

Schleiermacher's Never-written *Naturphilosophie*

Abstract

Friedrich Schleiermacher is traditionally considered the author of an Idealist philosophy without nature. Contrary to this common belief, this paper aims to prove the existence of a phantasmatic, yet insistent nature-philosophical perspective in his work and thinking. In many passages, Schleiermacher claims that the study of nature should coordinate with the study of morality and that nature and reason are two convergent and interpenetrating movements of the Being. The paper analyzes the texts in which he develops this view, with particular attention to the 1825 speech titled *On the Difference Between Natural Law and Moral Law*. It will then be shown how Schleiermacher's parallelism can be applied to one of the fundamental distinctions in his thought, that between ›organs‹ and ›symbols‹. Finally, his standpoint on nature will be associated with another crucial concept of his philosophy, the concept of impulse.

1. Introduction

Among the protagonists of the fervent *Goethezeit*, Friedrich Schleiermacher is traditionally considered one of the least – if not the least – concerned with the problem of nature.¹ The vast majority of the interpreters remain convinced of his aversion towards the

1 E.g., Mulert, Hermann (1907): *Schleiermachers Geschichtphilosophische Ansichten in ihrer Bedeutung für seine Theologie*. Gießen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 11.; Moretto, Giovanni (1979): *Etica e storia in Schleiermacher*. Napoli: Bibliopolis, 380–381.

Naturphilosophie of his times. This long-lasting opinion, however, is largely inadequate, and is in fact slowly changing, partly due to the progressive publication of Schleiermacher's *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. This paper argues in favor of a reassessment of Schleiermacher's view on nature, first of all by demonstrating that nature holds a crucial systematic position in his philosophy. The Moravian theologian was undoubtedly well-versed in contemporary *Naturphilosophie*; he was also significantly influenced by Romantic biocentrism² and certain developments in the natural sciences of his time. His ideas on nature, however, remained hidden behind other aspects of his thought.

After demonstrating the presence of an original view of nature in Schleiermacher's philosophy, the paper aims to elucidate its fundamental approach and concepts. Unlike thinkers like Goethe and Schelling, who put nature at the center of their interest, or Fichte and Hegel, who subordinated nature to the domain of pure reason, Schleiermacher advocated for a radical parallelism between nature and reason. His position relied on an effectualist ontology which allows conceiving of the reversibility of the two domains of nature and reason. These are not two regimes of abstract laws, one governed by inescapable necessity and the other by freedom: they are instead two regimes of acts, one mainly oriented towards progressive idealization, the other towards progressive realization, but both animated by vectors of idealization and realization. At the heart of this vision lies the Romantic and Idealistic distinction between the living act and the lifeless law. Like many other thinkers of his time, Schleiermacher holds to a speculative notion of life as that which produces a sensible effect or movement, and therefore pertains to both spiritual and corporeal substances.³ In this sense, natural life consists of acts

2 I use the term ›Romantic biocentrism‹, as Poggi does, to denote the pervasive attention towards biological life within Romantic sciences, in contrast with the more general attitude of Romantic vitalism, which was based on a much broader notion of ›life‹ (Poggi, Stefano (2000): *Il genio e l'unità della natura. La scienza della Germania romantica (1790–1830)*. Bologna: il Mulino.) (see e.g. Mitchell, Robert (2013): *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature*. New York: John Hopkins University Press).

3 The monumental dictionary by Johann Heinrich Zedler, published between 1731 and 1754, defined life (»Leben«) as »alles, was eine Wirkung und Bewegung spüren lassen, [...] obgleich dasselbe nach dem Unterscheide derer Dinge, an denen

dictating their own norms (i.e., of living acts) exactly like spiritual life.

This perspective is clearly illustrated by Schleiermacher in an often-ignored speech from 1825, titled *Über den Unterschied zwischen Naturgesetz und Sittengesetz*. The second section of this paper focuses on untangling the claims presented in those passages of high speculative density. The third and final section instead addresses a different aspect of Schleiermacher's natural philosophy, one that he never clearly explicated but can be legitimately inferred from his ethical writings in the light of his parallelist perspective: an analogy can be drawn between the field of ethics, which studies reason unfolding and developing through vectors of realization (referred to as ›organs‹) and idealization (referred to as ›symbols‹), and the field of physics, which studies nature constructing itself through organic vectors and reflecting in itself through symbolic vectors. The paper concludes by examining Schleiermacher's theory of ›impulse‹, which emphasizes that nature's self-constructive path of idealization is oriented towards the human being as its ultimate outcome. In the end, Schleiermacher's conception of the living act reveals itself as oriented towards the convergence of reason and nature in human existence, without however considering the latter as a necessary or stable endpoint.

2. A system without nature?

There are of course undeniable reasons to believe that the realm of nature was of little or no interest to Schleiermacher. Some of his best-known works testify to a clear anthropocentric perspective that opposes spiritual interiority and material exteriority. In the *Reden Über die Religion*, for example, Schleiermacher writes: »To external

es sich befindet, merklich unterschieden ist« (Zedler, Johann Heinrich (1737): *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, Bd. XVI (L–Leir). Halle/Leipzig: Zedler, 642). During the 18th century, this dynamic, effectualist, yet still spiritualist understanding of life acquired more materialist and scientific nuances through the association with the notion of »force« (see Gambarotto, Andrea (2018): *Vital Forces, Teleology and Organization. Philosophy of Nature and the Rise of Biology in Germany*. Cham: Springer).

nature, which is by so many deemed the first and supreme temple of Divinity, the innermost sanctuary of religion, I lead only as its outermost atrium [*Vorhof*].⁴ »Space and mass do not constitute the world and are not the matter of religion; seeking the infinity in that corresponds to a juvenile way of thinking«.⁵ Further on, he mentions again nature as a mere »vestibule [*Vorhof*]« of religious experience.⁶ The »vestibular« character of the natural world is a trope that traces back at least to Luther, who defined the body as the »atrium« of the soul.⁷ »Examine the law« of the living, writes Schleiermacher,⁸ and you will only witness the Spirit in action.⁹

Moreover, Schleiermacher never devoted any writing or university course to the philosophical study of nature. His teachings at the University of Berlin cover an almost encyclopedic range (from theology to pedagogy, aesthetics and the doctrine of the State), but have never addressed the field of *Naturphilosophie*; nor did Schleiermacher tackle the problem of nature when he was a member of the Jena Romantic circle. These facts alone may seem enough to settle the matter.

And yet, it would be incorrect to argue that Schleiermacher expunged nature from his philosophical system.¹⁰ In fact, physics –

4 Schleiermacher, Friedrich (1980–): *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter. Abbreviated in the text as KGA, (Abt./Bd.); here: KGA, I/2, 223.

5 Ibid., I/2, 225.

6 Ibid., I/2, 227.

7 »*Sein seel ist sanctum [...]. Sein corper ist atrium*« (Luther, Martin (1897): *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Schriften*, Vol. 7, *Schriften 1520/21 (einschließlich Predigten, Disputationen)*. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 551).

8 KGA, I/2, 226.

9 See also Otten, Willemien (2020): »Nature as Dispositive Thought in Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion*«. In: Id., *Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking. From Eriugena to Emerson*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 127–158.

10 The presence of a »system« in Schleiermacher's thought is a controversial issue. It is true that Schleiermacher never articulated an actual philosophical system in the sense of the *Systemwissenschaft*; but it is equally true that all his mature work is consistently guided by a systematic idea, which is explicitly detailed in the 1804 review to Schelling's *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* (KGA, I/4, 461–484). In fact, Schleiermacher's systematic inspiration suggests a different concept of the system of sciences compared to the one enforced by Hegel and Schelling: one in which the single disciplines are not assimilated into speculation, intended as the science of the identification of

as he defines it in a classical fashion – is one of the most fundamental disciplines in Schleiermacher's view of the architecture of knowledge, where it finds its place alongside ethics, the study of human activities. When he outlines the overall structure of his own system of knowledge, then, Schleiermacher reveals that the system itself exceeds the number of disciplines that he actually addressed during his life. From these passages we learn that the highest science of all is dialectics, where Thinking aspires to reunite with Being along the process of knowledge. From dialectics, two parallel disciplines descend: physics and ethics, corresponding to the domains of nature and reason («*Vernunft*»). These two fields share one and the same subject, the becoming identity of nature and reason, from opposed viewpoints: the former deals with »rational nature« (rather than pure nature), the latter with »natural reason« (rather than pure reason).¹¹ Thus physics and ethics form a »vital complex«¹² under the metaphysical aegis of dialectics.

In his systematic reflections, Schleiermacher explicitly argues for a full-fledged parallelism between the study of nature and the study of reason in activity: »never is thus ethics better than physics, there is always a parallelism between the two«.¹³ If abstracted from nature, reason is nothing but the void totality of all concepts; if abstracted from reason, nature is nothing but the inert totality of all objects.¹⁴ According to their fundamental reciprocity («*Ineinandersein*»), nature and reason appear as the objective and the subjective side of the common process of spirit and matter: reason is the domain of the active »*Produzieren*«, nature the domain of the »*Produkt*«. ¹⁵ This definition, opening Schleiermacher's *Brouillon zur Ethik*, is an ethical distinction in all respects. The implicit preeminence of reason intended as subjective activity upon passive nature is an ethical principle; this means that from the viewpoint of physics, the relationship

Being and Thought. On this topic see Moretto (1979, 336–338), who refers to the crucial studies by Herms and Süskind.

11 Schleiermacher, Friedrich (1910–1913): *Werke. Auswahl in 4 Bände*. Leipzig: Meiner. Abbreviated in the text as WA, (Bd.), II, 252.

12 KGA, I/1, 550.

13 WA, II, 249.

14 KGA, II/10,2, 37.

15 WA, II, 79.

is symmetrically reversed: nature is indeed a specific kind of activity that cannot be equated to any form of ›dormant reason‹.

Nature and reason are interwoven domains of vectors of objectivation and subjectivation¹⁶ that can be observed from both sides. A natural body, for example, cannot exist or be thought of as separated from its own vectors of subjectivation, which are its forces, relations and formative constraints. Likewise, a concept cannot be separated from its own domain of spatial-temporal determinations. The main difference between the domain of nature and the domain of reason is that the former marks an overall movement of idealization (from reality to ideality), while the latter marks an overall movement of realization (from ideality to reality). In Idealistic terms, nature is reality aspiring to become ideal (cosmicity) and reason is ideality striving to realize itself (historicity).¹⁷

Precisely from this standpoint, Schleiermacher criticizes the other philosophical systems of his times. In a fragment dating between 1800 and 1803, he writes: »Two distinct theories came out from Idealism. The Fichtean one, according to which no physics is possible, and the Schellingian one, in which likewise no ethics is possible. It is therefore necessary to demonstrate that the physics of the latter and the ethics of the former are bad and empty as well«. ¹⁸ Fichte's philosophy is described as the anti-physical idealistic philosophy *par excellence*; and in order to oppose it, Schleiermacher is ready to count himself among the *Naturphilosophen*.¹⁹ Schelling's efforts towards a physical philosophy, on the other hand, are declared to be failed, as they do not truly account for the integration between nature and the sphere of human ethics, history and culture.²⁰ In another passage from Schleiermacher's 1818/1819 course on dialectics, Schelling's vision of nature embodies all the shortcomings of *Naturphilosophie*, caught in the contradiction between the empiric study of matter and the speculative construction of nature in general.

16 Ibid., II, 92.

17 A speculative science of nature (»*Naturwissenschaft*«) and an empiric study of nature (»*Naturkunde*«) descend from physics, a speculative science of morality (»*Sittenlehre*«) and an empiric study of morality (or philosophy of history, »*Geschichtskunde*«) from ethics (ibid., II, 535–536).

18 KGA, I/3, 320.

19 Ibid., I/3, 243.

20 Ibid., I/3, 300.

The real subjects of natural philosophy remain hidden at the center of this hiatus: these subjects are the »actions [*Actionen*]« or »forces [*Kräfte*]« of nature.²¹

We can preliminarily conclude that, at the very least, Schleiermacher should not be counted among those whom Grant²² defines as the »anti-physical Idealists«, as his philosophy does not oppose the sphere of nature in its premises. It is not by chance that one of the most insightful interpreters of Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, devoted an entire chapter of his *Leben Schleiermachers* to physics. »It is impossible«, writes Dilthey,²³ »to grasp Schleiermacher's system without presupposing the *Naturphilosophie* and its historical value«. It therefore proves necessary to reread Schleiermacher's oeuvre in the light of this actual gap in the system, which »he himself perceived very clearly«. ²⁴ Schleiermacher's never-written *Naturphilosophie* exerts a phantasmatic influence that cannot be overlooked.

The reasons why Schleiermacher never wrote a Physics must be ascribed to biographical and personal circumstances. From his letters, for example, we can clearly gain the impression that he never considered himself an expert in a discipline that required encyclopedic omniscience.²⁵ We can therefore assume that, with the humility that characterized his way of philosophizing, he deliberately chose not to venture into a field that he did not perceive like his own, but nonetheless considered essential in the edifice of knowledge. In any case, this did not certainly prevent him from delving into the matter. His personal library contained literature on the history and philosophy of nature by authors such as Alexander von Humboldt,

21 Ibid., II/10, I, 122, 133.

22 Grant, Iain Hamilton (2017): *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*. London: Bloomsbury.

23 Dilthey, Wilhelm (1966): »Leben Schleiermachers.« In: Redeker, Martin (ed.): *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. XIV, Schleiermachers System als Philosophie und Theologie. Erste Abt., Schleiermachers System als Philosophie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 451.

24 Ibid.

25 Schmidt, Sarah (2018a): »Es ist doch sehr fatal, dass wir so weit auseinander sind« – Stationen einer Freundschaft zwischen Steffens und Schleiermacher aus Briefen und Dokumenten«. In: Schmidt, Sarah/Miodonski, Leon (ed.): *System und Subversion. Friedrich Schleiermachers und Henrik Steffens*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 33–65.

Linnaeus, Oken, Steffens.²⁶ We know that he conducted chemistry experiments,²⁷ made botanical observations,²⁸ went on geo-mineralogical excursions²⁹ and even took a naturalistic trip to Scandinavia towards the end of his life.³⁰ During his years as a professor in Halle, he had the opportunity to attend the lessons held by Danish mineralogist and *Naturphilosoph* Henrik Steffens, with whom he formed a long-lasting friendship and intellectual collaboration.³¹ Later, during his years in Berlin, he participated in the lectures delivered by mineralogist Dietrich Ludwig Gustav Karsten.³² From all this we can legitimately conclude that Schleiermacher was deeply connected with the natural sciences of his times.³³

3. The laws of morality and the laws of nature

Schleiermacher's reflection on nature, however, is not limited to formal indications referring to a ›phantom limb‹ of his system. Several

26 See Meckenstock, Günter (1993): *Schleiermachers Bibliothek. Bearbeitung des faksimilierten Rauchschen Auktionskatalogs und der Hauptbücher des Verlages G. Reimer*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.

27 KGA, I/3, 127–128.

28 Ibid., I/14, 99–103.

29 Gerber, Simon (2013): »Die Harzreise (1806)«. In: Arndt, Andreas (ed.): *Schleiermacher in Halle (1804–1808)*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 131–138.

30 Schmidt, Sarah (2018b): »Naturbegriff und Naturerkenntnis bei Steffens und Schleiermacher«. In: Schmidt, Sarah/Miodonski, Leon (ed.): *System und Subversion. Friedrich Schleiermachers und Henrik Steffens*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 93–117, 93–94.

31 The intellectual bond with Steffens was extremely important for the development of Schleiermacher's view on nature (see Schmidt, Sarah/Miodonski, Leon (ed.) (2018): *System und Subversion. Friedrich Schleiermachers und Henrik Steffens*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter). Schleiermacher recommended his students to attend Steffens' lessons in natural philosophy as a complement to his own. After pledging to have Steffens transferred to the University of Berlin, he will quote and use his doctrines since his first course on dialectics in Berlin. As mentioned by Schmidt (2018b, 97), there are testimonies that Schleiermacher considered Steffens the author »with whom he agreed most« (despite Steffen's clear Schellingian orientation).

32 Schmidt 2018b, 93.

33 Dittmer, Johannes Michael (2001): *Schleiermachers Wissenschaftslehre als Entwurf einer prozessualen Metaphysik in semiotischer Perspektive. Triadizität im Werden*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, chap. 2.

passages scattered throughout his work outline an original view that touches on some of the most relevant issues in coeval natural philosophy. Among these passages, the most prominent one is contained in a speech held at the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences on January 6, 1825 and titled *Über den Unterschied zwischen Naturgesetz und Sittengesetz*.³⁴ Here Schleiermacher elaborates on the idea that *Naturphilosophie* should deal with actions and forces, that is with the concrete acts of nature, rather than with its material objects (as pure empiricism does) or with its overall unity (as pure speculation does). The terms ›actions‹ and ›forces‹ are concepts related to the reversibility of nature and reason, which is the grand idea around which the speech is built.

After establishing that the approach based on the »coordination and opposition« of ethics and physics dates back to Plato and Aristotle,³⁵ Schleiermacher reminds his listeners that in the common opinion, the laws of nature are associated with natural necessity, whereas the laws of reason hinge on men's free will and subjective decision. Since the occurrence of natural events (like the famous Lisbon earthquake commented by Voltaire and Kant) is not the product of any choice, no distinction is possible between good and evil: in the realm of nature, the application of the law cannot be made subject of judgement, and every event is both contingent and necessary. Laws can neither be contravened nor perfected. In the field of morality, instead, laws always require an act of choice. Their application or realization is not necessitated regardless of their validity, because they depend on consciousness and judgement to be applied.³⁶

Now, this traditional distinction can be challenged, argues Schleiermacher, by realizing that a moral law does not preside over

34 This text is rarely commented and sometimes even misused by the interpreters. For example, a renowned expert of Schleiermacher such as Sergio Sorrentino mentions it superficially while discussing the issue of natural and ethical normativity and ends up distorting its content significantly. (Sorrentino, Sergio (1991): »Natur- und Vernunftkausalität. Schleiermachers Ethik als Thematisierung der Humanität«. In: Meckenstock, Günter (ed.): *Schleiermacher und die wissenschaftliche Kultur des Christentums*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 493–508, 508.) The only relevant exception is again Dittmer (2001, 390f).

35 KGA, I/11, 432.

36 Ibid., I/11, 443.

the moral act as a pre-determined ideal, but is rather built *within* the moral experience and through the moral act itself. Act and norm are not distinctly separated. Here Schleiermacher is resorting to the tenets of his own ethical doctrine, according to which morality does not rely on an eternal domain of abstract values, but on the human tension towards producing good and the idealization of reality carried out through human activities. The norm, however, is not the mere product of the act: it is rather its inherent »*Besonnenheit*«, the sparkle of consciousness that guides and organizes it from within.³⁷ In this sense, the rational validity of the moral law *forms around* the living force of human tendencies, impulses and desires that make up every individual action.

In the field of morality, it is the act that is »transcendental«, not the norm.³⁸ Through a deliberate reinterpretation of the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, Schleiermacher shifts the core of moral action to its effectuality (*Wirklichkeit*). Effectuality does not lie in the action's exterior results or material satisfaction, but rather in the interior determination of the acting I: »The determining force of the fundamental disposition [*Gesinnung*] of the I is the true and original moral Being«. ³⁹ It follows that moral laws are one with their own realization intended as the self-determination of the human individual. The moral law, says Schleiermacher, is a *Sollen* endowed with *Sein*,⁴⁰ a »living force«⁴¹ constructing itself in every organized act – and is therefore one and the same with what holds together the bundle of motivations constituting human activity, i.e., the unfolding consciousness. This also means that the individual is not free in the sense of freely deciding on the application of the law, but rather in the sense of acquiring consciousness of their own motives.

37 In the *Brouillon zur Ethik*, *Besonnenheit* is »the first act of stepping outside of ethos into life [*der erste Act des Heraustreten des Gesinnung ins Leben*]« (WA, II, 222), that is the gushing out of consciousness itself. The original meaning of *Besonnenheit* refers to prudence, deliberation and moral sense; Schleiermacher also uses it to translate the Platonic concept of *σωφροσύνη*.

38 KGA, I/II, 444.

39 Ibid., I/II, 445.

40 »Das Gesetz ist also nur Gesetz, insofern es auch ein Sein bestimmt und nicht al sein bloßes Sollen, wie den auch ein solches streng genommen gar nicht nachgewiesen werden kann. Können wir also hier auf dem Gebiet des Vernunftgesetzes das Sollen nicht trennen von der Bestimmung des Seins« (ibid., I/II, 445).

41 Ibid.

Having established this, it can be argued that, just like morality is not a pure and abstract domain of spiritual values awaiting intentional application, nature is not the crushing necessity of pure matter. The laws of nature do not correspond to blind, meaningless occurrences, but rather to the self-structuring of reality around its own ›actions‹. Analogously to morality, nature determines itself in the circumstances of its own effectuation. Whereas the former is a *Sollen* endowed with *Sein*, says Schleiermacher, the latter is a *Sein* endowed with *Sollen*.

Schleiermacher is claiming that nature is not a collection of static parts produced by necessity, but an organic whole made of formative paths. Natural laws are dynamic and genetic ›actions‹. This is the meaning of the following crucial statement: »All genera of the various forms of individual life are true laws of nature [*alle Gattungsbe-griffe der verschiedenen Formen des Individuellen Lebens sind wahre Naturgesetze*]«.⁴² Just like the laws of morality are the conscious acts of the human individual, the laws of nature are the developmental paths that nature undertakes in its own unfolding. This does not mean, precises Schleiermacher, that nature is a conscious Being: it rather means that it is made of ›actions‹ and ›forces‹ converging in a progressive path of idealization.⁴³ In this regard, Schleiermacher observes that each advancement in nature occurs by creative excess with respect to a previous domain of norms: vegetative life transgresses and surpasses the laws of the physical world, animal life those of vegetative life, intellectual life those of animal life.⁴⁴ With the appearance of humankind, morality comes out of nature and brings it to completion. From this perspective, concludes Schleiermacher, there is no difference between ontology and ethics, as long as ethics is freed from »the analogy with politics«.⁴⁵

The idealization of nature takes place through the progressive integration of contingency operated by natural formations, and not

42 Ibid., I/11, 447.

43 Dilthey often alludes to the presence of a progressive comprehension of nature culminating in the human being in Schleiermacher's physics: »The goal of *Naturphilosophie* is to let humankind emerge from the progressive order of nature [*Stufenfolge der Natur*]. This is then the premise of ethics« (Dilthey 1966, 457).

44 KGA, I/11, 448–449.

45 Ibid., I/11, 451.

by mechanic execution of eternal rules. The laws of nature are not mathematical constants, but the ideas or forms underlying every natural individual as its own regimes of formation. Such interpretation of the brief text from 1825 is justified in the light of some trends in the natural philosophy of that time, of which Schleiermacher was surely aware. That which Timothy Lenoir⁴⁶ refers to as the program of »developmental morphology« was a widespread paradigm that linked the notion that »an idea underlies the possibility of the natural product«⁴⁷ with emerging scientific views such as epigenesis, embryology and transformism. In the first decades of the 19th century, the increased interest around formative forces and the laws governing morphogenesis sparked a greater attention to nature's genetic character. In this framework, a form (*Gestalt*) was understood as that which enables an organic body to develop: the constructive plane of forces guiding its formation from within. Early embryology revealed that morphological constraints have a low degree of universality, allowing for a significant level of contingency that can easily lead to catastrophic outcomes; and also that these loose constraints are the only norms in the living nature, a realm that constantly undergoes creation and destruction and is endowed with a seemingly miraculous plasticity.⁴⁸

Schleiermacher designates these immanent norms of nature through the concept of »*Gattung*«, which literally denotes biological genera but was frequently used to indicate species as well. What is relevant here is that Schleiermacher aims to identify the natural equivalent of the self-determination of the I. Just as the manifestations of the acting consciousness are naturalized reason, genera are spiritualized nature, i.e., vectors of interiorization through which nature idealizes itself. And just as the effectuation of moral laws does not take place at the level of the exterior action, but at the

46 Lenoir, Timothy (1983): *The Strategy of Life. Teleology and Mechanism in Nineteenth Century Biology*. Dordrecht/London: D. Reidel, 54.

47 Kant, Immanuel (2007) [1790]: *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. by J.C. Meredith, ed. by N. Walker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 205.

48 Zammito, John H. (2018): *The Gestation of German Biology. Philosophy and Physiology from Stahl to Schelling*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 160–163.; see also Oppenheimer, Jane (1967): »Embriology and Naturphilosophie: Goethe und von Baer«. In: Id., *Essays in the History of Embriology and Biology*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 136–147.; Poggi 2000, chap. X.

level of the I, the effectuation of natural laws does not concern the single individual product, but rather its form or genus (that is nature's forms of interiority). »Wherever there is formation«, writes Schleiermacher, »there is a corresponding consciousness, and vice versa«. ⁴⁹

The conception of normativity emerging from the 1825 speech seems to follow the morphological principle regarding the intimate analogy between forming life and acting life. If it holds true that normativity has to do with »the form of reflection« and self-reference, ⁵⁰ Schleiermacher's attempt is to align moral and natural normativity on a plane of radical continuity by demonstrating that both possess a reflective character. In this sense, the laws of morality are defined as the ways in which reason reflects itself through the self-determination of the acting I, and the laws of physics as the ways in which nature reflects itself through morphogenetic regimes and developmental paths. The former are the means of reason to realize itself, the latter the means of nature to idealize itself. In both cases, the primary elements are vectors of expression understood in their effectivity.

Unlike Hegel and Kant, ⁵¹ however, Schleiermacher does not attribute natural reflexivity to the ›organism‹, that is the born individual, but rather to the forms that generate in between phylogenesis and ontogenesis, the morphogenetic ›actions‹ of nature. This is a manifest reinterpretation of Aristotelian typology, which involves the categorization by genera and species (*Gattungen*). Through a close analogy with his own ethical theories, Schleiermacher achieves a non-universalistic nor teleologic perspective on the more-than-individual forms of nature, conceiving them as acts dictating their own norms and forming a natural history rather than as abstract, eternal laws (like Aristotle's species). All this, as already mentioned, echoes the influence of the foundation of biology as a historical and

49 KGA, I/11, 452.

50 Gottschlich, Max (2019): »Foundations of Normativity«. In: Krijnen, Christian (ed.): *Concepts of Normativity. Kant or Hegel?*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 73–94, 73.

51 See Corti, Luca (2022): »The ›Is‹ and the ›Ought‹ of Animal Organism: Hegel's Account of Biological Normativity«. *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 44, 17.

dynamic discipline, along with the rise of specific trends such as pre-Darwinian evolutionism⁵² and modern embryology.

4. Organology and conatology

The 1825 speech illustrates and justifies Schleiermacher's parallelism of physics and ethics and elaborates on the idea that the first elements of nature (the ›actions‹ and ›forces‹) correspond to nature's dynamic forms of self-determination. Not differently from morality, nature is an ever-evolving domain that constructs itself around its own singular acts of self-reference. Once this point has been established, the whole of Schleiermacher's oeuvre retroactively discloses as a constellation of analogies between nature and morality. Two of these analogical articulations are the ethical concepts of ›organ‹ and ›symbol‹.

Schleiermacher's concept of organ refers to the constructive organization of reason as nature and nature as reason. The writings on ethics describe the first movement extensively: reason realizes itself into nature by means of constructive organization. In this sense, the organ is »every reciprocal exchange [of reason and nature] in which a becoming-agent with nature [*ein Handelnwerden mit der Natur*] is set«, or »nature as a gateway for the acting of reason«. ⁵³ We can now complete Schleiermacher's argument and claim, by means of analogy, that the natural organ represents the reciprocal movement of the moral organ: just as the moral organ is a vector of realization of reason into nature, the natural organ is a vector of idealization of nature into reason. Both are defined as self-constructive; but while in the field of ethics self-construction is the material organization of the subjective action, in the field of nature it is the self-formation (›*Selbstbildung*‹) of matter. Nature idealizes itself by means of constructive development: this would be its organic dimension.

Schleiermacher defines the organ in opposition to a symmetrical concept, that of symbol. In an ethical sense, a symbol is »every

52 See Barsanti, Giulio (1994): »Lamarck and the Birth of Biology 1740–1810«. In: Poggi, Stefano/Bossi, Maurizio: *Romanticism in Science. Science in Europe, 1790–1840*. Dordrecht: Springer, 47–74.

53 WA, II, 565.

reciprocity of reason and nature, insofar as a having-acted on nature [*ein Gehandelthaben auf die Natur*] is set«. »The symbol is nature at rest with and in reason«. ⁵⁴ While the organ is an active vector of self-construction, the symbol is a passive vector of self-reference, an act of interiorization. Through its own symbolism, reason idealizes itself *as nature*: it reflects itself as living *Produkt*. We can argue analogically, then, that natural symbolism is a way for nature to realize itself *as reason*, i.e., for reflecting itself in its living *Produzieren*. ⁵⁵ An organ is whatever forms around an expressive vector that idealizes nature into reason and realizes reason into nature *by means of exteriorization*; a symbol is whatever forms around an expressive vector that realizes nature into reason and idealizes reason into nature *by means of interiorization*. The organ represents the pole of *Produzieren* (self-construction), the symbol that of the *Produkt* (self-reference). These two poles, however, must be considered as the two sides of one and the same process of individuation ⁵⁶ as they are always simultaneous within the »reciprocity of reason and nature«.

This intricate intertwinement can be better understood by considering the concrete ways self-construction and self-reference manifest in each field. In the field of morality, organic self-construction relates to exterior forms of organization such as gestures, ethical relationships, institutions; symbolic self-reference, on the other hand, relates to the interior forms of culture, such as signs, representations and all sediments of the human spirit. ⁵⁷ In the field of nature, instead, organic self-construction would relate to exterior forms of organization such as the living organism as well as every phenomenal body

⁵⁴ Ibid., II, 565.

⁵⁵ »Every being-symbolized of nature is grounded in the activity of reason; and every being-force of reason in nature is something symbolic [*Alles Symbolisiertsein der Natur ist in dem Handeln der Vernunft gegründet; und alles Kraftsein der Vernunft in der Natur ist ein symbolisirendes*]« (ibid., II, 564).

⁵⁶ Ibid., II, 568–569.

⁵⁷ Stoellger, Philipp (2008): »Der Symbolbegriff Schleiermachers«. In: Arndt, Andreas/Barth, Ulrich/Gräb, Wilhelm (Hg.): *Christentum – Staat – Kultur. Akten des Kongresses der Internationalen Schleiermacher-Gesellschaft in Berlin. März 2006*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 109–145, 119. Note that our interpretation is starkly different from Stoellger's, as he categorically excludes the possibility of natural symbolism.

(intended as constructive activity);⁵⁸ symbolic self-reference, on the other hand, to those formative regimes and developmental paths that immanently build the laws of nature (its ›actions‹ and ›forces‹). Nature unfolds not only by organizing matter, but also by sedimenting into regimes of meaning capable of becoming the source of further relations (by realizing itself as reason). The symbolism of nature is nature contemplating itself as reason, a transindividual interiority that can be linked to the dimension of phylogenesis. In this sense, every natural self-organization (insofar as it is self-formation) will always require a certain degree of self-reference, and vice versa. Self-organization and self-reference in nature are always interrelated, though formally distinguishable.

The pinnacle of nature's idealization process, reached through the gradual interpenetration of self-construction and self-reference, is the human being⁵⁹ intended as the never-ending path of humanization.⁶⁰ The human body can be defined as the highest form of organic expression (or of spiritualized nature) and the human soul as the highest form of symbolic expression (or of naturalized reason). »Body and soul are the highest resolution of contrasts, a twofold interpenetration of material and spiritual. We see it diminishing in animals and plants; but we never see it disappearing [...]. Wherever there is formation [*Gestaltung*], there is a corresponding conscience, and vice versa.«⁶¹ The union of body and soul occurs at the highest conjunction of reason and nature, that is the human organism, »the purest image of the most elevated Being in relation to this distinction«. ⁶² Aiming to mend the torn man of Kantian anthropology,⁶³ Schleiermacher's theory of human nature characterizes the relationship between ethics and physics as a *converging parallelism*.

58 Another general definition of organization can be provided by generalizing a passage from Schleiermacher's *Psychology*: organization, in the most general sense, is »activity seeking resistance«, whereas symbolization is »activity seeking influx« (KGA, II/13, 34).

59 WA, II, 561.

60 As stated in the *Reden*, »humanity is relentlessly committed to mold itself« (KGA, I/2, 339).

61 WA, II, 533.

62 Ibid., II, 534.

63 In his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), Kant decisively contributed to overcome the model of *totus homo*, the *ganzer Mensch* of Lutheran and

This is particularly evident in Schleiermacher's account of the emergence of human consciousness, which revolves around his theory of impulse (»*Trieb*«). The notion of impulse was highly prevalent in Germany during the *Goethezeit*.⁶⁴ Schleiermacher's own understanding of *Trieb* was shaped by the Leibnizian idea of *appetitus*, the Spinozian notion of *conatus* and the philosophical tradition of Halle, as well as by contemporary authors such as Schiller, Herder, Reinhold and Fichte. Schleiermacher's oeuvre is constellated by impulses, from the »*innerste Triebfeder*« of the *Reden* to the »*Trieb auf Gemeinschaft*« of the *Brouillon zur Ethik* and the »*Kunsttrieb*« of the lessons on psychology and aesthetics. Generally speaking, Schleiermacher's »impulses« are neither blindly mechanical nor strictly teleological, unlike instinct (»*Instinkt*«) and stimulus (»*Reiz*«).⁶⁵ They

Pietist tradition, by separating an *anthropologia physica* from an *anthropologia moralis* (Nannini, Alessandro (2015): *L'uomo vivificato. Il ganzes Mensch come ideale antropologico della Wirkungsästhetik tra primo illuminismo e filosofia popolare*. Tesi di dottorato in Scienze Filosofiche discussa presso l'Università di Palermo). Schleiermacher had already condemned this vision of the human being as the »negation of all anthropology« (KGA, I/2, 366) in a review written with Friedrich Schlegel in 1800. His entire anthropological project will later go in the direction of a (re)unification of spirit and matter through the understanding of man as a psychophysical unity in act.

64 See Kisner, Manja/Noller, Jörg (ed.) (2022): *The Concept of Drive in Classical German Philosophy. Between Biology, Anthropology and Metaphysics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

65 It is important to note that Schleiermacher always tends to avoid teleological explanations, despite emphasizing the priority of activity over material determination. Let us look again, for example, to his notion of organ. As we have seen, the organ is never reduced to its anatomic meaning, but rather corresponds to a zone of material-spiritual transparency between interiority and exteriority. In this sense, as Schleiermacher argues in his lessons on psychology, the soul determines itself through the organs and simultaneously »constructs its own organs« (KGA, II/13, 88). Even more radically, the soul does not begin before the organs (ibid., II/13, 105). The movement of self-construction, here, is more about expression than teleological orientation: it is an immanent act of exteriorization. In contrast with Aristotelian physiology and Kant's notion of natural teleology, the organization of the form around the function or purpose does not mark a goal-directed development, but rather a creative becoming. The same holds true for the impulse, which is driven by virtue of its own energetic status. The expressive understanding of force, which seems to reestablish the role of efficient causality under a new light, was not very common in the natural sciences of that time (see Gambarotto 2018) and might be linked to a Spinozian influence.

are rather inner orientations towards manifestations pertaining to any form of interiority, following the rule »what is interior always aspires to manifest itself [*allgemein will das Innere sich äußern*]«. ⁶⁶⁶⁷

Especially in Schleiermacher's early writings, a partial overlap can be noticed between the concept of impulse and the description of human individuation as the emergence of consciousness from action and behavior.⁶⁸ The individual interiority of human beings acts as a space of conversion and elaboration of reality into ideality, thus determining itself as a source of spontaneity; this proto-moral spontaneity, however, is such only insofar as it follows and prolongs vectors of exteriorization that come from the organic body, that is from nature itself. As the composition of impulse, consciousness is exteriorization that becomes manifestation. To use again the ethical categories, the impulse is a vector of exteriorization (or organization) that constitutes itself in a vector of interiorization (or symbolization).

Insofar as the impulse pertains to all living beings, consciousness is therefore the ultimate modulation of the general movement of interiorization of nature, that is the living tension towards symbolic manifestation. Consciousness emerges from the process of nature as rule and completion of the process itself without properly supervening on it, on a plane of differential (but not dialectical) continuity. Nature intrinsically tends towards rhythmic composition, that expresses itself in the human being as consciousness and sense (»*Sinn*«): within human interiority, nature breaks free from the automatism of action and reaction (or stimulus and response) and ulti-

66 KGA, I/11, 780–781.

67 Here Schleiermacher's view echoes a tradition that goes back to Hermann Samuel Reimarus' *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere*, which illustrates the idea of an idealizing tendency in animal constructive behaviors, especially in the insect world (1760, see Zammuto 2018, 138–144). Elaborating on Reimarus' concept of impulse, Herder will later precise that the difference between animal and human impulse is that the former is unreflective and the latter conscious, i.e., endowed with »*Besonnenheit*« (see Pénisson, Pierre (2002): »Trieb et énergie chez Herder«. *Revue Germanique Internationale* 18, 45–52). In this framework, the impulse is the spiritual thickness of the organizing act, which distinguishes it both from simple mechanism and from the action subordinated to an exterior goal.

68 See Lamm, Julia (1994): »The Early Philosophical Roots of Schleiermacher's Notion of *Gefühl*«. *Harvard Theological Review* 87(1), 67–105.

mately becomes an autonomous source of idealization. »The highest manifestations of the soul«, writes Schleiermacher,⁶⁹ »are also the highest aspirations of the earth to elevate the dependence of its being and absorb all the rest in itself, so as to become the same as all the rest«.

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69 KGA, II/13, 7.

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