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The passivity of our actions

Steffens, the fragility of Romanticist unity, and the Anthropocene's predicament

Abstract

Unity is a key ideal when considering the human-nature relationship. This paper looks into an important moment of conceiving this relationship in terms of unity: The Romanticist movement, represented here by Danish-Norwegian philosopher, writer and scientist Henrik Steffens. But the Romanticist ideal of unity is complex and fragile, in particular in its attempt to combine transcendent, sublime, infinitely large dimensions with the individual and the everyday. This complexity also characterizes today's predicament of the "anthropocene". At both moments in history, we encounter a combination of the dramatic and the evasive. The paper presents some of the stylistic resources and argumentative strategies that Steffens (and other Romanticists, including visual artists) employ to capture this double nature of the human predicament. It is rather surprising to see that Steffens ascribes great importance to what goes beyond individuality and, therefore, beyond activity, also in accounting for human actions: we might say that, for Steffens, our actions are our passive encounters. In a final step, these arguments in Steffens are compared to more recent arguments in debates concerning the anthropocene.

I. Romanticist and very modern predicaments: Between call to action and quietism

'Unity' and its semantic cognates such as 'harmony' or 'totality' are omnipresent in Romanticist texts that deal with the human-nature

relationship. These concepts also figure prominently in recent debates about this relationship. One example: Henrik Steffens' (1773–1845), Danish-Norwegian cosmopolitan, working for large parts of his career in German states, writer, philosopher, natural scientist, theoretician of the university, promotes discourses of unity throughout the broad scope of his Oeuvre. One example: His 1806 book on the *Foundations of philosophical natural science* (*Grundzüge der philosophischen Naturwissenschaft*; Steffens 1806) defines, in the opening sentences, “science” as the “annihilation of a contradiction, the re-unification of something that had been originally united” – only that which “is originally united and is One with spirit” can be known.¹ But this ideal of unity expresses itself in profoundly different forms, as Steffens reconstructs in a large-brushstroke cultural history of humankind in the opening pages of this book, and in an analysis of his own times. This directly raises conceptual problems: can unity itself be a diverse phenomenon? Steffens assumes an ideal original state, a golden age in the “youthful history of humankind” during which humans had been “intimately united with nature” and for this reason could enjoy full bliss in their lives. In a second step, humans enter into opposition to “the things”. There remain, however, two (i.e.: again, diverse) ways of overcoming this opposition: through the work of philosophers, but also through remnants of the original “serene spirit of a happy, innocent childhood” that finds expression in the work of artists and in the unifying constructions of nations and religions.

At this point, things get complicated: this re-unification does not come about automatically or happily, it may involve, in Steffens' own terms, “coercion” which seems to stand in clear tension with the ideal of unity.² Also, he emphasizes that the very act of putting humans and things in opposition should not in itself be regarded with disdain.³ Steffens' argument for this latter point is rather unclear. He might argue that it is necessary to think in terms of oppositions for climbing up towards higher forms of unification (but he does not explicitly pursue this – somewhat Hegelian – line of argument);

1 Steffens 1806, IX; there are clear echoes here of Schelling, both from his *System of transcendental Idealism* and his philosophy of identity. – All translations are my own.

2 Steffens 1806, X.

3 Steffens 1806, XI.

rather, he quite directly returns to the ideal of unity and seems to claim that even in what looks like individual acts of knowing, i.e. acts that fall outside of comprehensive unity, it still is the “infinite itself that becomes visible”.⁴

It has already become clear that Steffens’ stance is programmatically undecided. At any moment, he can refer to an overarching unity, and he can also do justice to individual things, events or actions without giving up this unity. Vice versa, he can refer to this unity as being concretized by including individuality into his account. At this point, we can detect an analogy between typically Romanticist stances (taking Steffens as a protagonist of Romanticist stances) and a predicament of which we became aware only quite recently: it is a key idea of Romanticism that we should turn the transcendent, the untouchably immense and divine, into something that we can experience in a concrete way. Or: that we should experience in empirical concreteness what Kant deemed to be only an idea, namely all-encompassing unity. On the other hand, in today’s period of the *anthropocene*,⁵ human influence is both everywhere and also remote, sunk in into the very geological foundation of the earth’s life. In both contexts, we can formulate clear imperatives that again are very similar in both cases: the imperative to keep the cosmic-scale predicament of precarious human influence sufficiently close to us so that it can guide us towards ecologically responsible action; or to do our utmost best to capture the most profound and encompassing philosophical ideas in the finite spaces that humans can actively manage.

Put somewhat differently: Calling our times the times of the anthropocene is a move that is, at one and the same time, dramatic and evasive – terms that are also adequate for the position and for the stylistic tools that Steffens adopts. The anthropocene is dramatic in stating that human interventions influence all and every aspect of the earth’s life and of everything living on earth, and even reach beyond the confines of the living. Human actions have an impact upon even the most elementary foundations of existence, i.e. they function on a geological scale (and this is as much a metaphor as

4 Steffens 1806, XII.

5 On perspectives upon the anthropocene from a Romanticist/philosophy-of-nature background, see Matthews 2015, Lauer 2016, Pinsdorf 2020, Höfele/Hühn 2021, di Maio 2022.

a term that is intended to be used literally). This is dramatic on a quantitative scale just as well as on the moral scale of requiring us to take responsibility precisely for the scale of these interventions. But the dramatization of detecting human impact on a geological dimension is also an evasive move, and that, again, precisely because of the enormity of this impact. In the encounter with structures and powers on a geological scale, are we not reduced to powerless beings, are we not overwhelmed, dwarfed? Making things so large that we cannot intervene, or that we cannot capture them, turns human impact upon earth into something sublime that might render us powerless. In a dialectical, tragic twist, the concept of a 'tipping point' combines these two aspects by referring to a situation in which tiny individual actions become universally impactful. The 'anthropocene' is a concept that is startling and unsettling, a clear call to action, while at the same time it can offer some excuse for adopting a quietist attitude.⁶ This can get us into a typically Romanticist discourse that is also – as will be discussed in more detail later in this paper – omnipresent, in frequently rather surprising twists to what one would expect, in Steffens' texts: A discourse about how human actions, or human consciousness and freedom as sources for autonomous activities, relate to our *passive encounters* with forces beyond our control. Passivity will be shown to play a rather important role throughout Steffens' texts.

Steffens is an ideal discussion partner here, because he both fits the Romanticist paradigm *and* reveals its fragility. As an author writing many of his important texts in a language that is not his own, his very writing style can be revealing of stylistic stereotypes of his times. In terms of content, he genuinely challenges his readers to adequately reconstruct his frequently rather evasive arguments, and to come to terms with some completely unacceptable statements in his texts. The fragility of his arguments and ideas is highlighted very clearly by the blatantly antisemitic passages in his book on *His own times (Die gegenwärtige Zeit)* from 1817.⁷ What makes these pas-

6 The complex relationship between adopting the anthropocene as an epoch on a geological scale, its threatening dimensions, and a quietist attitude is discussed regularly in literature on the anthropocene, e.g. in Mitman 2018, Higgins 2022.

7 As far as I can see, these passages have not been discussed in the literature; Puschner 2008, Abelein 1977, Bergner 2016 do not discuss Steffens' antisemitic

sages particularly problematic is their being placed at an important juncture in the text (at the very transition of his analysis of problems resulting from the past towards his discussion of what one may “hope” for the future of Germany), and the fact that he is drawing upon the stylistic registers of analogical arguments involving ideas from the philosophy of nature: the antisemitic arguments are not an external side-line, but are deeply inscribed into his analysis.⁸ If unity is of central importance for his texts, and if arguing from or within unity allows for antisemitic arguments, this can be viewed as a straightforward *reductio* and outright rejection of what Steffens does. What follows is not intended as a defence of Steffens; highlighting tensions and fragilities in Romanticist arguments cannot justify morally appalling positions. But highlighting fragilities is a relevant exercise in its own right.

II. Sensory deprivation and conceptual overcrowding: Stylistic strategies for capturing totalities

The anthropocene makes it absolutely imperative to come to terms with what is too big to be grasped by us, and it includes the human

statements. From today’s perspective, his examples that criticize non-fully-binary gender roles read quite as problematic (see this paper, § III). For an interesting perspective on problematic implications of (historical) discourses in geology, see Lettow 2021.

- 8 These passages are to be found in Steffens 1817, 758–760. Steffens first makes a political/legal point: “We must claim that nothing can be demonstrated with as powerful evidence as the disastrous results that result from allowing the Jews to obtain full civil rights in Christian states.” Then, he characterizes the Jewish population via a basic attitude that is turned towards “earthly [irdische]” things, that is: towards money; “the Jews are tolerated as peasants tolerate the hamster [in a comparison involving the hamster that is different from the usage of this same animal’s behaviour in national-socialist antisemitic arguments, but leads to similarly negative verdicts] when quietly seeing his fields devastated only in order to obtain from second hand, more comfortably, what one might obtain more copiously, but also more actively, in a first hand approach.” He draws upon categories from the philosophy of nature when Steffens compares the Jewish population to the natural category of metal, as opposed to the “formless, ever moving, never shaped air” that he associates with a form of “Protestantism that has become areligious”, and with the “water of faith” that gives form to everything.

into this imperative. But how can we achieve this? Traditional models are available in the aesthetics of the *sublime*. The above question transforms into the question whether there are finite objects that can be viewed as representations of the sublime, of the infinitely large and infinitely powerful? Can we turn the ultimately remote into something concrete? Kant discusses that this can only be achieved via indirect, symbolic representations, or – closer to Kant's example of our moral self contemplating a storm and shipwreck on open sea – by discovering genuine infinity in an artwork not in size, but in limitless interpretability and an unrestricted impact upon the human mind. The Romantic period has developed an impressive range of style strategies for giving a concrete expression to the sublime, to the inexplicably beautiful, to the transcendent unity of a system of thoughts, and to the necessity of infinite interpretations: the paradox, irony, incompleteness, the fragmentary, and this not only in writing, but also in paintings or drawings.⁹

There are other interesting complementarities between visual and textual strategies. For instance, we find a strategy of actively filling the space in paintings with nothingness, while at the same time texts adopt a strategy of conceptually overcrowding texts. The very quote in which Steffens juxtaposes the different forms of overcoming the opposition between humans and things exemplifies this strategy:

Thus, we see, next to the most profound glimpses of knowledge in what is most general, the most beautiful flourishings of poetry in what is particular. What originally, in virtue of being alive, is rooted in nature reveals its life, embedded into totality, only tempered by its own nature, in the innocent play of freedom that is completely unlimited; what has sundered itself from totality will be reunited with totality through coercion – coercion that emerges itself as sacred necessity if only it is conceived as being alive and within the context of totality.¹⁰

9 There is abundant literature on the fragmentary form of Romanticist texts; on the far less studied fragmentary paintings/drawings from this period, see Wegner 2010.

10 Steffens 1806, X; German original: "Daher sehen wir, neben den tiefsten Blicken des Wissens im Allgemeinen, die herrlichsten Blüten der Poesie im Besondern. Was ursprünglich, als ein Lebendiges in der Natur wurzelt, offenbart sein Leben, von dem Ganzen getragen, nur durch die eigene Natur gemäßigt, im unbefangenen Spielen nirgends eingeschränkter Freiheit; was sich von dem Ganzen getrennt hat, wird demselben wieder durch Zwang verbündet, der, lebendig und selbst im Ganzen gefaßt, als heilige Nothwendigkeit hervortritt."

Here, Steffens combines numerous dichotomies: Knowledge-beauty, general-particular, totality-individuation, coercion and the autonomy of life. In no case does he make explicit how these conceptual regimes relate to each other. This is a form of analogical reasoning or interchangeability without making the logic of the argument explicit, and the results are rather startling: the “innocent play of freedom”, being “tempered by its own nature”, and “coercion” as “sacred necessity” can come together within the overarching notion of totality. The entire passage can be read as structured by the idea of juxtaposition: Steffens finds different trends in his own times that nevertheless can come together under a common goal, but again, he does not add further nuance as to how these trends relate to each other. Also, rather concrete and highly abstract terms are juxtaposed here. We might say: what we find here, is a form of *conceptual overcrowding* that still leaves a lot open, and that gives expression to rather open forms of conceptual frameworks that exist next to each other without clear hierarchical structures.

Let’s compare these strategies with a pictorial strategy that is displayed in landscape paintings such as Lars Hertervig’s “The Island Borgøya” from 1867.¹¹ Hertervig’s painting is constructed along a very classical composition, with converging lines in the foreground (something that the compositionally far more radical paintings by Caspar David Friedrich do not have!); but these lines converge towards a centre that is both dramatic and evasive at the same time. There is a lot going on here: Rocks, clouds, shoreline, the shadows of the rocks on the water, ships, but what the viewer actually sees in the very centre of the painting is a very diffuse area in which water, clouds, and rock come together, in smooth transitions that cannot be fully unravelled into transparent identifications. We also encounter this phenomenon in other paintings of the Romanticist genre; paintings by Carl Gustav Carus also depict richly empty centres,¹² and Caspar David Friedrich

11 A reproduction in <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/stories/explore-the-collection/lars-hertervigs-luminous-landscapes/>.

12 A paradigm example: Carl Gustav Carus’ Painting *Hochgebirgstal* from 1822 (today at Düsseldorf, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast), with a composition that is quite as classical as that in Hertervig’s island-painting: diagonal lines converging towards a central area in the painting that only contains clouds/fog. In the terms of Steffens’ tendentious comparison of religious attitudes with natural categories, we might say: these painting do not display the volatility of air, but turn

builds entire paintings around the difficulty to identify certain areas in a painted landscape as being either cloud, or rock, or tree.¹³ With placing a richly textured emptiness in the centre of the canvas, Hertervig includes a key feature of quite some of the most ambitious Romanticist landscape paintings. These paintings, just as Steffens' heaped-up words, turn broad-ranging interchangeability (rock-plants-clouds, for instance) into a rendering of the sublime, they depict an all-pervasive unity as a dynamic exchange within the natural world, and can thus function without giving a prominent place to explicit (e.g. religious) symbolism.

What makes these stylistic devices interesting in our present context, is the dialectical interplay of emptiness and richness. They enrich the artist's expressive range by including openness and the untouchability of the sublime into their works by means of filling the pictorial or textual frame to the very brim. Unity, in these contexts, is not a form of lean abstraction; the texture of these texts and pictures is anti-hierarchical and not organized around clear centres or foundational concepts.

III. Today's fears, misguided forms of unity, passive morality: reading the introduction to Steffens' *Grundzüge*

In the introduction to the *Foundations of philosophical natural science*, Steffens combines, in very condensed writing with long-winded sentences, a critical analysis of his own times with an equally critical discussion of trends in the philosophy and sciences of his times – what remains rather open is the alternative picture or argument that he wants to propose. In the final passages of this introduction he offers strong new concepts, with reference to Schelling (but without referring to detailed passages): “morality of cognition” (“Sit-

air into something pretty solid, while keeping the untouchability of atmospheric phenomena intact.

- 13 A very characteristic painting is Friedrich's *Morgennebel im Gebirge* from 1808, today at the Residenzschloss Heidecksburg in Rudolstadt. Friedrich's much more famous *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10, today Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin) provides another example. For a discussion, see Ziche 2024.

tlichkeit des Erkennens”)¹⁴ and “scientific cult” (“wissenschaftlicher Kultus” – a term that will not be discussed here). This introduction also comments upon stylistic features of his text; his *Foundations* are written in a semi-aphoristic, “epigrammatic” style, but is also intended to be “systematic”; these abbreviated, aphoristic sections should later be used as “headings” in future writings that will have the task of integrating the “immediate” perspectives upon reality sketched in his *Foundations* into larger contexts.¹⁵

For Steffens, his own time is a time of profound fear. This fear results dialectically from both a fear of infinity and of finitude, where both are themselves mutually interpenetrating each other. It is no longer infinity itself that is threatening (it might be considered as being threatening because it might imply a loss of control), but “the infinity of becoming in the finite”,¹⁶ and vice versa: finitude is threatening because we encounter it in the form of a “finiteness of being in the infinite”. In other words, neither the act of transgressing finitude, nor that of delimiting an infinite potential, are threatening in themselves, but rather the fact that both of these acts are always omnipresent. This is startling because we should rather expect Steffens to argue for a positive evaluation of unifications, of bringing together the finite and the infinite. In fact, Steffens pays quite some attention to the disharmonious aspects of our predicament and, correlated to this, to the disharmonious aspects of faulty forms of harmonization. For him, the threat of quietism arises from unsuccessful attempts at balancing the infinite and the finite, freedom and necessity: “if the external tension between arbitrariness/freedom [Willkür] and natural necessity [Naturzwang] becomes too strong, this ends up in faint-hearted indifference, or one is looking for mediating opinions, assumptions, and hypotheses”.¹⁷ Faint-hearted indifference is a result of overload, not of withdrawing from conflicts. Consequently, he wants us to stand up to the overload, and find ways of getting or continuing to be active nevertheless,¹⁸ which will not be possible in a purely harmonizing attitude.

14 On this concept see Lorenz 1995.

15 Steffens 1806, IV.

16 Steffens 1806, XIII.

17 Steffens 1806, XIV.

18 In similar terms, Steffens criticizes a “kraftlose Schlawheit”, a “forceless listlessness” in Steffens 1809, 213.

Steffens relates this analysis of the origins of fear and of quietism to trends in the philosophy in his times. He finds two characteristic forms of philosophical argument that both are, in opposite ways, insufficient: There are those who can grasp totality, but fail to account for individuality in its concrete detail.¹⁹ Adherents of this view move towards a philosophy of feeling and piety, of the indeterminate, that can only be approached in “Andacht, Ahndung, Anbetung”, in “devotion, pre-sentiment, adoration”. On the other hand, there are thinkers who assume the unity of “poetry, philosophy, science, and art”,²⁰ but can only conceive of this unity in an “external” way, as a form of hybrid mixture (illustrated by an example from anti-binary gender roles that again reads appallingly from today’s perspective). Steffens does not explicitly name his reference authors here; interestingly, both lines of criticism turn out, in his analysis, to be quite similar.

The solution that he suggests is interestingly anti-conciliatory. We need to empty the “bitter chalice to the very bottom”,²¹ we must “love coercion”, and must be “looking for, and finding, harmony in eternal tension/contradiction”.²² But there also remains the conciliatory discourse of unification: “the eternal laws of unchangeable being become One with the existence of human individuality”²³ – embedding and conflict, oneness and coercion can come together. That harmony must be “looked for” implies that it needs to be found.²⁴ Finding something always involves a moment of passivity, and there are quite some more passages in these texts that emphasize our being passive. What needs to be emphasized here, is the focus upon *passivity* which continues to be an important motive in Steffens’ arguments. It can be found in an entire series of semantic strategies and arguments.

Steffens describes the way how the individual comes about in rather *depersonalized* terms; we do not produce ourselves as individ-

19 Steffens here does not use the word “concrete”, but speaks, to a similar effect, about “the clear and distinct outline of the individual”, Steffens 1806, VI.

20 Steffens 1806, VII.

21 Steffens 1806, XIII.

22 *ibid.*

23 Steffens 1806, XVI.

24 The term “finding” is used frequently in his texts; see, e.g., Steffens 1806, XXI: the human mind “finds” itself in the things if it is “captured by infinite love”.

uals (which is a strongly anti-Fichtean stance to take). Rather, “the individual life will come to the fore”, it “will break forth”²⁵ in the symmetrical process of integrating into One the generality of thinking and the individuality of the objects. We can still describe this in close analogy with the classically Romanticist model of letting the unassailably infinite play a role in our lives and cognitive endeavours in the form of an indefinitely delayed or strictly unassailable goal towards which we may direct our activities. But he describes this situation in a different way, as studying not eternal striving, but situations in which something over which we do not have full control emerges when we stand up to the big tensions that characterize our life and our times. We might call this a meta-Romanticist move: from the situation in which we live up to the Romanticist predicament, there emerges a new iteration of the predicament, but it is now no longer the utopian infinite, but the individual that emerges.

Ethics itself is described by Steffens in *passive* terms (I am here using his condensed discussion of ethics in his book on *His own times*). Again, he starts with an argument from comprehensive unity: “Nature, in the higher sense, is the immediate, omnipresent revelation of divine action.”²⁶ Here, the argument gets opaque, and reminds one of the problems relating to Spinoza and his alleged fatalism: “Thus, humans are, originally, *totally* nature”, but we also have to account for human freedom and autonomy. He combines two lines of argument here: on the one hand, human actions (he uses the term “human creation” to refer to our actions) are still phenomena of God’s “original act” that is omnipresent and all-pervasive in all of reality (described in a Romanticist description of nature: “God’s spirit “breathes in the airs, it murmurs in the trees, the industrious waters are looking for the proper words”²⁷). This profound unity of ourselves with the divine is revealed to us in an “indestructible feeling that is a secure indication of the unity of our creation with the divine, our being freely at home in the divine”,²⁸ namely the feeling of faith (a phrase that reminds one strongly of Jacobi). So in our own actions, too, we see a phenomenon of God’s original act; traced back

25 Steffens 1806, XVI.

26 Steffens 1817, 307.

27 Steffens 1817, 308.

28 *ibid.*

to its origins, ethics is most intimately united with nature.²⁹ But how can we conceive of ourselves as being active and autonomous if even our free actions reflect God's original action? Steffens adamantly claims that ethics also requires that ethical actors be persons. So he needs to find ways to describe personhood in passive terms, or in terms of being fully embedded in God's all-encompassing original act which also is the foundation of the all-encompassing unity we find everywhere.

This is indeed what Steffens aims to do. One step towards this goal consists in relating individuality itself to overarching unity: "Pure individuality that, having its foundation in itself, is always leading its very own, timeless life. It expresses itself in history, in the form of eternal clarity and everlasting character; it expresses itself in nature as eternal, untainted harmony."³⁰ What he describes here is the way from individuality up to the level of original unity; but this description is framed in rather strongly *non-individual terms*. Being timeless, eternal, being absolutely unified and harmonious seems to transcend the concreteness of personal individuation. In a similar expression, the transition from oppositions to unity is phrased in non-personal terms: "the appearance of a contradiction destroys itself not only within totality, but also within the individual, all the way down to the infinitely small".³¹

This line of argument can be made more plausible by showing that *individuality* itself is constituted by ideals of harmony. There is a rather straightforward way of achieving this, namely by tapping into the rich resources of a discourse on "Bildung" and related ideals. A key term in this context is, for Steffens, the "proper measure", which he takes to refer to an account of personal perfection as, at the same time, universal. He can redescribe this ideal in the terminology of the philosophy of nature, arguing from a symmetry between turning towards interior world and turning towards totality: "Whosoever

29 Steffens 1817, 310.

30 Steffens 1806, 203–4; German original: "Die reine Individualität, die, in sich begründet, immer nur ein eigenes, zeitloses Leben führt, drückt sich geschichtlich, als die ewige Klarheit und Unvergänglichkeit der Gesinnung, als Sittlichkeit – in der Natur, als ewige ungetrübte Harmonie aus."

31 Steffens 1806, 174; German original: "der Schein des Gegensatzes vernichtet sich nicht allein im Ganzen, sondern auch [Orig.: aus] im Einzelnen bis ins unendlich-Kleinste".

recognizes one's own proper measure and grasps it in its being alive, they possess the measure of all things",³² or:

Whosoever retreats into themselves, recognizing themselves in their inner forms, moving themselves in beautiful circuits, they lead a general and individual life at the very same time. They are united with all things via a clear ether, the very same sun awakens and enlivens themselves and everyone, the very same gravity supports them and everyone; they lead a planetary life.³³

Again, this account of what is most intimately personal is phrased in depersonalized terms, as a passive "being united" and as a form of being embedded within all-pervasive ether, sound and gravity – it is these natural forces and phenomena that are described in active terms.

The "proper measure" also captures the adequate attitude vis-à-vis the state:

Follow your own proper and higher nature, recklessly, not prudently in an external fashion whether this nature is alien to the state or not! Where you have found your own proper measure, there you have understood, in the most profound way possible, the sacred relational structure of totality, the inner coincidence with everything.³⁴

Again, this is a form of finding; at the key moment, something comes to the fore by itself – and our embeddedness into totality manifests itself to us in a passive way, too:

This is what we want, this is what the desiring soul is looking for, this is what incites all industry and efforts: Destroy mere appearances, view the divine that is what has permanent existence in everything. It only emerges ["tritt hervor"] where the totality is mirrored in any individual

32 Steffens 1809, 212; German original: "Wer sein eigenes Maß erkennt und lebendig faßt, der besitzt das Maß aller Dinge." See also Steffens 1809, 233.

33 Steffens 1809, 212; German original: "Wer sich in sich zurückzieht, in innern Bildungen sich selber erkennt, in schönen Bahnen sich selber bewegt, der führt ein allgemeines und gesondertes Wesen zugleich. Mit allen Dingen verbindet ihn ein klarer Äther, dieselbe Sonne erweckt und belebt ihn und alle, die nämliche Schwere trägt ihn und alle; er führt ein planetarisches Leben."

34 Steffens 1809, 233; German original: "Rücksichtslos folge du also deiner eigenen höhern Natur, nicht äußerlich klügelnd, ob sie dem Staate fremd sei oder nicht! Wo du das eigene Maß gefunden hast, da hast du das heilige Verhältnis des Ganzen, die innere Übereinkunft mit allem, am tiefsten ergriffen".

thing. [...] ‘The soul knows the infinite, it knows everything, but only darkly. If you hear the roar of a forest in a storm, you hear the sounds made by each individual leaf, but mixed with the sounds of all the other leaves, without being able to differentiate them. In this way the roar and surges of the world are in our soul’.³⁵

Here, also perception is described as a fully passive process; passive to the extent that perception is not even passively being imprinted by objects or events in the external world: Steffens, with Schelling, reduces this relationship even further to the laconic statement of external events simply ‘being’ in our soul.

But are these descriptions and arguments sufficient to bridge the gaps that we perceive between human individuality on the one hand, and God’s ordering of the world on the other? Steffens certainly thinks to be able to bridge this gap. One of the rather more remarkable statements in this context is Steffens’ optimism that we may make use of coercion in order to get humans on track towards adopting and appreciating the stance of unity. This can be motivated by full confidence in unity: “coercion” is completely unproblematic if it integrates that which is separated from totality back into this unity,³⁶ so he is not simply arguing for the dynamic freedom of emergence. In the same terminology, this point is repeated in his programmatic texts on universities and in his 1817 analysis of his own times.

Universities need to combine a research orientation with a non-liberal attitude as to transmitting knowledge. In his discussion of the universities, he needs to combine it with authoritarian knowledge, and does so via the concept of “*proper measure*”, “*eigenes Maß*”. Two conflicting notions come together here: that of a “*proper measure*” – with its individualistic connotations – and that of stable truths

35 Steffens 1806, 267; the quote in this passage is taken from Schelling’s *Aphorismen*, SW VII, 173. German original: “Das ist es, was wir wollen, was die sehende Seele sucht, was Mühe und Fleiß und Anstrengung jeglicher Art erregt: Den Schein vernichtend, das Göttliche schauen, was in allem allein Bestand hat. Da aber tritt es allein hervor, wo in jedwedem Dinge das Ganze sich spiegelt. [...] ‘Die Seele kennt zwar das Unendliche, kennt alles, aber dunkel. Wenn ihr das Brausen eines Waldes im Sturme vernehmt, so hört ihr das Geräusch eines jeden Blattes, aber vermischt mit dem Geräusch aller andern, ohne es zu unterscheiden. So ist das Rauschen und Wogen der Welt in unserer Seele”.

36 Steffens 1806, X.

that need to be presented at universities in such a way that the students' minds do not get destabilized. In his texts on the *Idea of the Universities* from 1809, Steffens makes this fully explicit: “the state cannot permit the scholars to involve the not yet fully formed youth in the maze of conflicting views, just as little as it can permit the religious factions to spread out by engendering proselytes.”³⁷

IV. Make nature matter: Our actions are our passive encounters

Steffens is not a reliable reference author. His writing frequently is evasive, his writing style oscillates between the fragmentary and the conceptually overcrowded attempt of rendering big systematic ideas in ultra-compact form, his ethico-political claims can be unacceptable, his arguments are far less stable and conceptually consolidated than they may appear – Steffens is just as much an advocate of unity as of tensions, pain and violence. But he is an intriguing discussion partner who can help highlighting intriguing conceptual issues, precisely because so much of what he says does not fit smoothly into clearly streamlined narratives.

The conceptual tangles that have been described here open up strong, and now surprisingly precise, parallels with a far more recent discourse: with Bruno Latour's discussion of “political ecology” (Latour 2004). Latour rejects, based upon arguments from the science studies, what he calls a “two-house politics” that assumes a clear separation between nature and politics. The one house, ‘nature’, in this picture is conceived of as being beyond political control, whereas political negotiations reside in the other house, and are limited by nature. But this dualistic perspective does not adequately capture the practice of the sciences, and it is not helpful in political contexts. The typical objects that operate in the discourses of science and of politics do not fit this dichotomy, and if we take nature as an immensely

37 Steffens 1809, 222; German original: “[der Staat kann] den Gelehrten ebenso wenig erlauben, die noch nicht gebildete Jugend in den Irrgarten einander widersprechender Ansichten zu verwickeln, als er den Religionsparteien erlaubt, sich durch Proselyten auszubreiten.” – On Steffens' text on universities, see Bengtson/Frølund/Sørensen 2019.

powerful and external frame of reference that puts limits to what is negotiable in politics, we lose incentives towards action. What we need, and what we also find (our conceptual needs and our findings in the analysis of science and politics closely correspond to each other here; a strategy that is again closely paralleled in Steffens' texts) are not "matters of fact, risk-free objects" with "*clear boundaries*", but "matters of concern"³⁸ that go beyond hierarchical thinking. In order to get there, we need to assemble new "collectives", but these cannot be arrived at by simply adding up separate conceptual regimes. Put succinctly: a political economy is only possible if we go beyond 'nature' in the traditional sense.

The parallels with Steffens' arguments are strong. Steffens does not think in terms of an additive mereology either. In Steffensian terms: we encounter rather surprising combinations of activity and passivity. According to Steffens, we encounter God everywhere. In the anthropocene, we encounter the human everywhere. Both contexts, therefore, urgently raise the problem of balancing activity and passivity. How can we understand that? As a transformation of a Fichtean stance that emphasizes that active and conscious human autonomy needs to be at the core both of our cognition and our actions? As demanding a refinement of notions of identity and of the constraints under which even God has to labour, as we find it in the middle and later Schelling? The anthropocene turns quite some of these strange combinations into something very real indeed. Let's try to work with a compact summary of what we may find in Steffens: *Our actions are our passive encounters*. In a Fichtean context, the right-to-left direction is clear: we only encounter resistance, i.e. we experience objects only via an experience of resistance that shows us to ourselves as being passive. And: we experience this passivity only when we actively engage with exploring where our cognitive faculties can reach. In a Schellingian context, the world of nature, i.e. the world that in subjectivist idealism is experienced as the resistance that our activities encounter, is itself conceived as being inherently active.³⁹

38 These terms in Latour 2004, 22, 24.

39 For an interesting study of how agency is ascribed to objects, in the context of a larger project (see Dürbeck/Probst/Schaub 2022) in the history of literature –

But what we really need, and what Steffens is hinting at, is an approach that goes beyond these directed readings.⁴⁰ The anthropocentric jargon that our actions have been consolidated into the framework of our encounters echoes well with Steffens. In our actions, we encounter our own actions as something that has moved beyond our control, in a move that is captured in the passive descriptions that Steffens gives of our ethical stance. Put in these compact terms, this is only a minor twist given to Fichte's emphasis upon activity, but Steffens also illustrates that this small step can lead to rather drastic conclusions as regards the relationship between activity and passivity.⁴¹

In Steffens' account of an undirected interaction between activity and passivity, we do not act upon an external reality, and neither do we depend upon an external reality. Steffens' picture, thus, is not characterized by the dichotomies and hierarchies that Latour so forcefully criticizes. But a reading of Steffens also highlights the difficulties of this stance: how can we reject dualisms in such a way that the potential for critical reflection or intervention is preserved, or even actively supported? Let us note another intriguing aspect that comes up in a comparison between Steffens and Latour: where Latour argues on the basis of a critical analysis of the highly developed system of the sciences and of scientific practices, Steffens writes at the very beginning of such a system. This means that the problem of balancing activity and passivity both has a foundational role for our notion of 'science' and has a function outside of the context of science and scientific practices.

Quite some studies of Steffens emphasize the key role of concepts and ideals of unity in his writings.⁴² But his take upon unity is very richly textured, unities can be complex, fragile, riddled with

i.e. a context that is also clearly relevant for Steffens – see Dürbeck/Schaumann 2015.

40 To which extent this coincides with arguments in later texts by Schelling cannot be explored here.

41 This also shows that Carl Schmitt's critical discussion of a (political) Romanticism is too one-sided. Schmitt criticizes the Romanticists for – in their "occasionalist" stance – not being able to provide a foundation for (decisive) human action (Schmitt 1925). He thus rightly highlights the crucial importance of the activity-passivity relationship for an adequate understanding of Romanticism, but misreads the Romantic movement as being one-sidedly subjectivist.

42 See, e.g., Engelhardt 2005; Paul 1973.

tensions, leading to ethically appalling positions, and should better be replaced by a discussion of the complex balancing of activity and passivity, both in the human realm and in nature. And: we should take the idea that we should understand our actions as our passive encounters as an anti-quietist call to action.

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