

BRUCE MATTHEWS

(DUKE UNIVERSITY)

ON

SCHELLING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: THINKING BEYOND THE ANNIHILATION OF NATURE

The Anthropocene is the name proposed by scientists for the new geological age we now find ourselves in. It is literally an 'age of humanity' in which we have become the most significant shaper of the world (as the sun was in the Holocene).

In 1804, the German philosopher F.W.J. Schelling wrote of the future 'annihilation of nature' that would occur if we continued to value nature only for its economic worth. This prediction was grounded in his broader critique of modernity's obsession with control and clarity, succinctly expressed in Descartes' self-certain "I think, therefore I am." Certainty and control, however, come at a high cost: making Nature a domain irreducibly detached and separate from our consciousness, with no inherent value beyond its instrumental value to our needs.

Thinking beyond the annihilation of nature is the attempt to think beyond this destructive frame of modernity. The question is: How might we use the rich resources of Schelling's works – on art, on myth, on nature and religion – as a source and foil for creating a new way of understanding nature, ourselves and our relation to nature, so that we can move beyond, and thus hopefully stop or mitigate the radical changes we are causing to our world?

The very possible annihilation of nature we now face – annihilation not in the sense of the end all life, but referring to the nonetheless world-changing extinctions at hand - this possible annihilation creates a space for philosophical reflection that can no longer indulge in the luxury of more scholastic speculations, but must instead work to think creatively within the horizon of such a future.

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