such duplicity is original, since if productivity were not limited in such a way that it continuously produces particular products, it would go over completely into product. In other words, nature must maintain a necessary equilibrium between productivity and product. Here it seems that all the structures of self-production that were identified with that act of reflection, in which the self brings itself forth and thereby becomes aware of itself, are located in nature.

If nature is unconscious production, then rather than positing itself at the outermost limits of reason, as in Fichte, the subject is posited insofar as it steps out of determinate action into freedom. Through the free act of the subject, what is active of necessity in nature is posited as passivity; necessity, or nature, is in this sense a real component of subjective position. In other words, while Fichte grounds consciousness in the subject’s own feeling of limitation, Schelling grounds consciousness in the nature of consciousness. This is what Schelling calls “real self-positing,” which was in Fichte grasped only speculatively.

What then becomes essential for a philosophy of history is that passivity comes to be understood not as merely relative to free activity, but as the absolute condition of activity. It is not a question of bringing novelty to an end, whereby history conceives nature in its complete objectivity. It is a question of understanding how a conditioned totality, as found in free but finite subjects, is *derived* from an unconditioned totality of complete determination. In other words, nature, as “the embodiment of everything that has happened and [which] thus qualifies as the object of history,”⁷ is not to be conceived as finished and static, but as the very potential for free action. At the core of a philosophy of history, in this way, is the recognition that the subject really has being in that possibility, and that free action is really willing that which is possible.

⁶ SW I/1, 380.

⁷ SW I/1, 473.

Not everything that happens, however, is on this account an object of history. In *System of Transcendental Philosophy*, Schelling argues that natural circumstances owe whatever historical character they attain to the influence which they have had upon human actions, and that a historical object cannot be regarded as that which takes place as a general consequence that can be calculated *a priori*. In order to speak of a history of nature in the true sense of the word, philosophy would take nature as though “apparently free in its productions, it had gradually brought forth the whole multiplicity thereof through constant departures from a primordial original; which would then be a history, not of *natural objects* (which is properly the description of nature), but of generative *nature itself*.”⁸ This would be to view nature . . .

. . . as ordering and managing in various ways with one and the same sum or proportion of forces, which she could never exceed; we should thus regard her, to be sure, as acting freely in this creation, but not on that account as working in utter lawlessness. Nature would thus become an object of history, on the one hand, through the appearance of freedom in her productions, since in fact we would be unable to determine *a priori* the directions of her productive activity, although there would be no doubt at all that these directions had their specific law; but she would also be an object, on the other hand, through the confinement and conformity to law inherent in her, owing to the proportion of forces at her command; whence it is therefore apparent that history comes about neither with absolute lawfulness nor with absolute freedom either, but exists only where a single ideal is realized under an infinity of deviations, in such a way that, not the particular detail indeed, but assuredly the whole, is in conformity thereto.⁹

Schelling stresses that the right combination of necessity and freedom required for history exists only where a single ideal is realized under an infinity of deviations, in such a way that the whole is in conformity to that ideal. Certainly, when speaking of nature in the *First Outline*, Schelling is speaking of it as a whole, and not in any empirical sense; in this way the whole of nature is thought of as an *idea*. But when speaking of nature as an *ideal* in the *System*, he is speaking of something that can only be achieved as a result of *purposive* human action. Schelling’s position here is that the realization of an idea, where “the progress as a whole, as it might be seen by an intellectual intuition, does justice to the ideal,”¹⁰ can only be thought of as possible at the level of the species. This is because the individual, as a mere part, is incapable of attaining to the ideal. In other words, there can only be a history of such beings as have a purpose before them, which can never be carried out by the individual, but only

⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 199.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

by the species. Neither absolute lawlessness nor a series of events without aim or purpose deserve the name of history, since its true nature is constituted only by freedom and lawfulness in conjunction, “or the gradual realization, on the part of a whole species of beings, of an ideal that they have never wholly lost.”¹¹

Furthermore, a philosophy of history is only possible if “all that has ever *been* in history is also truly connected, or will be, with the individual consciousness of each,” by means of “innumerable linkages” of such a kind that if they could be brought to consciousness it would become obvious that the *whole* of the past was necessary in order to put this consciousness together. What we witness here is Schelling arguing for the *organic* construction of history through the natural relations inherent to the human species. Schelling maintains that no individual could be posited “with all the determinations it is posited with, and which necessarily belong to it, unless the whole of history had gone before,”¹² and that a kind of reflection might bring this whole to human consciousness. Schelling puts this in terms of two worlds or natures:

The first world, if we may so express it, that is, the world brought about through unconscious production, now falls, as it were, behind consciousness, together with its origin. The intelligence will thus never be able to recognize directly that it produces this world out of itself just as much as it does the second world, whose gestation begins with consciousness. Just as, from the original act of self-consciousness, a whole nature developed, from the second act, that of free self-determination, a second nature will come forth.¹³

Yet this seems to once again render a philosophy of history impossible, or nearly so. If history is problematized as a form of exposition that can recount the actions, which have been decisive for the history of self-consciousness and present them in their interconnected character, it becomes a question of how a humanity that has reached self-consciousness (second nature) can become conscious of an original productivity (first nature), which is now unconscious for it, a past that appears to have receded into an immemorial origin and is inaccessible.

A contradiction appears at the heart of the free act. Stated otherwise, the productivity that is the ground for an explanation of history cannot conversely be demonstrated from history. Schelling’s initial solution to this contradiction lies in the way in which nature, as it appears in consciousness, as an organic *product*, appears to have purpose despite the fact that as *productivity* it does not. This implies that, insofar as a realization of human purposes in the world is possible through free and conscious activity, there must have been an original “susceptibility”¹⁴ to such an action. Yet here humanity merely recognizes itself as purposive in the organic product, but only in outline, as it remains unable to

¹¹ Ibid., 200.

¹² Ibid., 201.

¹³ Ibid., 159.

¹⁴ Ibid., 214.

recognize itself directly in the productivity that underlies consciousness. In other words, not able to recognize the ground for an explanation of history in itself, it recognizes this ground only in nature. Schelling argues that what is required is an intellectual intuition, whereby in one and the same appearance humanity is at once product and productivity *for itself*, and beginning from such an intuition might bring forth history, as it were, entirely out of itself. Only such an intuition, Schelling suggests, can bring together “that which exists in separation in the appearance of freedom and in the intuition of the natural product; namely *identity of the conscious* and the *unconscious* in the *self*, and *consciousness of this identity*.”¹⁵

According to Schelling, the product of this intuition will verge, on the one hand, upon the product of nature, brought about unconsciously, and on the other upon the product of freedom, brought about consciously, and will thus unite in itself the characteristics of both. What is more, to know the product of this intuition is also to be acquainted with the intuition itself, and hence it is only necessary to derive the product, in order to derive the intuition.¹⁶ The intuition that Schelling is pointing to is aesthetic intuition, and its product is the art product. Central to Schelling’s argument is that such a product is the inverse of the organic product. Whereas an unconscious activity is reflected out of the organic product as a conscious one, conscious activity will conversely be reflected out of the art product here as an unconscious one. In other words, whereas the organic product reflects its unconscious activity as determined by conscious activity, the art product here, conversely, reflects conscious activity as determined by unconscious. So, if nature begins as unconscious and ends as conscious, and the process of production is not purposive while the product nevertheless is so, in the production of the art object one begins (subjectively) with consciousness, and ends without consciousness, or *objectively*, in the product. Humanity is thus self-conscious in respect of production, but unconscious in regard to the product.¹⁷

What initiates the activity of artistic production, according to Schelling, is the aforementioned contradiction between unconscious and conscious worlds (in the organic product). Only in this way can it be thought of as a resolution to the problem of origin: by providing an intuition for a humanity that is at once product and productivity, and thus providing a beginning for humanity to bring forth history out of itself. Schelling allows that all aesthetic production rests upon a conflict of activities, that artists are involuntarily driven to create their works, and that in producing them they merely satisfy an irresistible urge of their own nature. The artistic urge proceeds from a feeling of inner contradiction that sets in motion “the whole man with all his forces,” since such a contradiction “strikes at *the ultimate in him*, the root of his whole being.”¹⁸

At this point, however, Schelling is no longer operating at the level of the

¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹⁸ Ibid., 222.

species, but at the level of the exceptional individual: the genius. Only an individual that is driven by the potency of the unconscious production within itself brings a properly *aesthetic intuition* into play. Starting from such an “unconscious factor . . . inborn through the free bounty of nature,”¹⁹ the genius is struck by the separation of its conscious action from nature, and consciously sets the goal of bringing forth this source in the art product. Schelling describe nature as “a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script,”²⁰ and the unconscious factor is thus the element of *poetry* in art, brought forth by the artist. Poetic art allows an originary productivity to appear in a human product, and in this way aligns human purposes with nature in such a way that the contradiction in aesthetic intuition can be conceived as the philosophical ground for an explanation of history. Art is in this way intellectual intuition become objective.

Yet since such an aesthetic production is up until now merely the work of individuals, there must be some way in which it translates across all of human history. For Schelling, this takes place via *mythology*. Mythology, Schelling argues, is an aesthetic production that is shared by humanity as a whole, in various stages of translating the productive power of nature into conscious form. Yet, in a certain sense, for Schelling, philosophy of mythology stands in for an *incomplete* philosophy of history, since there has been no mythological moment that has been shared by humanity as a whole. By the end of the *System*, Schelling can only long for a “new mythology” that would bring the various ways in which the separation of productivity and product in human free activity back to its source in poetry, “the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race, personifying, as it were, one single poet—that is a problem whose solution can be looked for only in the future destinies of the world, and in the course of history to come.”²¹

From Unprethinkable Being to Humanity at the Eternal Center

Between the writing of the *System* and Schelling’s later work there is a shift that makes it necessary to think the absolute as origin, and thus the philosophy of history, differently. Certainly, in the wake of Napoleon, Schelling has become disillusioned with exceptional individuals, that is, *genius*. But perhaps more importantly, Schelling has begun to rethink the place of humanity in nature, especially in its relation to an original productivity, to an act of *creation*. In the Würzburg System of 1804, with the culmination of what has been called Schelling’s philosophy of identity, Schelling rethinks the problem of two worlds. This has become important, since the relation between nature and human activity in the System led to the conclusion that the appearance of original productivity waits upon the existence of a human product, a mythology to come. However, this can only be true if “the poet can intentionally make into history what is not

¹⁹ Ibid., 224.

²⁰ Ibid., 232.

²¹ Ibid., 233.

history, a necessary event that he exhibits as contingency.”²² That is, the absolute necessity of the origin must somehow be compatible with the contingency of what originates. Whatever originates from the origin must be compatible with the origin: thus the contingency and necessity of the origin must both be possible. The content of the original productivity, from a historical perspective at least, seems to depend on human creativity. To use terminology from the *First Outline*, the development of “primordial Life” appears to be explained by human contingency.

In his philosophy of identity Schelling repeats the idea of an original identity of conscious and unconscious activities, but puts into question the way in which this identity “rests in the self itself,” and looks for an explanation of how the ground of the harmony between subjective and objective becomes an object “to the *self itself*,” while allowing for the reality of human contingency. According to Schelling’s philosophy of identity, when considering the origin of judgment, subject and object cannot be presupposed as already separated. A judging subject cannot be originally set in opposition to a world of sense, since this way of thinking about a world presupposes the establishment of judgment. As Markus Gabriel puts it, “being must not be assumed as the other of the self, since this separation cannot be presupposed if what we seek is the origin of judgment through which all separation is in the first place possible.”²³ Schelling therefore argues for something originally determinable, which can be thought of as the first position of judgment in general, the “subject” presupposed by any and all determination. This cannot itself be a term in a judgment, since it is that which makes judgment itself possible. The second position of judgment would then be an originary predication, without any relation to the being of a subject. This would be predication for which it is not decidable if it applies to anything whatever. As Gabriel points out, “The figure of the predicate opens, therefore, a logical space of possible instances, without there being eo ipso a determinate instance to sort out . . . it is not a priori decidable if the predicate applies to anything whatsoever.”²⁴ Only in a third position of judgment, then, is the coordination of subject and predicate in an “originary synthesis” or “originary image.”

Nevertheless, the origin of position cannot be judgment (even a thetic judgment, as it was for Fichte), since there is no reference whatever. It is not even conceivable as the being of a subject, but only as what Schelling calls “unprethinkable being.” In other words, the identity of self-intuition at the origin of knowledge remains wholly indifferent to that very knowledge. Gabriel puts it succinctly: “Unprethinkable being can therefore not be understood as the *ground* of logical space, because the very concept of ground already presupposes the successful constitution of logical space.”²⁵ This means that what is considered necessary in the structure of self-positing is itself *contingent*, since it depends on

²² SWI/1, 472.

²³ Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 68.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁵ Ibid., 70.

a contingent existence in order to be determined as necessity in the first instance. From the perspective of knowledge, that which provides all determinacy with its being-there [*Dasein*] is contingent, since it is determinate as necessary only through its difference from the unprethinkable possibility of another being.²⁶

In *Philosophy and Religion*, near the end of his Würzburg period, Schelling writes:

The in-itself remains free of all difference, for only that *wherein* it becomes objective is difference, not it itself. As to this difference, it could only consist in the one and same identity becoming objective within particular forms; but these forms could only be the *ideas* since in them the universal, i.e., absoluteness, becomes one with the particular in such a way that neither the latter is cancelled by the former nor the former by the latter. However, the differences exist in the ideas only as possibilities, not as actual differences.²⁷

The absolute becomes objective in the ideas (Gabriel's "logical space") that relate to unprethinkable being *in themselves*, that is, contingently. In other words, by virtue of the existence of the ideas, the absolute is thinkable, but only through the ideas themselves, not through the absolute itself. However, and this is important, they are in themselves only insofar as they *simultaneously* share in the absolute's possibility of being other. It is in this sense that they are only possible differences, and not actual differences. The ideas are productive in the same way as the absolute: in their contingency, they necessarily "bring forth only absoluteness,"²⁸ and that which emerges from them relates to them in the same manner as they themselves relate to the absolute. There is a real sense in which "the absolute is the only actual,"²⁹ since it is only in the absolute act of becoming other in the ideas that the possibility of actual differences arises. This is how Gabriel should be understood when he writes: "Unprethinkable being should thus be understood as the actuality of all possibility, that is, all determinability prior to its becoming determinate as such."³⁰

If the ideas are only truly in themselves insofar as they are simultaneously in the absolute, objectification of the absolute is free only in its necessary relationship to the unprethinkable. Freedom, in this sense, is the cause of the *possibility* of difference. However, *actual* differences are only the result of a production through the ideas without connection to the absolute, that is, through a process that Schelling calls "falling away." Such differences would have reality not through their internal connection with the absolute, but outside themselves, in

²⁶ This is a slightly weaker point than the one I take Gabriel to be making (see Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 66).

²⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, trans. K. Ottmann (Putnam: Spring Publications, 2010), 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 70.

a merely “conditional actuality.” In other words, actual differences emerge when the ideas produce the finite and find their necessity in that finitude. An idea is thus thought to have a “double life”: one is in itself and yet bound to finitude; the other is in itself insofar as it is in the absolute, “which is its true life.”³¹ Production in the first continues to be through an idea, but is now thought of as an activity of “the *soul* insofar as it is destined to produce finiteness and intuit itself in it.”³² That is, insofar as the idea expresses itself as “I-ness” [*Ichheit*], as self-identical individuality, it ceases to determine itself through the absolute, but rather determines itself through finitude. To follow Fichte and argue that I-ness is its own act and is nothing apart from this activity, is to argue for an intellectual intuition merely for-itself and not in-itself: “That the cause of all of finite things is merely residing in finitude and not in the Absolute could not have been expressed in clearer words.”³³

From the perspective of the soul’s selfness, “the entanglement with necessity . . . is indissoluble.”³⁴ Relying exclusively on its finitude, the soul becomes disconnected from possibility and is *actually fallen*, unable to surrender its selfness and once again arrive at producing absoluteness. The soul’s predicament is that “it can only produce that which was (as *idea*) *ideal* within it, as *real*—that is, as negation of the ideal.”³⁵ However, by becoming aware of its falling-away, the soul might nevertheless strive to produce absoluteness, even though it can only produce finite things. Schelling writes: “[The soul] strives to express the complete idea . . . by taking this attribute from one idea and that from another so that the sum of all that is produced equals a complete reproduction of the true universe.”³⁶ The soul can only produce what is other than absolute, but through its connection to ideas, it might come to form a complete idea of the absolute in its knowledge of nature. This would be to think what is necessary in the structure of self-positing as free, as sharing in the possibility of ideas, that is, sharing in the capacity of ideas to produce other ideas. This is to say that the very actuality that emerges from the soul’s production, the fact that it produces what is ideal as real, might retain the possibility of being other, the possibility of restoring itself into absoluteness as much as actuality holds within it the possibility of another idea. In this sense, the relationship of possibility to actuality in the soul “is the cause of the manifestation of freedom,” since therein it gains “the possibility of either restoring itself into absoluteness or of falling anew into non-absoluteness.”³⁷ Freedom, attesting to “the first absoluteness of all things,” becomes the repeated possibility of falling away, but equally the

³¹ Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 29.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 31–32.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 32.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

repeated possibility of clarifying “the relationship of finite necessity to absolute necessity.”³⁸

Schelling suggests that this would be to see in *nature* the ground for the existence of God. If the identity of necessity and freedom appears according to the soul’s finitude, in its indirect relation to the world, absolute identity can only appear *as fate* [*Schicksal*]. However, in a conscious reconciliation with possibility in the absolute, the soul recognizes the relation of necessity and freedom as *providence* [*Vorsehung*]*—*progression from the standpoint of unprethinkable and incomprehensible being, to that of a God whose nature is an existential transparency resulting from the self-totalization of the ideas in the soul. As Gabriel puts it, the object of positive philosophy is therefore the self-mediating movement of “blind eternity, eternity that merely exists” to “eternity of essence, the eternity of the idea.”³⁹ Or, as Schelling writes, God is . . .

. . . the *unmediated* in-itself of history since He is the in-itself of nature only through the mediation of the soul . . . Since God is the *absolute* harmony of necessity and freedom, and this harmony cannot be revealed in individual destinies but only in history as a whole, only history as a whole is a revelation of God—and then only a progressively evolving revelation.⁴⁰

However, were this revelation to be completed, and the ideas actualized in a last instance, there could be no possibility of being other, and therefore no relation to the absolute. God exists in the succession of ideas, their ‘potentialization’ in the soul, and this development always opens upon a future that cannot be anticipated.

God is therefore historical, because it is what is given to knowledge in the sequence of concepts of being, that is, as what cannot be brought under any single idea. Nevertheless, “in *any* way that being is determined, it must be conceived as an ontological future”⁴¹ from the perspective of the eternal past of unprethinkable being. Therefore . . .

. . . the ontological structure of any given world as it presently is, is the realized future of its origin. This also allows for the possibility of change in the actual ontological structures presented to us, because they have as much a future as they are themselves realized futures of their origins or conditions. There is, therefore, an ontological temporality, which arguably lies at the ground of any other form of temporality.⁴²

In the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* Schelling elaborates on the points made in *Philosophy and Religion*, beginning

³⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

³⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁴¹ Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 72.

⁴² Ibid.

with the idea that primordial nature is unprethinkable being, is “the eternal ground for the existence of God,” and contains within itself, “although locked up, the essence of God.”⁴³ Each being, he suggests, emerged in nature with a dual principle in itself, though these two principles are “basically one and the same considered from both possible sides.”⁴⁴ The first principle, that of finitude, is that through which things are separated from God insofar as they exist only in nature, or in the ground. However, this principle, to the extent that it comes only out of nature (actuality or reality), has not yet been grasped in its connection with the absolute, and is in this sense “pure craving or desire, that is, blind will.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, through the understanding (the development of ideas), a universal will stands against this self-will of creatures, “using and subordinating the latter to itself as pure instrument.”⁴⁶ This is to say that the soul, as the site of possible understanding, the “dark principle,” or the eternal ground and the blind will of unprethinkable being, is itself the very principle of the revelation of God.

Humanity has a unique role in revelation, since it emerges with the ground: “man has in relation to God a relatively independent principle in himself; but because precisely this principle—without it ceasing for that reason to be dark in accordance with its ground—is transfigured into light, there arises in him something higher, *spirit*.”⁴⁷ Even if both principles are indeed in all things, they are without the “consonance” [*Konsonanz*] that results from potentiation in the soul, and *the revelation of God only occurs in humanity*. Schelling writes: “In so far as the soul is now the living identity of both principles, it is spirit . . . Were now the identity of both principles in the spirit of man exactly as indissoluble as in God, then there would be no distinction, that is, God as spirit would not be revealed.”⁴⁸ In God the unity of both principles is indissoluble, but not so in humanity. Precisely since humanity is ensouled, it contains both a principle relatively independent of God, that is, its creaturely reality in nature, and a capacity for spiritual activity. It is this unique capacity of humanity for self-will *and* revelation that endows it with a *choice*: to withdraw into finitude, or look to the future as the possibility of expressing the dark and unprethinkable principle of all determination as nothing less than the spiritual principle of all existence.

Humanity is thus, for Schelling, the embodiment of the ontological temporality of the idea. Schelling writes:

Man, even if born in time, is indeed created into the beginning of the creation (the *centrum*). The act, whereby his life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity: it also does not temporally precede life but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is eternal by nature. Through this act the life of man reaches to

⁴³ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 30.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the beginning of creation; hence, through it man is outside the created, being free and eternal beginning itself.⁴⁹

Because the soul shares in the eternity of God's creative act, humanity is predisposed to consciousness of this act. And yet humanity will be led outside itself, into nature, and will in this way sink into unconsciousness, waiting to be rediscovered in consciousness, as the ground of duration and thus history. An act, in other words, which determines the life of humanity in time, is always a return to the primordial act in which the soul produces what is ideal within it. In this moment human life is separated from itself, leading to the contradiction of free action witnessed in the *System*. However, if a crisis now urges humanity into aesthetic production, it is one whose *content* is from all eternity derived from a primordial creative act, and is the origin of mythological consciousness. As Schelling has Clara express for him, "man is in this way like a work of art."⁵⁰

Mythology as Naturally Self-Producing Religion

Christian Gottlob Heyne distinguished himself from previous thinkers of mythology by assuming that mythic content existed as such, which was only afterwards expressed in mythic poems (such as Homer's). He argued that access to mythic content is achievable by analysis of its poetic expression, working backward to the mythic raw material. Heyne also thought, following Hume, that early humanity could only think concretely, with abstract thought coming only later. Raw myth expresses a certain primordial, indeed *unprethinkable*, reality that was to be developed *historically* through the abstract intentions of mythic poetry.

In his *Historico-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, Schelling follows Heyne: "A double emergence into being shows itself—once according to the material and in envelopment, then in the unfolding and exposition."⁵¹ Mythology, Schelling argues, was not immediately present in the poetic form in which we find it: "The implicit history could basically well be poetic, but not *actually*; thus it did not emerge into being poetically," and thus the foundation of the history of the gods, "is not laid by poesy."⁵² And yet, there is something new in Schelling, who differentiates himself from Heyne by arguing that mythology originally had not just concrete meaning, but *religious* meaning. Like Heyne, Schelling argues that mythology is not the product of invention, but is rather the expression of a kind of inheritance of an originally *mythic intuition*. However, unlike Heyne, who had thought of mythic experience as crude

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Clara* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 77.

⁵¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), 17.

⁵² Ibid., 17.

philosophical groping, Schelling argues that it is "The divinity of the gods alone . . . which is primordially ancient."⁵³

It is a relation to this divinity, in the poets themselves, that leads to mythic expression. "The world of the gods" unfolds itself into the "history of the gods" through a *crisis* that is internal to the poets. It is not the poets as persons who create the history of the gods but rather "the crisis of the mythological consciousness within them . . . the history of the gods comes about in the poets *themselves*; it comes into being in them, it succeeds in unfolding in them, it is first there and explicit in them."⁵⁴ For Schelling such a moment of religious crisis inhabits poetry as its "dark background," and while "poetry could indeed be the natural end and even the necessarily immediate product of mythology . . . as actual poetry it could not be the generative ground, the source of the representations of the gods."⁵⁵ For Schelling, seeking the source of the history of the gods preserves the philological import and a scientific rigor that he sees in Heyne, though the real content to which his analysis seeks access is the very origin of religion.

Schelling argues that humanity's first and immediate sense of existence is inseparable from the intimation of a total power to which it belongs. A natural potency arising in the interior of consciousness itself provides the principle for the unified consciousness of human existence. Humanity feels its existence in a power that is equally interior and exterior to it and therefore that *its* existence is no different from the substance of *all* things. The *immediate content* of this original consciousness is without form or function, directed as it is toward potency everywhere in nature, and precisely for that reason, nowhere in particular. This is, Schelling suggests, the *notitia Dei insita*: "implanted knowledge of God." Religious consciousness is undeveloped in early humanity since relation to God emerged from "blind impulse" [*ein blindes Wollen*] to worship, as there was simply no power available to consciousness outside nature. In other words, while power is the first content of consciousness, there is no actual consciousness of this power.

Schelling argues that humanity is naturally god-positing, and in bringing God to consciousness becomes conscious of itself. However, the moment that humanity, of itself, begins to comprehend itself in relation to God, it steps out of the center of primordial being and the divine unity is confused. Humanity finds that it is separated from God insofar as it is conscious of God; the power in which humanity was originally immersed is now something outside it. As Schelling puts it, humanity was . . .

. . . displaced from that primordial condition of a purely essential relation to God. But this relation cannot be thought without that, as man himself became another, the God also became an other to him; that is, it cannot

⁵³ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 19.

be thought without an alteration of consciousness . . . that alteration was precisely of the type that corresponds to that which we have called relative monotheism consciousness . . . has relation to only *One* of the Godhead, no longer to the whole.⁵⁶

This alteration of consciousness that results from humanity's turning toward God is that the ultimate One God does not live in it any longer, but is instead only the relative One.⁵⁷ However, insofar as this follows from a necessary coming to consciousness, Schelling argues that the original potency, now in inverted form, steps between humanity and the divine. He writes:

Consciousness is subject to and, as it were, struck by [a] one-sided *One-in* this way, the oldest mankind indeed finds itself in a state of unfreedom, finds itself posited outside itself, which is to say outside its own self dominion . . . seized upon by an alien dominion . . . a power that . . . has taken hold of consciousness.⁵⁸

With this consciousness religion emerged for the first time, as primordial humanity turned towards the power than once filled its consciousness, now as *cause* of its existence, as an *actual* God.

For Schelling, the original unity of the still undivided human species cannot be thought without a spiritual power that kept mankind in a state without change that did not even let come into effect that which is contained within it. Humanity, then, would not have left that state without a *spiritual* crisis that had to be of the deepest meaning and had to have occurred in the foundation of human consciousness itself if it was supposed to be “powerful enough to enable or determine the heretofore united humanity such that it disintegrated itself.”⁵⁹ “*Whatever* duration we give to [the] period of homogenous humanity,” Schelling writes, it is entirely *indifferent* to the extent that this is a time “in which nothing happens” and has “only the significance of a point of departure, of a pure *terminus ad quo*, starting with which time is counted, but in which itself there is not actual time.”⁶⁰ There was becoming, Schelling argues, as soon as an actual God appeared in human consciousness and came into prominence against a background of unprethinkable power. As soon as a second principle began to manifest its effect on humanity, all the spiritual differences, “as with one blow, to be sure,”⁶¹ were posited, but some as more nearly possible and others as more distantly possible. Schelling explains that the “reason for these differences lies initially in the fact that the heretofore immutable God [A], as soon as he is required to accept determinations from a second, cannot remain the same, and in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100-101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁶¹ Ibid., 92.

the unavoidable conflict with this second God cannot avoid proceeding from figure to figure, cannot avoid taking on first one and then the other, according to the extent that the second God [B] gets power over it.”⁶²

Schelling argues that the same God that preserved the unity of humanity “in unshakable self-equality” becoming mutable and non-identical to itself, disperses the human species, just as it had previously held it together; and just as in his identity God was the cause of the unity of the human species, in his multiplicity God had to become the cause of its separation.⁶³ Schelling argues that “the ultimate *one*,” the principle of the first humanity, should also be understood as the merely *relative one*, as that “which does not yet *have* another outside itself, but yet can have one, and indeed such another one who will relieve him of his exclusive being.”⁶⁴ And, crucially, in this way, with the first principle *the foundation is laid for polytheism [Polytheismus]*. Schelling declares that the first God, even if not yet known as such, is “the means of cision hurled into homogeneous humanity”⁶⁵ is, as relative one, the first member of a future series of gods, of an actual “successive polytheism” [*Vielgötterei*]. So various systems of the gods of the world’s peoples begin to emerge with the occurrence of the second cause, even if they do not all enter into reality at once, but rather only in measured succession. Humanity is dominated by other gods than the first, and through that which is successive in polytheism the peoples are, with regard to their appearance if not their possibility, in their entrance into history, kept apart.⁶⁶

Historical time begins with that spiritual crisis that differentiates primordial humanity from itself and the successive separation of the peoples through a mythological process. However, the *time* of the crisis of the peoples must be thought of as preceding the separation. This is the case since the time of crisis involves the transition to historical time, and to this extent is pre-historical. Yet Schelling notes that, to the extent that something happens and occurs in it too (the becoming-other of God in human consciousness), it is only pre-historical in relation to historical time in the strictest sense, and so is in itself also historical; thus it is only relatively the pre-historical time.⁶⁷ As a result . . .

The historical and pre-historical time are no longer merely relative differences of one and the same time; they are two times essentially different and set apart from one other, mutually exclusive times, but also for this reason mutually limiting times. For between both there is the essential difference that in the pre-historical time the consciousness of mankind is subjugated to an inner necessity, to a process that as it were removes mankind from the actual and external world, whereas every

⁶² Ibid., 92-93.

⁶³ Ibid., 75-76.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 127.

people that has become one through an inner decision⁶⁸ also is set out of the process *as such* through the same crisis and, free of the process, now abandons itself to that series of acts and actions whose more external, worldly, and profane character makes it into a historical time.⁶⁹

If the crisis of peoples holds within it a becoming, and in this sense is only relatively pre-historical, it itself finds its limit and determination through “a pure point of departure,”⁷⁰ an indivisibility of time in which human consciousness is indifferent to itself. And in this sense, only the time of “the calm, still unshaken unity of the human species”⁷¹ will be understood as *absolutely pre-historical*. In this way, Schelling regards mythology as “the *unprethinkable* religion of the human race, and to this extent also the religion of the human race anticipating all thought.”⁷² But this is only comprehensible because he assumes the *natural* God-positing of human consciousness. Only emerging from such a condition might mythology be called “the *naturally self-producing* religion,” or simply “*natural* religion.”⁷³

“Man,” writes Schelling, “as soon as he simply *is* and still has *become* nothing, is consciousness of God. He does not *have* this consciousness; he *is* it, and precisely in the *non-actus*, in immobility, is he that which posits the true God.”⁷⁴ God is immediately posited with the nature of humanity, and this means that “he is not first in man with time; he is eternal to him because he has become along with his nature.”⁷⁵ Yet this same God is the first god of polytheism and the mythological process, and thus the original God-positing consciousness holds within it all potential for history as the emergence of peoples. History, then, can be thought through the mythological process whereby humanity is diversified into peoples who preserve an original unity in their various mythological systems. But this is comprehensible only insofar as humanity is first understood as being thrust outside itself, and separated into peoples, and thus only by investigating, through what Schelling calls “philosophical ethnology”: the study of the various ways in which the peoples preserve the primordial ground of consciousness.

The ‘Tragedy’ of South America

However, Schelling’s own philosophical ethnology introduces a curious anomaly. Schelling turns to South America as something of a paradigm case of

⁶⁸ The word *Entscheidung*, translated as “decision,” contains the root *Scheidung*, which translates as “cision” or “crisis.” Schelling employs this affinity in the earlier discussion of the “mythological crisis” taking place in the poets, and the role of decision in the structure of self-positing.

⁶⁹ Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction*, 162-163.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

those tribes in whom till now no trace of the representations of gods has been found.

⁷⁶ Schelling follows Felix Azara's *Voyages in the Southern Americas* (1809) which describes the various characteristics by which the humanity of the South American tribes are put into question: their body morphology, the loudness of their voice and that they do not laugh, the quality of their teeth compared to Europeans, that they demonstrate no passion, that they sometimes kill their own children, that they (like the animals) never drink while eating, etc. He notes that most of the Catholic clergy, acting on the reports of missionaries during the so-called Valladolid debate over whether the South Americans had souls, initially refused to impart to them the sacraments, until the South Americans were pronounced human by a decree from the pope. Schelling accepts, as does Azara, that the South Americans descend from Adam, but he seems unwilling to go as far as Azara in concluding that "they are capable of adoring a creative spirit."⁷⁷

Two characteristics stand out for Schelling: that the South Americans seem to respect no form of authority, and that "they know no religion, or divinity, of any kind."⁷⁸ Insofar as South Americans do not have religious representations, which is in Schelling's view to say that they do not have mythology, they cannot be conceived of as a people. For Schelling, they are merely *externally* human, since . . .

. . . [they] live, as Azara reports, *without any type of community among themselves*, fully like animals of the field, in that they acknowledge just as little a visible authority above themselves as an invisible one, and feel as foreign to each other as animals of the same species feel to each other. And they form a people just as little as the wolves or foxes form a people amongst themselves; indeed, they live more unsociably than some of the animals living and working in a community, such as the beavers, ants, or honey bees. Every effort to make them into a people—that is, to produce amongst them a social connection—would be in vain. Introduced by violent fiat, such a connection would be their demise; it would be a proof that a people not born immediately as a people can come into being through neither divine power nor human power and that where the original unity and community of consciousness is missing, none can be produced.⁷⁹

This is to say that the South American have never achieved actual consciousness, and are merely the "tragic result" of that "inner agitation"⁸⁰ that leads to the crisis of peoples. It is not that they evidence a "stupid" primordial condition of the human species, as some others had suggested during Schelling's time, but only a condition out of which no progress is possible at all. In other

⁷⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁷ Félix de Azara, *Voyages Dans l'Amérique Méridionale* (Paris: Dentu, 1809), 196.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁷⁹ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction*, 48.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 80.

words, while the rest of humanity preserved the ground of human consciousness during their dispersion into peoples, this ground was fully lost for the South Americans. Schelling writes:

They are the still living testimony of the completed, utterly unrestrained dissolution; the entire curse of the dispersion has been realized in them—actually they are, properly, the flock that grazes without shepherd; and, without becoming a people, they were annihilated in just the crisis that gave the peoples determinate being. . . . The condition of these people is indeed understood if they are the part of the original humanity in which all consciousness of unity has really perished . . . We see in them what the whole of humanity would have become, if it had *saved nothing of the original unity*.⁸¹

Amerindian Perspectivism and the Contingency of Humanity

That Schelling excludes South Americans from the process of revelation through mythology, while allowing them their humanity, even if only externally and insufficiently, suggests that what he means by “humanity” is something other than the *species*. It might be suggested that Schelling conceives of humanity as *condition* rather than as *species*. It should be noted that during Schelling’s time very little was known about the beliefs and practices of South Americans, except for what was passed on by Christian missionaries. Of course, today there is no doubt that South Americans have their own mythology. What is interesting is that Schelling’s conception of humanity comes very close to what is reported to be expressed in South American mythology by contemporary anthropologists. Philippe Descola tells us that the common point of reference in Amerindian mythology is “not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition.”⁸² The question arises as to whether what humanity conditions is something other than what Schelling had in mind.

Schelling’s primary reason for denying South Americans mythology, and thus any role in history, is that they do not represent divinity to themselves. They have no relation to God or gods, and in this sense they do not relate in any way to the ground of revelation. In other words, they do not relate to nature as the unprethinkable being or absolute principle of possibility, and they therefore have no capacity for self-will, since they are never presented with a choice to transcend their finite existence and, as a result, do not participate in the historical reconciliation of freedom and necessity. Schelling refuses to derive the being of subjectivity from any presupposition, and it is in this sense that he considers it unprethinkable and ungroundable. And yet, he appears to derive the South American’s non-relation to the being of subjectivity through what he sees as their non-relation to a monotheistic divinity. Stated otherwise, their incapacity for

⁸¹ Ibid., 80-81, emphasis added.

⁸² Philippe Descola, *Par-delà Nature Et Culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 120; my translation.

transcendence seems to stem from their inability to recognize nature as the singular source of possibility that, ideally, is totalizable at the limit of history. This is, arguably, due to Schelling's expectation that the being of subjectivity, that is nature, is monolithic. Unprethinkable being for Schelling is singular and, in this sense, entirely prethinkable through the notion of the One. From this perspective, humanity, for Schelling, is the condition of a *successive* repetition of the mythological moment, where one divinity always replaces another one.

However, what seems clear from recent ethnology in South America is that their mythology expresses a relation to nature in the plural—*natures*. It is “perspectival” inasmuch as self-consciousness emerges in a variety of natural contexts. As for Schelling, the being of subjectivity is contingent upon existence for its determination and, subsequently, any manifestation of freedom. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro puts it: “Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds as though *the point of view creates the subject*: whatever is activated or ‘agented’ by the point of view will be a subject.”⁸³ While in Schelling's transcendental philosophy subjectivity conditions every encounter with the world such that this encounter becomes essential for self-knowledge, Viveiros de Castro argues that in Amerindian ontology a plurality of worlds conditions every encounter with subjectivity. In this ontology, the limit of subjectivity, which in Schelling must be resolved back into the subject to release it from its internal contradiction, lies not in a singular nature but extends across various natural contexts, or *natures*, in a kind of trans-natural contingency. Bruno Latour nicely summarizes Amerindian *self-position*:

[The] theory under which [South Americans] were operating was that all entities share by default the same fundamental organization, which is basically that of humans. A licuri palm, a peccary, a piranha, a macaw: each has a soul, a language, and a family life modeled on the pattern of a human (Amerindian) village. Entities all have souls and their souls are all the same. What makes them differ is that their bodies differ, and it is bodies that give souls their contradictory perspectives: the perspective of the licuri palm, the peccary, the piranha, the macaw. Entities all have the same *culture* but do not acknowledge, do not perceive, do not live in, the same *nature*.⁸⁴

Insofar as Amerindian myths are filled with beings that inextricably mix merely specific human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability, ‘humanity,’ as a condition, is seen as the “vanishing point

⁸³ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies’, *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004): 467.

⁸⁴ Bruno Latour, “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no.3 (2004): 451-452.

of Amerindian perspectivism, where the differences between points of view are at the same time annulled and exacerbated.”⁸⁵

In Amerindian mythology, the natural body is not the object of self-positing, but rather is form from the perspective of an other, that is, from another species’ point of view. Nature, in this sense, is the form of the other as body. The subjective, on the other hand, is the very possibility of relating to the other as different, the possibility of another nature. There is an unprethinkable being that, as in Schelling, is open to the possibility of another being. However, this opening is the result of a potentialization of the body, rather than of the soul. As Viveiros de Castro puts it: “the body is the site of perspectives; the soul, that which the point of view has put in the subject position.”⁸⁶ All the beings that people mythology manifest this ontological entanglement or cross-specific quality. According to Viveiros de Castro, “Myth speaks of a state of being where bodies and names, souls and affects, the I and the Other interpenetrate, submerged in the same immanent pre-subjective and pre-objective milieu, the demise of which (ever incomplete, always undone) is precisely what the mythology sets out to tell.”⁸⁷ Amerindian mythology, it might be said, is the expression of historical cosmogony, rather than historical theogony.

What is witnessed here is a challenge to the prethinkability of nature under the One, and a resulting change in the way in which actuality might be thought of as relating to possibility. Possibility and actuality are, for Schelling, always in a relation of transcendence: unprethinkable being indexes the contingency of ontology itself through the world’s possibility to be otherwise, but only insofar as the world can be otherwise in a future that takes over for the present by exceeding the limits of the actual. The being of history advenes through the repetition of possibility in *succession*. Choice, as the manifestation of freedom, implies the extension of the merely finite beyond itself and towards an ideal reconciliation with the absolute through totalization. Amerindian mythology, on the contrary, points to an immanent relation between possibility and actuality. The repetition of the possibility of self-knowledge occurs across *contemporary* actualities and, in this sense, the being of history, if we can speak this way, is not successive but *serial*. The opening of finitude to the possibility of being otherwise is distributed across multiple natures and is thus expressed in the tension *between contemporary actualities*. An “ontological future” can only mean, from an Amerindian perspective, a realized cooperation across what has emerged unprethinkably. The possibility of change in actual ontological structures does not lie, however, in the repeated distance from the origin, but in the difference between origins, inasmuch as subjectivity is multiply contingent upon various perspectives.

⁸⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “1. Cosmologies: perspectivism,” *HAU: Masterclass Series 1* (2012). Available at <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/masterclass/article/view/106/134>.

⁸⁶ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “3. Nature: the world as affect and perspective,” *HAU: Masterclass Series 1* (2012). Available at <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/masterclass/article/view/108/136>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

The act that brings about spiritual crisis is not here limited to a single nature, which for Schelling is the unique and singular locus of divine intentionality and is thus the condition of history, but is discovered in the intentionality of *all life*. The original creative act of South American mythology is one that is *decentered*, since there is no privileged site of creation (the human is not a creature of the *centrum*). It is because primordial life is creative across a variety of natures that it becomes separate from itself and sets history in motion. Arguably, despite Schelling's dismissal, the being of subjectivity expressed by Amerindian mythology is radically unprethinkable and constitutes an extension of Schelling's thesis, since it opens to the *contingency of humanity*: the impossibility of pre-determining the site of what is necessary for the development of historical self-consciousness.

In both Schelling's and the Amerindian view of mythology, humanity is a generic form. And in both, the becoming of this generic form is the motor of mythological expression. The unity of this becoming, broadly construed, is a transformation of nature into spirit. But for Schelling, a potential for the soul to be otherwise opens to a spiritual transcendence within the finite, while for Amerindians, such a potential is derived from differences in relations between bodies, an immanent spiritual tension across the finite. It might be said that for Schelling spiritual becoming is "opening to," whereas in Amerindian mythology spiritual becoming is "opened by." Stated otherwise, due to Schelling's presupposition of an indifferent content in a primordial past, however unprethinkable, the function of mythological expression is irreversible and teleological. Even if never completed, historical self-consciousness is the product of a progressive totalization of form that reveals truly human content as God. To the contrary, there is an inherent reversibility to Amerindian self-consciousness. Becoming is a shift of perspectives that results from an entangled, non-decidable coexistence between species, each rendering the other invisible as human in order for itself to appear as human.

There is a type of revelation at work here, but it occurs in qualitative transformation and not in a process of production. Nothing happens, so to speak, but everything changes. This is the inherent potential of the human of Amerindian mythology, always distributed across relations. In such relationality, human subjectivity is captured by another cosmologically dominant point of view, and in this sense, spirit is the form of the other as subject, unprethinkable prior to real encounters. If, following Schelling, the heart of humanity's essential freedom is its potential to be otherwise, in Amerindian mythology this depends on the essential contingency of trans-specific encounters. The more power a species brings to bear in an encounter, the more likely it is to reveal itself as human. In Amerindian myth, it is this revelation of humanity that warrants use of the term 'people'. Ultimately, if there is an incompatibility between Schellingian and Amerindian mythological visions, this is not due to the insufficient humanity of the South American, but results from the way in which they answer the question of whether the being of history can be progressively and irreversibly subsumed under a dominant power and its exclusive mode of self-production.