Hegel, Schelling, and Günderrode on Nature

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Abstract

This chapter compares the philosophies of nature of Schelling, Hegel, and Günderrode. For Schelling, nature is organized by a dynamic opposition between polar forces that have gendered connotations. For Hegel, the interaction between the concept and matter organizes nature, and he again construes the concept and matter in hierarchical and gendered terms. For her part Günderrode puts birth, death, and rebirth at the center of nature, taking a view of the earth which anticipates recent feminist philosophies of natality.

1. Introduction: Feminist History of Philosophy and German Idealist Philosophies of Nature

Feminist philosophers have argued that Western philosophy has been structured by binary oppositions: mind/body, reason/passion, culture/nature, subject/object, reality/appearance, activity/passivity, human/animal.[[1]](#endnote-1) In each binary, one term is valorized over the other, and the valorized term is implicitly taken to be ‘male’ or ‘masculine,’ the devalued term ‘female’ or ‘feminine.’[[2]](#endnote-2) In this way the entire series of oppositions lines up with a binary gender division. This conceptual structure manifests itself when women are assumed to be at the mercy of their bodies or passions, or to be ‘closer to nature’, or when men are assumed to be more potent actors, or more authoritative knowers who can better grasp the structure of reality.

Feminists have analyzed binary oppositions in many Western philosophical writings, including some canonical works of German idealism, notably Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet the feminist critique of binary oppositions has rarely been applied to German idealist philosophies of nature – surprisingly, because the critique applies well to Schelling’s and Hegel’s accounts of nature. For Schelling, who originated the whole idea of ‘philosophy of nature,’ nature is constituted from two opposed polar forces – attraction and repulsion or, as he came to think, productivity and inhibition. Productivity, the primary force, is gendered masculine; inhibition is secondary and feminine. For Hegel, who formulated his philosophy of nature in critical response to Schelling’s, nature is composed not from forces but from the concept and matter. These dimensions of reality, again, have hierarchical and gendered connotations: Hegel valorizes the concept and aligns it with the masculine, while downgrading matter and aligning it with the feminine.

However, in recent years a problem with the feminist critique of binary oppositions has come to light. The problem can be illustrated with reference to Luce Irigaray’s influential critique of binary oppositions in a series of canonical figures from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, to Freud.[[4]](#endnote-4) In putting forward this critique Irigaray presupposes that Western philosophy is a unitary tradition, defined by the work of a set of accepted canonical figures, all male, and all viewing the world from a male perspective. These presuppositions have been undercut by recent work in feminist history of philosophy, spearheaded by Eileen O’Neill’s essay “Disappearing Ink.”[[5]](#endnote-5) For O’Neill, the reality of philosophy across the millennia is that it has been far less exclusively male than our histories of philosophy have made out. Whenever we investigate past historical periods, we find that women were there, doing philosophy. The problem is later historical narratives, which omit women’s contributions – hence O’Neill’s metaphor that women wrote in “disappearing ink,” which becomes invisible once set down on paper.

O’Neill’s point that women have always been involved in philosophical conversations goes for German idealism. Women were integral members of the intellectual and cultural circles from which early German Romanticism and German idealism originated as overlapping movements. Caroline Schlegel-Schelling and Dorothea Veit-Schlegel were core members of the Jena Romantic circle (c. 1798-1804). Bettina Brentano-von Arnim was part of the slightly later Heidelberg Romantic circle of the 1800s, with which her interlocutor Karoline von Günderrode was linked as well. Amongst other topics, both Brentano-von Arnim and Günderrode wrote on philosophy of nature, and Günderrode formulated her view of nature in response to Schelling’s.[[6]](#endnote-6)

To be sure, women did not participate in Romanticism or idealism on equal terms with men. In German-speaking countries at the time, women authoring philosophical work was heavily frowned upon; women could not undertake university education, let alone lecture in universities; and liaisons with men often provided women’s entry-point into intellectual discussions, as with Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, whose several husbands included August Schlegel and then Schelling. Still, these factors constrained women’s participation but they did not eliminate it.

Once we recognise that women participated in the post-Kantian philosophical ferment, new questions arise. Were these women’s philosophical views organized by the same gendered binary oppositions as the men’s? Or did the women, by virtue of being women, rethink and reconfigure these binaries? It makes sense that they might have done so, even unintentionally. For this would have enabled them to understand and experience their own femininity more positively, not merely as the inferior counterpart of masculine subjectivity and agency.

In this chapter I will consider this with respect to Günderrode’s philosophy of nature and suggest that its gendered connotations are mixed and unstable. To some extent Günderrode reproduces the binary oppositions we find in Schelling and Hegel. But she also complicates these oppositions and introduces a new one – birth and death – in which birth, which has maternal-feminine significance, prevails over death. This startlingly anticipates contemporary feminist thinking about natality.

2. Schelling’s Philosophy of Nature and its Gendered Aspects

Schelling’s philosophy of nature formed the point of departure for Hegel and Günderrode. They took philosophy of nature in different directions, but both started out from Schelling. He set out several successive versions of philosophy of nature in the later 1790s. The common theme is that nature is a hierarchy of levels, each arising from the dynamic interaction between two opposed forces (*Kräfte*). Initially Schelling took these forces to be attraction and repulsion, then productivity and inhibition. When he reconceives the forces as productivity and inhibition their gendered connotations become somewhat more explicit, for productivity is lined up with the masculine, whereas inhibition is lined up with the feminine.

In his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), Schelling maintained that all natural beings and processes are constituted from the polar opposition between attraction and repulsion. In making attraction and repulsion central to nature, Schelling was partly building on and partly criticizing Kant, who in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786) had argued that material bodies are only solid and impenetrable because they are held together by a fine balance of attraction and repulsion (*Ak* 4: 508-9). Schelling generalized this insight to pertain to nature as a whole:

Dynamic chemistry . . . admits no *original* matter whatever—no matter, that is, from which everything else would have arisen by composition. On the contrary, since it considers all matter originally as a product of opposed forces (*entgegengesetzter Kräfte*), the greatest possible diversity of matter is still nothing else but a diversity in the relationship of these forces. (*IPN* 221/371)

By “diversity of matter,” Schelling means the whole array of kinds of bodies and their relations and processes found in nature. Gravitation, magnetism, electricity, chemistry, organic life and life-processes, all arise from the interplay between attraction and repulsion. Attraction pulls separate bodies together; repulsion draws these bodies back into their separated selves. These forces are not added on top of matter, since the latter is not a fundamental component of nature in the first place. Rather, matter is only ever a product of opposed forces, and these forces are nature’s fundamental constituents.

However, indebted as Schelling was to Kant for this insight concerning forces, he rejected the mechanistic understanding of nature which Kant adopted as a whole. For Kant, under the categories such as causality that we necessarily apply to experience, we must experience nature as a realm of objects interacting in the causally determined way theorized by Newtonian physics. To be sure, for Kant, we must also think of ourselves as free agents and of living organisms as self-organizing, but strictly speaking we cannot know either that we are free or that living beings organize themselves. So “there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible ... just as if there were so many different worlds” (*Ak* 5: 175-6). Schelling found this gulf intellectually incoherent. Instead, he maintained, we really are free and can know as much, because our freedom emerges out of nature. Nature is composed of successive levels each realising freedom to a certain degree, ascending to the highest degree of freedom which comes about in human beings. The “universal life of nature reveals itself in manifold forms, in progressive developments, in gradual approximations to freedom” (*IPN* 36/100).

Accordingly Schelling developed a theory on which nature rises through levels of freedom, each corresponding to a particular balance of attraction and repulsion. He did not devise this theory through pure speculation, but rather he took up scientific accounts of specific natural phenomena and argued that these phenomena are the way scientists have shown them to be because of the operation of polar forces. For example, consider a chemical process occurring between two bodies each composed of two elements, (A + B) and (C + D). In the chemical process, A and C unite to form a new body and B and D do the same. The force of attraction first prevails to draw together A with C and B with D, while the force of repulsion operates so that we still end up with two separated bodies, (A + C) and (B + D), not one gigantic composite (A + B + C + D). But although repulsion is at work in chemical interactions, attraction is operating more powerfully than in, say, electrical or magnetic reactions. For the internal make-up of the bodies that exist at the end of the chemical process has been completely rearranged. Attraction has drawn the bodies and their elements together more forcefully and comprehensively, resulting in an entirely new set of composite bodies.

Having shown how all natural processes are effects of the interaction between attraction and repulsion, the philosopher then arranges these processes in an ascending series. As we move up it, each process embodies a stronger level of attraction than the ones preceding it. However, at each step, repulsion is also strengthened, in proportionate counter-reaction to each rising level of attraction. Thus the natural progression is one in which the forces continually vitalize themselves in antagonism to one another. As attractive force grows stronger, so does repulsion against it. The overall outcome is that nature is a hierarchy, its higher stages exhibiting more dynamic antagonism between their component forces. The hierarchy ranges from mechanical inertia at the bottom to organic life at the top. By the same token, we are rising to freedom, because mechanical inertia is gradually replaced by forms that are active, dynamic, and organized from within themselves by inner vital forces.

On this account nature is governed by a single structuring principle – the interdependence of opposed forces – that elaborates itself at different levels. This is close to the idea that nature is a vast self-organizing whole, as Schelling indeed maintained in his next work, *On the World-Soul* of 1798. Here he claimed that nature orders itself from its own principle or concept. In this way, not only specific natural phenomena but also nature as a whole already anticipate and foreshadow the human power to determine one’s actions freely from one’s own intention or will.

This led to Schelling’s next account in his 1799 *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*. Here he argues that nature must originally consist of pure productive activity (*unendliche productive Tätigkeit*). There can no natural beings at all unless they are first produced; consequently, all nature must derive from an active productive force. However, for pure productivity to yield any determinate natural objects, productive force must limit or fixate itself (*FO* 18/83). Otherwise, pure productivity would dissolve infinitely quickly, burning through its energy with every product being dissolved again as soon as it emerged. To use Schelling’s own analogy, a river only forms eddies when its flow encounters resistance. Productive force can only *be* productive if it meets an opposing force that inhibits and confines it so that specific natural “products” result.

Necessarily, then, all natural forms are composed from varying proportions of productive and inhibiting force. In this new system, nature is again “a *dynamically graded series of stages*” (*FO* 53/116) in which productive force repeatedly bursts past each finite form in which it becomes confined. This produces new classes of phenomena manifesting increasing levels of productive activity. For example, compared to electrical phenomena, chemical ones are more productively active: chemical interactions are more dynamic and more completely transform the bodies that they interconnect. Thus because productive force reasserts itself more forcefully each time it breaks past its previous boundaries, productivity increasingly prevails over inhibition and nature becomes more and more dynamic and alive as we ascend the series. At the highest level productive force passes over into human agency, so that nature’s highest level is simultaneously the lowest level of mind.

We can now look at the gendered connotations of productive and inhibiting force, which become apparent in Schelling’s account of sexual reproduction. He places reproduction at the very pinnacle of nature’s hierarchy, where living, organic beings exist embodying a high degree of productive activity, but whose activity is confined by their finite, individual forms. This confinement into finite form is reflected in that these living organisms are sexed: because they do not embody the whole but only a finite part of it, they fall on one side or another of the sexual divide. So “the separation into different sexes is just the separation which we have furnished as the ground of inhibition in the productions of Nature” (*FO* 39/105). Sexual difference itself is the consequence of the limitation of productivity by inhibition. These individuals’ productive force now seeks to pass beyond these finite boundaries by “uniting” with another individual, i.e., by coupling and reproducing with them (34/100). But then, once again, productivity must be hemmed in, and so the reproductive effort issues merely in more finite embodied individuals – the pair’s offspring, which are sexed in turn.

Within the reproductive couple, productive activity falls more on the side of the male partner and inhibition more on the female side. The female is more receptive:

If the organic power of resistance increases, the movements become more forceful, more energetic too—in equal proportion to the sinking sensibility. — Or, one might observe the difference of the sexes, … or finally the increase of the forces directed outwardly in nature, which also happen in a certain (inverse) relation to sensibility. (*FO* 169/240)

That is, “irritability,” the active power to respond to stimuli, prevails in some bodies whereas in others “sensibility,” passive reception of stimuli, is in the ascendant. Each is present in inverse proportion to the other, with activity prevailing in males and sensibility in females, as we “observe” in “the difference of the sexes.” This difference between irritability and sensibility is the felt, organically lived version of the natural polarity between productivity and inhibition.

In sum, for Schelling living beings are necessarily sexed, and the nature of that sexual difference is that one sex is more productively active (the male) and the other more receptive, confining, and inhibiting (the female). But Schelling not only interprets living male and female bodies in terms of productivity *versus* inhibition. Reciprocally, in his account of nature he has tacitly interpreted productivity and inhibition as male and female all along. For: “Throughout the whole of [organic] nature absolute sexlessness is nowhere demonstrable” (*FO* 36/102). That is, productivity and inhibition are sexed male and female; these forces structure all of nature; therefore all of nature is implicitly sexed. Moreover this is why sexed reproduction is at the pinnacle of nature: it brings to full explicitness the sexed connotations that nature’s polar forces had all along.

Schelling’s thought evolved over subsequent decades and its gendered implications with it.[[7]](#endnote-7) But we need not explore those here, for it is Schelling’s 1790s philosophy of nature writings that decisively influenced Hegel and Günderrode. However, neither of them simply endorsed Schelling’s view of nature. Hegel initially philosophized under Schelling’s wing, but then he turned against his former mentor and formulated his philosophy of nature in critical reaction against Schelling’s. In doing so Hegel reconceived Schelling’s polar forces as *concept* and *matter*. Yet their gendered hierarchy remained and was if anything intensified, as we will see.

3. Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature and its Gendered Aspects

I will now proceed by first locating Hegel’s account of nature within his philosophical system. Then I will outline the stages that he identifies in the natural progression and then pick out the underlying structure of his account, which turns on the interplay of matter and concept. After that I will compare Hegel’s position with Schelling’s and assess its gendered implications, which also feed into Hegel’s account of the family in his 1821 *Philosophy of Right.*

Hegel took a considerable time to elaborate his philosophy of nature and differentiate it from Schelling’s because he was determined to approach nature as part of a comprehensive and completely elaborated system. He presented that system in outline as the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, first in 1817, then 1827, then 1830. The system has three parts: *Logic, Philosophy of Nature*, and *Philosophy of Mind*. The *Logic* deals with the “concept” – which, for Hegel, is nothing subjective, and not a mere mental representation, but is rather “the truth, objectivity, and actual being of things themselves. It is like the Platonic Ideas, which . . . exist in individual things as their substantial kinds” (*EN* §246A). These substantial kinds do not exist in static juxtaposition but produce one another in a dynamic and rational process. That process yields a rationally interconnected sequence of basic ontological principles and forms – being, nothingness, becoming, determinate being, and so on – which Hegel’s *Logic* narrates. Late in this sequence, a kind arises that Hegel calls “the idea”: “The idea is what is true *in and for itself, the absolute unity of concept and objectivity*” (*EL* §213). That is, the idea is the concept insofar as it penetrates and organizes non-conceptual reality. Then, at the very conclusion of the *Logic*, we reach the “*absolute* idea,” the totally explicit and worked-out unity of concept and reality (*EL* §236). Yet this unity is at first merely aspirational. It can only *be* the completely explicit, realized and developed unity it is meant to be if the concept first “resolves to release [reality] out of itself” into independent existence and then re-establishes its unity with this reality that has been granted full independence (*EL* §244).

This brings us to the *Philosophy of Nature*, the presupposition of which is that reality has been released from the concept. By virtue of this releasement, reality exists as pure matter; and so that is how nature exists initially. For the concept has released reality into independence, but the concept is, as we have seen, a unifying and ordering power that imbues things with dynamic and rational organization. When the concept releases reality, then, reality is left devoid of any rational organization, and therefore is pure *Außereinander* (as Hegel calls it) – the existence outside one another of a set of separate parts, *partes extra partes* (*EPN* §252). Hegel further equates this with pure spatial extension (*EPN* §254). However, because the parts of space have no differentiating qualities they collapse together; then these parts attempt to differentiate themselves more effectively, assuming the guise of temporal moments (*EPN* §257). A still more effective form of differentiation occurs with material bodies (*Materie*), which distinguish themselves by each possessing a particular mass: “matter has … a *quantitative* difference, and is particularized into different quanta, – *masses*” (*EN* §263).

These opening sections of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* already reflect the structure of his entire approach. Like Schelling, Hegel regards nature as a “series of stagesconsisting of many moments, the exposition of which constitutes the philosophy of nature” (*EPM* §381A). Also like Schelling, he does not expound these stages independently of science – contrary to what my brief summary so far may have suggested. Rather, Hegel takes up scientific accounts of such natural phenomena as space, time, material bodies (etc.) and re-interprets and re-organizes them into a hierarchical progression. But unlike Schelling, Hegel holds that this progression (*Stufengang*) is one in which matter gradually becomes shaped and organized by the concept.

The main stages in this series are as follows. At first, as we have seen, nature consists of units of matter; these occupy the first, “mechanical” stage of nature, during which nature gradually advances from its original guise as space to comprise increasingly structured and interrelated sets of material bodies, ultimately those that make up the solar system including the earth. These bodies are subject to forces of attraction and repulsion (*EPN* §262A) – but those forces for Hegel are merely an aspect of one stage of nature, not its entire groundwork.

Nature’s second main stage is the “physical” stage, in which material bodies are partly but still not fully integrated with one another. They are related to one another and affected by these relations, but still not completely so; they retain a kernel of bare material separateness. Thus in magnetism, electricity, and chemistry distinct substances react and transform one another, but without becoming bound together into permanently self-renewing and independently acting wholes.

That is only achieved in the “organic” stage, which is the third and final one, and is occupied with various levels and kinds of organic bodies. Animals, plants, and the entire earth as a system of interacting elements all realize the inherent nature of an organism to varying degrees: namely, to have material parts that are as they are wholly because of their places in the organic whole. A heart, for instance, is utterly shaped by its function in pumping the blood. Or in Hegel’s example:

The single members of the body are what they are only through their unity and in relation to it. So, for instance, a hand that has been hewn from the body is a hand in name only, but not in actual fact, as Aristotle has already remarked. (*EL* §216A)

The material parts or members (*Glieder*) of an organism are thus shaped by its unifying form, purpose, or concept. This is the hallmark of an organism, for Hegel: its plan, purpose, or concept organizes and assigns roles to all its material parts and this shapes their materiality.

Overall, then, nature begins as matter devoid of unifying form, mere *partes extra partes*; next come material bodies located in systems of interrelations but retaining an aspect of bare matter; and finally organic bodies have material parts that are entirely shaped by their places in the whole. Matter has gone from being unshaped by any form, to being partially shaped by organizing form, to being completely shaped by organic form. To relate this back to Hegel’s *Logic*, the absolute idea released reality from itself in order to work out its complete unity with independent reality. Over the course of nature’s development, this goal has largely been accomplished.[[8]](#endnote-8) For we end up with living bodies that are organized by their forms, and which therefore are comprised of matter that is organized by the concept, given Hegel’s particular understanding of “the concept.” As we saw earlier, on that understanding “the concept” is not an idea or representation in the mind, or a set of interconnected such representations; rather, the concept exists externally to our minds, organizing the world and providing a rationally interconnected ordered structure to everything that exists (*EPN* §246A). Organic form, then, just *is* the concept as fully embodied in the material world. For the parts of living organisms are completely shaped and penetrated by the whole and its purposes. Thus as nature advances to contain more and more systematically organized and integrated forms of matter, matter is becoming more and more pervaded by the concept.

On the one hand, Hegel thinks that the absolute idea alienates and externalizes itself to give rise to nature and that the natural progression is one in which the idea returns to itself (*EPN* §376). On the other hand, the idea is never altogether absent from nature, even though it is only within organic life that it resumes its true character as organizing form. To see how the idea always retains a subterranean presence, let us look once more at Hegel’s view that nature is a progression (*Fortbildung*)– which for him is true in a logical rather than temporal sense (*EPN* §249R).

Organisms are more advanced than chemical processes, which are more advanced than electrical processes, all the way back down to pure extended space. Each succeeding natural form is more advanced than the one preceding it because the successor has a more complicated internal structure, enabling it to resolve tensions or contradictions in the predecessor. For example, chemical bodies are partly related together but partly independent of one another, which is a kind of tension. Organisms avoid that tension by having material parts that are fully shaped by the whole.Nature thus progresses in that each of its forms resolves tensions within the one preceding it. The most advanced forms best resolve all the prior tensions. This shows that nature, as a whole, organizes itself in accordance with rational requirements. Nature begins, as spatial extension, beset by a fundamental tension: its parts are supposedly different from and exist outside and next to one another (as *Nebeneinander*); yet because the parts lack any differentiating features they are in fact all identical. Hegel sees this as an internal contradiction, but even if ‘contradiction’ sounds too strong, hopefully we can at least agree that it is a tension. To remove, resolve, or reduce this tension, nature re-organizes itself into its next form – time – but this contains a tension as well, so nature re-organizes itself into material bodies with mass, and so on right through the progression. Nature, then, orders itself into a systematically interrelated set of stages by following the rational requirement to overcome and resolve tensions. What makes it possible for nature to organize itself rationally is its conceptual dimension. This dimension is present, albeit submerged, even in space, for space *in its concept* has two contrary characteristics (difference and lack of difference). The material parts of extended space reflect this by being simultaneously differentiated from and identical with each other. It is in virtue of its conceptual aspect that nature-as-space strives to resolve its tension, producing the new shape of time. Thus, as in Hegel’s philosophy generally, the concept is a dynamic power of negativity, which repeatedly comes into conflict with itself, develops to overcome these conflicts, and so accumulates a complex systematic structure.

Without this ever-present conceptual substructure, nature could never progress and the concept could never return to itself as the idea and absolute idea. Thus Hegel says:

In so far as the contradiction of the idea is external to itself as nature, one side of it is formed by the conceptually generated necessity of its formations … and the other by their indifferent contingency and indeterminable irregularity. (*EPN* §250)

At first, though, the conceptual side of nature is entirely submerged; then it gradually re-emerges, step-by-step, so that

nature is idealized not merely by us, … nature’s being-outside-itself [*Außereinander*] is not completely insurmountable for nature itself, for its concept; but … the eternal idea immanent in nature … brings about the idealization, the sublation of being-outside-itself … . Therefore philosophy has … only to watch how nature itself sublates its externality [*Äußerlichkeit*], how it takes back what is self-external into the centre of the idea, … how it liberates the concept concealed in nature from the covering of externality. (*EPM* §381)

Comparing Hegel’s account of nature to Schelling’s, we first see some important similarities. Like Schelling, Hegel treats nature as a hierarchy where the higher stages are more advanced and where the progression through stages arises from the interaction between two opposed dimensions. Also like Schelling, Hegel thinks that the philosopher of nature takes up scientific accounts of various natural phenomena and re-interprets and re-organizes them (although Hegel’s specific engagements with science are not something I have discussed here). Unlike Schelling, though Hegel thinks that the opposed structuring dimensions of nature are not polar forces but concept *versus* matter. He abandoned the notion of forces because he thought that appeal to the concept better explained how and why nature is a rationally ordered whole, with reference to the concept’s dynamic negativity. Moreover, his idea of the concept also enabled him to theorize nature as part of his entire system, integrated together with the *Logic* and *Philosophy of Mind*.

However, an upshot of Hegel’s move away from forces is that his opposition between the concept and matter is sharper and more clearly hierarchical than the antagonism of polar forces was in Schelling. For Schelling, *both* forces are dynamic – there is no real inertia in nature at all – and both forces make vitally necessary contributions to every natural form. For Hegel, however, the rational organization of nature really depends on its conceptual side, and matter only imperfectly embodies successive stages in this conceptual structuring.

In sharpening the opposition between nature’s constitutive elements, Hegel at the same time strengthens the gender hierarchy that for him, as for Schelling, is bound up with them. For the concept and matter are gendered terms, from Hegel’s perspective:

The study of nature is … the liberation of nature, which in itself is reason … Spirit has the certainty which Adam had when he beheld Eve, “This is flesh of my flesh, this is bone of my bones.” Nature is, so to speak, the bride which spirit weds. (*EPN* §246A)

Here the philosopher who beholds nature is masculine, whereas the nature that he observes is “flesh” (*Fleisch*), standing to him as Eve does to Adam. Nature’s materiality, its fleshiness, is feminine; conversely, spirit and reason are masculine. Given these gendered connotations, the natural progression in which the concept re-emerges from matter and gradually comes to shape matter more and more completely is simultaneously a progression in which the masculine element increasingly masters and prevails over the feminine element.

This becomes explicit in Hegel’s account of reproduction, just as the gendered connotations of Schelling’s natural forces likewise became explicit once he turned to sexual reproduction. Again like Schelling, Hegel locates reproduction near the top of the natural hierarchy, as a core aspect of organic life. Within reproduction (which is called the “species-process,” *Gattungsprozeß*), the female role is to provide the offspring’s matter, while the male role is to provide its concept, encapsulated in the semen.

*Conception* must not be regarded as consisting of nothing but the ovary and the male semen, as if the new formation were merely a composition of the forms or parts of both sides, for the female in fact contains the material element, while the male contains the subjectivity. (*EPN* §368A)

In denying that reproduction is a mere composition of two parts, Hegel means that reproduction does not involve an equal, reciprocal contribution from both sides but rather results from the hierarchical infusion of the superior element – subjectivity – into the inferior material element. This passage makes explicit not only that Hegel understands matter and the concept in gendered terms, but also that he thinks that female matter and male concept are rightly interrelated when the concept is in the driving seat. For Hegel, nature is a hierarchy and so is the gender relation: nature’s more advanced and superior stages are ones in which the masculine, conceptual element has gained its rightful pre-eminence over the feminine, material element.

Another interesting passage reveals these gendered associations. Hegel says that nature is “the Son of God, but not as the son, but as abiding in otherness … Nature is self-alienated spirit; in nature, spirit has merely let itself loose, a Bacchantic god free of restraint” (*EPN* §247A). The idea has let itself be torn apart and dismembered into *partes extra partes*. But in Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae* to which Hegel is alluding it was *women* revellers who tore King Pentheus apart in their Bacchanalian frenzy, headed by his own mother. Hegel remarked himself that Bacchanalian revels spoke to “female temperaments.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In being dismembered into parts the idea is being feminized; and as it re-members itself from amongst its parts, it regains masculinity.

Hegel drew out the further implications of natural sex difference for the gendered structure of the family in his *Philosophy of Right*. He maintained, in a passage that has become infamous:

Man … has his actual substantial life in the state, in science, etc., and otherwise in work and struggle … so that it is only through his division that he fights his way to self-sufficient unity with himself. … Woman, however, has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this *piety*.(*PR* §166)

Hegel was not merely describing the empirical reality that modern European societies were taking on a sharply gender-divided structure in which women’s place was the family and only the family. He regarded this “separate spheres” arrangement as broadly rational and right:

The *natural* determinacy of the two sexes acquires an *intellectual* and *ethical* significance by virtue of its rationality. This significance is determined by the difference into which the ethical substantiality, as the concept in itself, divides itself up in order that its vitality may thereby achieve a concrete unity. (*PR* §165)

That is, the ethical substance – the unity of a people’s entire communal life – divides into the spheres of family, civil society, and state to become “concrete.” This division assigns women to the family, an assignment that gives “intellectual and ethical significance” to natural sex difference. It is rational – and right – that natural sex difference should be given this social significance. For the reasons why, Hegel refers us to his account of the species-process in the *Philosophy of Nature* (*PR* §165).

To spell out what he has in mind, we have seen that in Hegel’s account of natural reproduction he identifies males as providing the conceptual element of the offspring. He connects this with the fact that males contribute to reproduction by expelling the conceptual element, as semen, outside themselves. Meanwhile he links the greater materiality of females to their reproducing within themselves, by containing the gestating offspring within their own bodies:

[Regarding] the *male and female* *genitals*, … in one or the other, one or the other predominates; in the female, it is necessarily the undifferentiated element [*das Indifferente*]; in the male, the moment of duality [*das Entzweite*], of opposition. … [T]he male testicle remains enclosed in the ovary in the female, does not emerge into opposition … . Through this difference, therefore, the male is the active principle, and the female is the receptive, because she remains in her undeveloped unity … (*EPN* §368A)

Consequently, on the social level it is appropriate for women to remain exclusively within the domestic sphere, because the family (on Hegel’s view) is the social sphere of immediate unity, where family members feel a direct identity of interests and concerns. The structure of the family parallels the inward-oriented and undifferentiated character of the female reproductive body. For their part men stand biologically for “the element of opposition,” and so they should appropriately proceed into civil society where conflicting actors come into opposition in the competitive marketplace. The structure of civil society parallels the outward-oriented and oppositional character of the male reproductive body.

4. Günderrode’s Philosophy of Nature

We have seen that both Schelling and Hegel approached nature in terms of gendered oppositions, a pattern that is considerably more pronounced in Hegel, partly because of the systematic interconnections he made between nature and politics. Did Günderrode, too, understand nature in terms of gendered oppositions? To answer this question I will explain her account of nature, then compare it with first Schelling’s and then Hegel’s accounts.

Günderrode developed her metaphysics of nature in response to Schelling’s 1790s texts on nature, all of which she read. His *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* influenced her the most.[[10]](#endnote-10) She set out her view of nature in a number of writings including the “History of a Brahmin” (1805); her fictitious letters to “Eusebio” (i.e. the Romantic philologist G. F. Creuzer, her close interlocutor) in her final poetry collection *Melete*, which had been intended to appear in 1806;[[11]](#endnote-11) and, above all, her essay “Idea of the Earth,” contained in her *Nachlass*.

For Günderrode, there is a unitary whole with which we were all originally one, but from which we become separated on coming into individual existence.

Too late! You are already born to the day,

Separated from the element of life,

We command becoming, not being,

And you are already separated from the mother’s womb [*Mutterschoos*]

Parted from dreams by your consciousness.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Günderrode thus describes the whole in maternal terms – as a womb, a primal sea, and our original ground. She identifies it with the earth; as universal, infinite, eternal life; and as “the all,” *das Alles*, or *die Allheit*. Individual beings have become finite by coming out of, or being born from, this unitary earth. The earth is thus a productive and material unity that produces finite beings by birthing them.

However, we are drawn back towards the infinite because we all retain an “element” of universal life (*Lebenselement*), even within our individuated forms.[[13]](#endnote-13) This notion of “life-elements” is crucial for Günderrode. For her, all human beings retain and contain elements of universal life, existing as electrical currents and magnetic and chemical forces flowing through and animating us. For although we are individuated, we remain parts of the whole that has generated us and remains our source. Its traces and activity persist within us and pull us to unite with one another and so with the whole.

Something similar applies at lower, inanimate levels of nature too. Mechanical bodies that are mere matter in motion are still attracted together because they share in infinite life. Magnetism realizes this attraction further, electricity further again,[[14]](#endnote-14) and further still that “most inner mixture of different elements with the highest grade of connection and attraction which we call life.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Thus “attraction” pervades nature – Günderrode speaks of the “law of attraction” (*Gesetz der Anziehung*).[[16]](#endnote-16) Attraction is pervasive because the life-element shared out amongst individual beings draws them together.

But beings can only truly unite by ceasing to exist as finite individuals at all. Günderrode therefore also believes in a pervasive “law of mortality” (*Gesetz der Sterblichkeit*)to which “individual life is given over.” The drive to unite is a drive to die. But once having died and returned to infinite life, beings strengthen and replenish it – things do not return to ground zero but reach a higher level. Günderrode explains this as follows. When we still exist as finite beings, the life-elements within us have to struggle against our individuated forms, straining to overcome them and return to unity. This struggle strengthens these elements. When we die, the life-elements we formerly contained are thereby returned to the whole. But these elements have in the meantime been strengthened by having struggled against our individuation, and so, now returned into universal life, they enhance *its* vitality and power: “So when they [the elements] return to the earth, they increase the earth’s life.” This empowers the earth to re-birth new individuals, and more highly animated and energized ones, because the earth now has greater vital strength to impart into these new products.

The earth begins, then, by producing merely mechanical beings. But once their life-elements are reabsorbed into the earth, this allows it to produce more animated – magnetic – beings; then electrical beings; then chemical, organic, and finally human beings. The process continues until the entire earth has become as vital as possible:

The earth rebirths [*gebiert … wieder*] the life-stuff that has been given back to it in new appearances, until, through ever-new transformations, all that is capable of life within it has become living. This would be achieved if all masses became organic.

However, this process does not conclude with the production of human individuals. It continues as individual human beings are reborn in a rising series of increasingly spiritual forms:

So every mortal gives back to the earth a heightened, more developed elementary life, which the earth develops further into rising forms; and through this … organism must become more complete and universal. … The Indian idea of the transmigration of soul corresponds to this view … [In the end] the earth can only finally reach its authentic, actual existence when it has dissolved all its appearances in a communal organism, when spirit and body so completely penetrate one another that all bodies, all forms are at once also thought and soul and all thoughts are at once also form and body and a truly clarified body, without defects and illness and immortal, therefore quite different from what we call body or matter, to which we attach transience, illness, weight and deficiency …[[17]](#endnote-17)

When a human individual dies, their life-elements return into and replenish the earth, and it reproduces a being that is a more highly spiritualized version of that same individual. Each person therefore undergoes successive cycles of rebirth, moving through a series of bodily forms that become more and more transfigured, rarefied, and perfected. Through this rebirthing process the whole earth will become completely spiritualized.

We can now compare Günderrode’s views with those of Schelling and Hegel, starting with Schelling.[[18]](#endnote-18) In the *Ideas*, Schelling saw nature as constituted from attraction and repulsion. Likewise, for Günderrode, the earth births us into finite forms, thereby repelling us from its unity, while we are subsequently drawn back towards the whole, in the counter-process of attraction. Unlike Schelling, though, Günderrode gives much more weight to attraction than repulsion, making the “law of attraction” a key feature of nature. Attraction also prevails in her account in that the attractive forces between beings become re-incorporated into the earth, empowering it to birth more deeply connected and interwoven (attracted) beings next time around. Through successive rounds of the earth’s process, then, attraction comes to predominate ever more emphatically over repulsion. To be sure, Schelling also argued that attractive forces are strengthened as we ascend the natural hierarchy. But for him the contrary force of repulsion is strengthened at each step too. Not so for Günderrode; hence her optimistic vision that the earth will become transformed into a totally spiritual state in which attraction has comprehensively won out.

Another difference is that for Schelling, the natural hierarchy culminates in human individuals as conscious subjects. Thereafter, progression continues through mind (or spirit), and our various cognitive, practical, and aesthetic powers (traced in Schelling’s 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*). For Günderrode, too, the earth’s progression rises into our various human powers – for instance, attraction manifests itself in all kinds of human abilities: when we connect with ideas and other minds outside of our own; when we fall in love; when we are drawn to aesthetic and moral ideals. But the natural progression does not end here, for Günderrode, but then continues still further through our posthumous cycles of rebirth. Thus *rebirth* is central to Günderrode’s philosophy of nature, unlike Schelling’s.[[19]](#endnote-19) This partly reflects Günderrode’s desire to integrate Eastern and Western philosophy: she combines Christian ideas about the body’s posthumous resurrection and its being raised to a spiritual body with an Eastern idea of cycles of rebirth.

The gendered connotations of Günderrode’s view of nature differ from Schelling’s. As we saw, Schelling reconceived attraction and repulsion as (masculine) productivity and (feminine) inhibition. Günderrode, conversely, sees the original unity of the earth as feminine: a maternal body, a womb that is a repository of all potentials and that produces everything by giving birth to it. At first sight this completely reverses Schelling’s gendered connotations by reconceiving productivity as maternal-feminine. Indeed, insofar as the earth is all-encompassing, Günderrode envisions the entire cosmos in maternal-feminine terms. Masculine creation has apparently been displaced in favor of feminine birthing.

But on closer inspection the gendered connotations of Günderrode’s view are more ambiguous. For Günderrode, the earth, in giving birth to finite beings, repels them from itself, thereby engaging in an activity of material production through which finite, material individuals come into existence. Thus the earth and its generative powers are aligned with materiality. However, when finite individuals are attracted together, the life-elements within them are fighting (*kämpfen*) against their individuated forms, and these elements become strengthened through this fight, “like two who, practised in long struggle [*Kampf*], are stronger when it has ended than before they fought.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Implicitly this militaristic language marks as masculine the struggle of the life-elements to prevail over adversity, to unite against differences.[[21]](#endnote-21) Moreover, these elements are strengthened (*stärkt*) and masculinized by the struggle against material difference which is already coded feminine. When the life-elements bring heightened strength back into the whole earth, then, they imbue it with masculinity. The masculinized elements fertilize the feminine earth-body, enabling it to issue new and enhanced products. In turn these products are now more masculine – more interconnected and spiritual, their masculine power of integration fortified against the dispersing power of feminine difference. Thus as it spiritualizes itself the earth masculinizesitself, and masculine spirit and connection progressively pervade feminine matter.

So there are competing gendered meanings in Günderrode’s work. After all, she was influenced by many male Romantics and idealists who privileged masculinity. Moreover, she chafed against the limitations of her gender, publishing her poetry under the gender-neutral pseudonym “Tian.” She admitted that she had “often had the unfeminine wish [*unweiblichen Wunsch*] to throw myself into the wild thick of battle [*Schlachtgetümmel*] and die. … I have no feeling for feminine virtues.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Yet, she continued, this led to an “unfortunate … imbalance [*Mißverhälthis*] in my soul, … since I am a woman.” So she was also compelled to try to create intellectual and imaginative space to philosophize asa woman. Hence her reclamation of an active, creative role for the feminine principle within the cosmos.

Günderrode did not live long enough to engage with Hegel’s thinking about nature, nor does he seem to have known her work.[[23]](#endnote-23) But we can see parallels between their ideas. Hegel reconceived Schelling’s productive force as the dynamic negativity of the concept, which was counterbalanced by matter, Hegel’s correlate of Schelling’s inhibiting force. Hegel aligned the concept with masculinity and matter with femininity, and for Günderrode too, the earth’s progressive spiritualization is a masculinization.

However, there are also major differences between Hegel and Günderrode. One concerns the concept of the earth. Hegel identifies the earth as one of three stages of organic life: the earth, plants, and animals. The earth emerges directly from nature’s physical stage, in which bodies’ material qualities are shaped by their interactions and these interactions become increasingly complex and all-encompassing. Eventually this yields the earth as an integrated whole of systems of magnetically, electrically, and chemically interacting bodies – the “totality of inanimately existing, mechanical and physical nature” (*EPN* §337). But although the earth is the first organic stage, for Hegel it is not quite alive; it is at the very cusp of life, brimming with potential (§341), but with that potential of organic life only becoming realized in the vegetable realm.

Thus, for Günderrode the earth is the primal unity of everything, the whole out of which nature emerges, whereas for Hegel the earth is only one stage of nature. The earth in Günderrode’s theory has a powering, productive role that Hegel instead allocates to the concept, while he demotes the earth to embody merely one point in the entire set of concept/matter interactions. These interactions are driven not by the earth but the concept, with successive material phenomena embodying the system of forms into which the concept organizes itself. For Hegel matter, purely as matter, is not productive, but for Günderrode in contrast the material earth *is* productive; it is the original generative force.

On this last point Günderrode is closer to Schelling. Like him, she does not reduce generativity to conceptuality but holds that there is an originally *non*-rational, non-conscious productivity. For Schelling, though, this productive force is aligned with masculine activity against feminine receptivity. This places Schelling mid-way between Hegel and Günderrode. Hegel most strongly assimilates creative negativity to reason and the masculine; Schelling’s in-between view is that productivity is a non-conscious and non-rational force but one that is still active and masculine; and Günderrode goes furthest in affiliating the earth’s productive power with materiality and the maternal-feminine.

Günderrode’s philosophy of nature deserves to be considered – as it almost never is at present – alongside the accounts of nature of the male German idealists. Günderrode does not simply take over the hierarchical gendered structure of the philosophies of nature of Hegel and Schelling. She does not altogether abandon this structure, but she re-arranges the gendered meanings of nature’s components to give a new priority to the maternal earth. Concomitantly the concept of birth comes to prominence in her view of nature. So does rebirth; on this point, her concerns to integrate Western and Eastern thought converge with her maternal-feminine interpretation of the cosmos.

By putting birth and rebirth at the center of nature, Günderrode anticipates recent feminist attention to natality. A growing number of feminist philosophers, Irigaray being one of the most influential, have argued that Western philosophical and intellectual traditions have been preoccupied with death and mortality while neglecting birth and natality (the condition of being born and entering the world by way of birth).[[24]](#endnote-24) “All men are mortal,” not “all people are born,” has been the emblematic slogan of Western philosophy. In contrast, feminist philosophers have endeavored to re-orientate our attention towards birth and recognize that human life is shaped by how we begin as well as by how we end.

Günderrode anticipates this re-orientation because she not only brings birth into nature but also encompasses death within birth. In her view, when we die, the life-elements that had been distributed across our finite forms flow together and re-unite, enriching the earth so that it re-births new finite forms that are higher, clarified, and more vital than the preceding ones. Death is only a route by which life comes back stronger than ever. Effectively here birth, death, and rebirth form a dialectical triad, in which birth is the thesis, death the antithesis, and rebirth the synthesis. Günderrode thus took up the German idealist discourse of dynamic oppositions but with a twist: she highlighted the dynamic opposition of birth and death and then put the dynamic power to overcome this opposition on the side of birth. It was through the earth’s powers of birth and rebirth, not the rationality of the concept, that she envisaged the world becoming completely perfected.

1. For classic feminist statements, see Hélène Cixous, “Sorties,” in *The Newly Born Woman*, with Catherine Clément, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1975] 1986); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, [1974] 1985); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In discussing these historical assumptions, I do not use a sex/gender distinction, as this distinction only began to be made in the 1960s. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Lloyd, *Man of Reason*, chs. 5 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Irigaray, *Speculum*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. O’Neill, “Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History,” in *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice*, ed. Janet A. Kourany (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On women’s contributions to German idealism and Romanticism, see Alison Stone and Giulia Valpione, “Idealism and Romanticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers in the German Tradition*, ed. Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021 forthcoming); Laure Cahen-Maurel and Giulia Valpione, eds., *Symphilosophie* 2: *The Women Writers of Philosophical Romanticism* (2020), URL: <https://symphilosophie.com/symphilosophie-2-2020-eng/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Alison Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Alison Stone, “Nature, Freedom and Gender in Schelling,” in *Schelling’s Philosophy: Nature, Freedom, and Systematicity,* ed. G. Anthony Bruno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 168-184. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Although not entirely, for full unification requires the journey through the stages of mind as well, narrated in the third part of the *Encyclopedia*, the *Philosophy of Mind*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hegel, *Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On Günderrode’s reading see S. D. Martinson, “‘… aus dem Schiffbruch des irdischen Lebens’: The Literature of Karoline von Günderrode and Early German Romantic and Idealist Philosophy,” *German Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2005): 303-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Creuzer had arranged for the publication of *Melete*, but he shelved it when Günderrode, tragically, committed suicide in 1806. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*,ed. Walther Morgenthaler (3 vols.; Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1990-1991), 1: 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Sämtliche Werke* 1: 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Sämtliche Werke* 2: 366. For all Günderrode’s notes on these various natural phenomena, see *Sämtliche Werke* 2: 359-406. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Sämtliche Werke* 1: 446. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Sämtliche Werke* 1: 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Sämtliche Werke* 1: 360. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For another account of Günderrode’s differences from Schelling, see Helga Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns. Mythisierung der inneren und äusseren Natur im Werk Karoline von Günderrodes* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004). Dormann argues that Günderrode differs from Schelling because her approach to nature is Romantic – hence aesthetic, symbolic, and mythological – rather than idealist, i.e., delineating various stages of realisation of the Absolute. I see Günderrode as closer to idealism. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Schelling entertained the possibility of future spiritual existence in the afterlife in *Clara*, but this is from around 1810 so post-dates Günderrode’s work. See Schelling, *Clara: Or, On Nature’s Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke* 1: 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Günderrode’s association of struggle and fighting with masculinity is evident in her dramatic writings, which often deal with male military leaders. She felt they trampled lesser individuals underfoot, but her fascination with them remained. See Stone and Valpione, “Romanticism and Idealism,” sec. iv. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Günderrode, letter to ‘Gunda’ (Kunigunde) Brentano, 29 August 1801, quoted in Christa Wolf, *Der Schatten eines Traumes* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1981), 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. No feminist, Hegel took a dim view of the multiply-married Caroline Schlegel-Schelling; see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 113, 192-3. Had Hegel known of Günderrode, I suspect that he would have disapproved of her too – not only because he saw intellectual women as an aberration, but also on account of Günderrode’s suicide and her illicit affair with the already-married Creuzer. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, [1987] 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)