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The Phoenix Complex

A Philosophy of Nature

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4 UNITY AND UNIVERSALITY: PLOTINUS/SCHELLING

The absolute singularity of the phoenix, who is one of a kind, is a feature that recurs across narratives and traditions, from the earliest to the medieval. This feature places the phoenix in a privileged position with regard to the whole: it is thanks to her singularity that she comes to embody the whole. Even John Donne in his 1604 poem “The Canonization” equates “the phoenix riddle” with the phenomenon of two becoming one in love: “Call us what you will, we’re made such by love; / Call her one, me another fly, / We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die, / And we in us find th’eagle and the dove; / The phoenix riddle hath more wit / By us: we two, being one, are it.”¹ The phoenix betokens not so much a post-factum unification as a primordial unity (also of opposites, the old *complexio oppositorum*, such as fire and water, the feminine and the masculine, sexual and asexual being, life and death, the eagle and the dove). The unity of nature—the unity that *is* nature prior to its unfolding, spreading or burgeoning out: which is to say, before and beyond what the Greeks call *phusis*; hence, a certain nature without nature—is at stake in the figure of the phoenix, who, in a burst of light and heat, incarnates the whole.

Born in Lycopolis, Egypt, which was then a Roman province, at the beginning of the third century CE, Plotinus deduces the existence of one nature from the nature of the One. Actually, the One in and of itself remains unknown and unknowable, even if it is partly available via three hypostases or emanations: the intellect (*nous*), the soul (*psuchē*), and the good (*to agathon*). The One gives itself as more than one, retreats from the giving, covers itself over with the latticework of multiplicities. The project of a return to

the origin, which Plotinus undertakes in his philosophy, is that of overcoming multiple ramifications of the One, of reuniting with the principle of unity, of disclosing nature before and beyond nature (hence, nature without growth and, in some sense, without itself; nature compatible with the self-containment of a principle) in absolute simplicity, quietude, and energetic rest. The principle is solitary and unique, so much so that it must be “defined by its uniqueness [*monachōs*]” (*Enneads* 6.8.9.11), while “uniqueness comes from the principle itself” (6.8.9.13–14). The phoenix’s dip into life-giving fire is an allegorization of this reunification and uniqueness, reducing material forms to the underlying ineffable One.

In the all-important *Ennead* 3.8, “On Nature and Contemplation and the One,” Plotinus famously (and playfully) suggests that “all things aspire to contemplation [*panta theōrias epheisthai*] and direct their gaze to this end—not only rational, but also irrational living things [*aloga zōa*], and the power of growth in plants [*phutois phusin*], and the earth which brings them forth—and that all attain it as far as possible for them in their natural state [*kata phusin echonta*], but different things contemplate and attain their end in different ways, some truly [*alēthōs*], and some only having an imitation and image [*mimēsin kai eikona*] of this true end” (3.8.1.1–8). The power of growth in plants, for instance, is the vegetal way of contemplating the One, through what Plotinus will later dub “growth-thought,” *phutikē noesis*. Sensation is the animal mode of contemplating the One in a “sense-thought,” *aisthētikē noesis*. Ratiocination is “soul-thought,” *psuchikē noesis* (3.8.8.15). Each thought, each manner of contemplation, is inseparable from a life—vegetal, animal, human. Being a plant is thinking-plant-hood (or growth) and contemplating the One, or being contemplated by the One, which imagines itself (through a rich and ever ramifying image) in the shape of a plant. Existing as an animal is entinking animality (or sensation) and contemplating the One, or being contemplated by the One, dreaming itself up as an animal. Assuming the form of a human is thinking thought itself, presumably freer of images and imitations, and contemplating the One, or being contemplated by it already in the medium of pure contemplation.

When the phoenix appears on the cultural scene as a synecdoche of the soul or of nature, what emerges is an image or a symbol (which I have

also referred to as a thought-image) of the whole. But, like the phoenix, the image, too, is unique. The phoenix is neither purely elemental nor vegetal nor animal nor human or divine, and all of these beings at once. The life of the phoenix is neither that of mere growing, nor of sensing, nor of abstract thinking, and yet it is all of the above. The phoenix neither incarnates the truth of the One nor is he its image nor imitation, even as he is all of these things. Through the phoenix, nature or the soul sees itself, as in a mirror—a contemplation of the contemplation that is as much sensuous as it is intellectual and growing-metamorphosing-decaying. The phoenix thus englobes the “ascents of contemplation from nature to the soul and from the soul to the intellect [*tēs phuseōs epì psuchēn kai apo tautēs eis noun*]” (3.8.8.1–2), ascents, through which contemplation becomes more intimate, more united with the contemplator, and yet also more universal.

More than an aspiration, contemplation is creative, such that the primordial unity of theory and practice is the principle of nature: “Nature . . . has contemplation in itself and makes what it makes by contemplation [*poiei dia theōrian poiei*]” (3.8.1.23–25). Theory moves the world, making it grow and change, endowing it with sentience and reflective capacities. Being, knowing, and making merge into one, because they are traceable back to the One.

Nevertheless, tucked into this thesis is a strong critique of phenomenality, of the process whereby, bubbling over itself, the One departs from itself, parting ways with itself, with its absolute rest, quietude, self-sufficiency, and plenitude. At first, “nature is at rest in contemplation of the vision of itself, a vision which comes to it from its abiding in and with itself and being itself a vision” (3.8.4.25–27). Subsequently (let us note that speaking of the “subsequent” is running into the problem of time, which Plotinus will take up separately in *Ennead* 3.7 on time and eternity), something comes to visibility, appears or surfaces, starts developing, leading a life that is exposed before the gaze of an outside observer. Passing into action, vision becomes generative or poietic and, in so doing, it grows weaker, just as “men, when their power of contemplation weakens make action a shadow of contemplation [*skian theōrias*] and reasoning” (3.8.4.30–32). Nature at rest, standing close to the One, gives way to a restless nature dispersed in the many. The

latter's "formative principle, which operates in the visible shape [*morphē*], is the last [*eschatos*] and is dead [*nekros*] and no longer able to make another" (3.8.2.30–32). But nature at rest, as well, is shadowy, compared to the brilliance of the intellect (*nous*), such that even the cosmos is but the intellect's "shadow and image [*skia kai eikōn*]" (3.8.11.28–29).

Plotinus borrows from Plato's *Phaedrus* (250c.4) the designation of the intellect as "pure light, pure radiance [*phōti katharō kai augē kathara*]" (3.8.11.27–28), compared to which the shining cosmic ornament is dull and dark. And he slots nature at rest, immersed in a contemplation of contemplation itself, between the two regimes of phenomenality (theoretical sight, on the one hand; physical vision, on the other). This in-between space is the space of the phoenix. Although Plotinus does not mention the bird by name, his early years in Lycopolis and a later sojourn in Alexandria surely made him acquainted with stories about this unusual bird and its Egyptian predecessor, *bennu*.² As a form of the sun god, *bennu* (probably transcribed into Greek as *phoenix*³) is a source of shining and a personification of radiance, seeing also that its name is derived from the verb *wbn*, which means "to rise radiantly," "to shine."⁴ How and why, then, does the phoenix (or *bennu*) with its own glow stand between what I've just termed "two regimes of phenomenality," notably the shining of the cosmos and of the intellect, the one a shadow of the other?

If we take fire as a medium of rebirth in the widely known renditions of the myth, then it becomes clear that, delving back into fiery life, whether the flames shoot from her own body or from the elements outside, the phoenix returns to a radiance that does not give anything to sight. In fact, in Ennead 2.1, "On Heavens," Plotinus asserts that "there are fiery living beings among the spirits [*Kai zōa de purina esti daimonōn*]" (2.1.6.54–55). The passage of the aged phoenix through fire is a reunification with the spiritual realm, where visible forms are no longer necessary—the final forms (including those of the body itself) that are already, in themselves, dead, incapable of generating anything else. The theoretical and the practical, eidetic and ritualistic reduction of the body in fire is but the most literal crossing from one regime of phenomenality to another.

Nonetheless, fire is not, for Plotinus, a principle of life; it is, itself, lifeless compared to the principles (the *logoi*) of vitality, through which nature is defined. Speaking of nature as “the power . . . which makes without hands [and therefore] must remain unmoved [*dunamin tēn ou dia cheirōn poiouasan kai pasan menein*]” (3.8.2.14–15), he rejects the view of cosmic or elemental fire as the formative (spiritual) principle that enlivens (wooden) matter: “For it is not fire which has to come to matter in order that it may become fire, but a forming principle [*ina pur hē hulē genētai, alla logon*]” (3.8.2.25–26). The second crossing between the regimes of phenomenality is, therefore, signaled by the transition from fire to *logos*. Here, the “fast” and the “slow” transformations of the phoenix, both of them eluding in different ways bodily vision, rely on nature’s “making without hands,” the generativity of its contemplation—which is, in a certain synecdochic sense, the phoenix’s contemplation. Plotinian nature is not a perfect artisan; on the contrary, its productive and reproductive powers betray a weakening of contemplative energy and need to be subordinated to the original impulse, which will revitalize them: “Action, then, is for the sake of contemplation and vision [*praxis eneka theōrias kai theōrēmatos*]” (3.8.6.1).

Besides the rising and setting sun or seasonal periodicity, another motif of phenomenality (closely tied to survival, if not to resurrection) in the phoenix complex is the germinating seeds. Reviving after apparent death, a seedling breaks out into the light, while remaining tethered to the darkness of the soil. The seed, in Plotinus’s eyes, represents the formative principle so long as it stays quiet in its self-identity. Analogous to the soul and to nature, however, it gives in to the temptation of disquiet: “As from a quiet seed [*ek spermatos hēsouchou*], the formative principle, unfolding itself, advances, as it thinks, to largeness, but does away with the largeness by division and, instead of keeping its unity in itself, squanders it outside itself and so goes forward to a weaker extension” (3.7.11.23–27). A weaker nature is restlessly active, striving to appear in the light of day, unsatisfied with keeping itself in reserve and in the quiet energy of the principle. Thinking, which is indistinguishable from growing—from “the spreading out of life” that constitutes time (3.7.11.42), the plant, as well as the soul and nature it represents—exchanges the first

regime of phenomenality flooded with the pure brilliance of the intellect for the second regime lit with actual sunlight and the rest of cosmic fire.

This is Plotinus's ultimate rebuttal of the phoenix complex: it would be better if the cycle of rebirths were to stop, and better still if it were never to have started. The seed, the principle gathered in its absolute simplicity into the One, is incomparably more desirable than the fully developed plant that will grow from it, squandering itself (squandering the unity and unicity of the One, no less!) outside itself. The phoenix is the symbolic stain of a philosophical version of the original sin according to Plotinus, the sin of having parted with and departed from the origin.

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The energy component of the phoenix complex fits, with some unease, the scheme Plotinus draws in his philosophy. On the one hand, he takes *energeia* in the Aristotelian sense of a quiet and complete actuality, not lacking in anything and perfectly self-contained in the One. On the other hand, *energeia* turns into *dunamis*, or potentiality—despite the efforts Plotinus exerts to differentiate between the two, particularly in Ennead 2.5, “On Powers and Actualities”—when, flowing down from the source, it drives the expansion of life *and* when it borders on pure potentiality, kept in reserve in the One. Be this as it may, for Plotinus, the reproduction of existence through copies of the original and copies of those copies, entails a weakening (exhaustion, entropy) of the initial energy the further it is pushed away from its source.

The paradox of Plotinian energy is explicable with regard to energy's doubling.⁵ So, “the first part of the soul, that which is above and always filled and illuminated by the reality above, remains there; but another part . . . goes forth, for soul goes forth always, life from life [*gar aei zōē ek zōēs*]; for energy reaches everywhere [*energeia gar pantachou phthanei*], and there is no point where it fails” (3.8.5.10–15). The quanta of energy are fixed, whether in the realm above, or here below. But, because upper energy remains ever the same, it does not suffer any diminution, while lower energy “goes forth,” expanding and flowing “from life to life,” and is debilitated in its parts by being divided. The two energies, then, are those of the One in itself and of a unity that falls apart into a constantly ramifying multiplicity.

As for the figure of the phoenix, its reproduction follows the rules of “the first part of the soul,” which, by producing a rejuvenated other as though it were the same, preserves a fixed quantum of energy without dissipating into the many. Cosmic fire and the cosmos itself combine sameness and difference in a similar fashion: “If anything was lost there through fire being extinguished, other fire [*pur heteron*] would have to be kindled; and if it [the cosmos] had this other fire from something else and that something else lost it by flux, that again would have to be replaced by other fire” (2.1.3.25–30). Such self-replacement is crucial to the myth of the phoenix, and it also reflects the activity of cosmic fire according to Plotinus, along with the view of energy that is invariable and at rest either above or beneath all its fluctuations. That nothing is lost in the process of substitution means that a formal identity has been established between the substituting and the substituted, stopping in its tracks the entropic tendency whereby energy dissipates the further it is from its source. Life itself—and, in the first and last instances, the life of the cosmos—is anti-entropic. All losses are not only accounted for but also neutralized, indemnified as though they have never been incurred, as though movement, change, metamorphosis never took place.

At the same time, Plotinus postulates a qualitative difference between the generating and the generated, such that “that which generates is always simpler than that which is generated [*tou gar gennēthenos pantachou to gennōn haplousteron*]” (3.8.9.43–44). The degrees of simplicity increase the closer we get to the origin, that is, the absolute simplicity of the One. And that is the very origin of energy’s doubling, its distribution between the energy maintained forever intact and that suffering a constant weakening. “The first life [*zōē prōtē*]” is not first absolutely, “since it is the energy [*energeia*] manifest in the way of the outgoing of all things” (3.8.9.33–34). By contrast to the energy of vitality, there is also “something else, which is no more in the way of outgoing, but is the origin of the outgoing, and the origin of life and of the intellect and all things [*archē diexodou kai archē zōēs kai archē tōn pantōn*]” (3.8.9.38–40).

The absolute principle and origin, which is the One, generates all that is *but does not partake of the mode of being, the energy, the life of the generated*. It dispenses life from what is not in life, what is not itself living, but is “above

life [*huper tēn zōēn*]” as its “cause [*aition*]” (3.8.10.3). The phoenix’s rebirth may be understood as a plunge into the nonliving cause of life, symbolized at the limits of phenomenality by fire. Pure Life is difficult to tell apart from Death, just as unadulterated Light is indistinguishable from Darkness. Along these lines pure actuality flips into pure potentiality, the energy (*energeia*) manifest in the outgoing supplanted with the power (*dunamis*) that remains nonmanifest in the cause of the outgoing: “What is it [that which is before all things]? The power of all things [*Dunamis tōn pantōn*]” (3.8.10.1).

Together with Plotinus, we circle back to the seed as a companion figure of the phoenix and as the semantic vehicle of the One, of its potency, which is, in a surprising reversal of Aristotle that makes Plotinus (almost) our contemporary, other and greater than energy. The One, Plotinus writes in a treatise on “The Descent of the Soul into Bodies,” could not stay happily in itself, alone (*monon*) and hidden (*ekekrupto*) (4.8.6.1). Instead, it generously unfolds like a seed (*spermatos*) “from a partless beginning [*amerous archēs*] which proceeds to the final stage perceived by the senses” (4.8.6.9–10). The infinite power of the One becomes manifest, giving itself a body, an actuality (in the exact sense of *energeia*). What is in the Ennead “On Eternity and Time” rebuked as the weakness of the seed “thinking itself to largeness” is here restyled into a strength (the strength *of* weakness?) insofar as actual existence in a ramified multiplicity is the dimension that was missing from the hermetic plenitude of the One: locked in itself, it would have remained as ineffectual as a soul without a body. “Energy (or actuality) everywhere reveals completely hidden potency [*energeia tēn dunamin edeixē*], in a way obliterated and nonexistent because it does not yet truly exist” (4.8.5.34–36).

The notion of potency or potentiality in Plotinus is far from straightforward; like energy, it splits against itself and emerges as its own double. On the one hand, “one must speak of anything which is potential as potentially something else [*to dunamei ti on allo hulē tō ti*] by being able to become something after what it already is” (2.5.1.17–18). On the other hand, “potentiality understood in the sense of being able to make [*hē dunamis hē kata to poiein*] would not be described as existing potentially” (2.5.1.25–26). *Dunamis* as the capacity to become other is not equivalent to *dunamis* as

the capacity to make others. The *dunamis* of the One, concentrating in itself “the power of all things,” is not subject to alteration, to the vicissitudes of othering. It overflows itself and initiates the outpouring of existence without suffering any changes. Although they reflect the activity of the One, the seed and the phoenix are not exempt from the first sense of potentiality: they are the One in self-alteration, capable of becoming something other than what they already are. In the story of the phoenix, this othering is immediately negated, subsumed into the same, as in Lactantius: “The same indeed, but not the same; the very one, yet not the one [*Ipsa quidem, sed non eadem, quia et ipsa, nec ipsa est*]” (*De ave phoenice* 169–170). The phoenix is, therefore, halfway to the One, both partaking and not partaking of the first sense of potentiality, pinpointed by Plotinus.

The “power of all” is, by implication, a double-edged sword. Gathered in the One, this power is not capable of anything—provided that capacity is indicative of a deficiency, something yet to be accomplished—and it is capable of everything—assuming the second sense of *dunamis* as a making (here: through the creative self-overflow of contemplation). That said, the making (*poiesis*) as an effect of contemplation (*theōria*) is not the bustle of activity, but quietude oozing with the energy of rest, replete with echoes of eternity and the One: “The disposition of . . . that quiet life as a single whole, still unbounded, altogether without declination” (3.7.11.1–5).⁶ Stillness (*hēsuchia*)—quietness, silence—marks this state before time, in which a potentiality not lacking in anything merges with actuality: *dunamis* melts into *energeia*. This is the state commemorated in the quietude of a seed, *spermatos hēsouchou* (3.8.11.23) and in the “soul of all that would be like the soul in a great growing plant [*phutō megalō*], which directs the plant without effort or noise” (4.3.4.25–30), furnishing a vegetal figuration of the One.⁷

Quiescence and stillness attained, as much as possible, in this life will later on become the cornerstones of the Greek Orthodox spiritual practice of Hesychasm, as formulated, for instance, in the writings of Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas.⁸ But what about the phoenix complex? Does it admit the quietude of energy at rest, the energy *of* rest that overcomes the restlessness of becoming within the sphere of becoming? Or does it frame life

as nothing but a hamster perpetually running in a wheel in order to remain in the same place? To take up these questions, we need to discuss the Plotinian concept of time as it bears upon the phoenix complex.

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In Plotinus's philosophical universe, time is derivative from eternity. In this, also, he subscribes to the position of Plato's *Timaeus*, where time is defined, protocinematically, as "a moving image of eternity" (37d). Eternity, for Plotinus, is being without either a past or a future, never expending anything of itself and yet, through its "infinite power [*dia dunamin apeiron*]," rendering the many (3.7.5.20–25). Eternity is the life (*zōē*; 3.7.5.23) and the nature (*phusis*; 3.7.6.1) of the One, or, at least, the "altogether beautiful and everlasting" life and nature, gathered "around the One [*peri to hen*]" (3.7.6.2). Time arises with "the restlessly active nature [*phuseōs de polupragmonos*] . . . seeking more than its present state" (3.7.11.14–16) and "the soul's unquiet power [*psuchēs hēn tis dunamis ouch hēsuchos*] wanting to transfer [*meta-pherein*] what it saw there [in eternity] to something else" (3.7.11.20–21). However necessary the physical extension of the One that lends it actuality and effectiveness at the price of its self-containment, time is, on this view, a whim of the soul and of restless nature (and, for Plotinus, "what is called nature is the soul [*hē men legomenē phusis psuchē ousa*]" [3.8.4.15]), symbolized by the phoenix.

Time is superfluous compared to eternity, of which it is the image: it replaces "the complete and infinite whole" with a "continuous and infinite succession" (3.7.11.54–55), an image that cannot be envisioned all at once because it is ever in the process of being made—*o kosmos eikon aei eikonizomenos* (2.3.18.16). And the phoenix complex confirms, over and over, the superfluousness of time. The aging of the bird or the tree that goes under that name is reversed, undone thanks to its rejuvenation, rebirth, or resurrection in fire or through a slower process of decomposition and spontaneous regeneration. Once the phoenix achieves its full manifestation, it is as though nothing happened, as though no time passed, as though the gap of "dead time" were bridged. Despite the language of filiality and even burial rites performed with the remains of the phoenix's predecessor in some versions

of the myth, there is no substantive difference between the “before” and the “after.” The myth thus abuts eternity, in which “you cannot apprehend anything as before [*proteron*] or after [*husteron*]” (3.7.6.18–19) and in which being ultimately appears “without any difference [*adiaphorōs*]” (3.7.6.14).

Time is erased in its very movement; a chain of succession disappears, bent into the circle, in which the phoenix is (remains or returns to being) one. It makes no sense to invoke what is before and what is after in a constantly rotating cycle. Similarly, in Plotinus, when the soul “leaves its activity outside eternity and returns to unity, time is abolished [*anērētai chronos*]” (3.7.12.20–22). Nature before and beyond nature is recoverable, because restless activity is a deviation from the underlying energy of rest, just as time is a (temporary) departure from the order of eternity. This is what the phoenix complex conveys. Embedded within the paradigm of “renewable” energy is the same sleight of hand that eliminates all differences between generations of growable and combustible materials, ideally interchangeable and substituting for the past without any positive or negative remainder. When the balance in this ontological accounting system is zero, time is, indeed, “abolished,” the unevenness, discontinuities, leaps and rifts of a succession leveled down and neutralized. The absence of changes discernible in a fresh version of the phoenix compared to the old encapsulates the superfluousness of time, that is, the passage of time that may be brushed off with a deeply theoretical pretense that it did not pass. In short, what is in play here is an approximation of the temporally (part by part) reconstructed whole and the undivided whole of eternity, in the image of which time is generated (3.7.11.45–50).

Time in Plotinus operates under erasure, moving within and toward what is no longer or not yet temporal. Its operations amount to the technologies (the mechanics and machinations) of transferring (*metapherein*) what a disquieted soul espied in eternity to something or someone else. This transfer is as much psychic as physical, geared as it is toward the production and reproduction of the same.⁹ Different existents and modes of existence are the manifold replications of the vision of the One: “The same vision is in every soul [*en pasē psuchē to auto*]” (3.8.5.32)¹⁰ and “it is soul which contemplates, and makes that which comes after it . . . and contemplation makes

contemplation [*kai theōria tēn theōrian poiei*]” (3.8.5.25–30). Time is the duration of theory-practice that transfers the same vision (of the atemporal) to a multitude of generated beings. The formal equality of vision that is “in every soul” equalizes the generating and the generated on the primordial grounds of the One.

And yet, in the ongoing replications of the same vision through psycho-physical transfer “filling all things with contemplation [*esti pantas plērōsai theōrias*]” (3.8.7.23), something happens—something that, disrupting the self-consolidation of sameness, introduces transcription errors into the program of reproduction. These errors, like genetic mutations or small inaccuracies in viral replication, muddle the vision of the One that still resides in every soul, such that a newly generated existence “contemplates in a more external way [*exōterō*] and not like that which preceded it” (3.8.5.26–28). Plotinus then suggests that the “failures [*amartiai*]” of the contemplators are due to their distraction from the object of contemplation, which is the One (the Greek word translated as “distraction” by A. H. Armstrong in the Loeb edition of the *Enneads* is *paraphora*, which entails going astray and aside, a slight derangement, frenzy or even madness) (3.8.7.21–24). If the phoenix reproduces itself without such errors, that is because it is not this or that soul, but the soul as such, counted among the hypostases of the One.

Self-creation, or self-re-creation (more recently recovered in the sense of *autopoiesis*), is another hallmark of the One, which it also shares with the phoenix. In an atmosphere of freedom, “he himself is the one who makes himself [*autos estin outos o poiōn eauton*]” (6.8.15.9). This is the sense of “the absolute making [*apoluton tēn poiēsīn*]” (6.8.15.6), of “eternal generation [*gennēsei aidīō*],” and “self-governance [*archōn eautou*]” (6.8.15.29)—all of them qualities that come very close to describing the phoenix’s activity. Eternal self-generation is the only way to avoid the error of distracted contemplators: the generating and the generated, the before and the after are one and the same and, though there is movement between them, this movement is insubstantial, literally freed from the limiting conditions of substance. Pertaining to the economy of the One, “absolute making” works with parts that are not really parts, with the One that parts against itself without actually parting or departing from itself. It is worth underlining

the singular mechanics and machinations of absolute self-reproduction and its place in the overall plot of the phoenix complex: with the whole at once undivided and divided on its own terms, time and eternity converge on the horizon on the One. And this convergence also has to do with “us,” in those exceptional conditions when we attain unity with the One, “when we ascend to this and become this alone and let the rest go . . . having become the true life itself [*auto to alēthinon zēn genomenous*]” (6.8.15.20–25).

In addition to symbolizing the soul, the phoenix is the synecdoche of nature, which, Plotinus writes, “is time itself [*hē phusis autē chronos*]” (3.7.12.1). The bracketing, the reduction, the putting under erasure of time is, therefore, a putting under erasure of nature. The time that is the predicate of nature consists of “even and uniform changes [*metabolais*]” in a “continuous unfolding of energy [*suneches to tēs energeias*]” (3.7.12.2–3). There is no time without metabolism, the unremitting transformations of energy, which assumes the most varied shapes. The bracketing of time that, by the same token, brackets nature does away with the metabolic pathways of energy tending toward exteriority. The phoenix-like rebirth of nature without time happens on a higher plane (which is also the earlier, or even the earliest stage, if it still makes sense to speak of the earlier and the later here) of energetic rest, of being “turned around [*anastrepsai*]” and directed only to itself (3.7.12.4) with utmost attention devoid of the possibility of distraction. In the same line of Plotinian text, energy mutates into *dunamis*, the power beyond capability, gathered into the One.¹¹

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The superfluosity of time against the backdrop of the “partless whole” that is eternity finds its logical expression in the redundancy of death, which is the pivotal aspect of the phoenix complex. Plotinus makes the strongest statement to this effect in *Ennead* 2.1, “On Heavens”: “Even if it were possible for all body to perish [*ei pan oion te sōma apolesthai*], nothing unpleasant would happen to soul” (2.1.4.31–32). The material reduction of the body does not in the least harm the soul: this metaphysical tenet presides over philosophical reflections throughout the millennia stretching from Plato to Edmund Husserl. Nevertheless, the phoenix signals resurrection of and in

the flesh, and the complex that goes under its name cannot ignore the bodily dimension of existence. This has not escaped Plotinus, who perhaps ironically suggests that, in order to achieve self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) in matters of well-being, “one must cut off the body, and even perception of the body [*aisthēsin tēn sōmatos*], from human nature” (1.4.5.24–25). (As a result of the proposed cut, lost, along with the body, would be the vegetal soul, the plant-thinking of the One that permeates the body and is in charge of its growth, nourishment, and reproduction, as well as the animal soul, which is the perceptual contemplation of the One. Remaining after the drastic psychosurgery would be the purely contemplative, “rational” soul.) So, how should we approach the issue of the redundancy of death, and possibly of the body, in Plotinian thought?

The initial clue is contained in the same manuscript “On Wellbeing,” where Plotinus muses about the possibility of cutting off from the soul the entire body and its perception. A radical cut occurs at the time of death. While it is absurd to desire the reduction of embodied existence in life for the sake of attaining happiness,¹² the event of death is not an occasion for grieving: “Even if the death of friends and relatives causes grief, it does not grieve him [a human being] but only that in him which has no intelligence [*en autō noun ouk echon*],” and “he will not allow the distress of this to move him” (1.4.4.34–36). Death performs a practical reduction on the body and on the most embodied levels of vitality (or the soul), while keeping intact the more intimate, purer self-contemplation of the One that constituted the human as human. It is this principle of human life that is reborn, reincarnated in the flesh.

In accordance with Plotinus’s theory of metempsychosis,¹³ influenced by the myth of Er that appears in Book X of Plato’s *Republic*, “Those who guarded the human in them become human again [*osoī men oun ton anthrōpon etērēsan, palin anthrōpoi*]” (1.4.2.16). What one does in this life matters; how one has led it steers the transmigrating soul toward the shape of a future incarnation. Humanity is not a fixed identity, not a genetic code hardwired into our corporeality once and for all. It is, rather, a gift that may be easily lost and that requires to be kept or guarded (*etērēsan*: “they kept”) in this life so that it would be received again in the next. The Plotinian phoenix

is, therefore, not an automatic, mechanical, and *consequently* machinational process or procedure, but a conditional event, promising rebirth in the same stream of life, provided that the life deemed to be specifically human prevailed in one's former existence.¹⁴

What befalls those who do not guard the human in them? “Those who lived by sense alone [*de aisthēsei monon*] become animals; but if their sense-perceptions have been accompanied by passionate temper, they become wild animals. . . . But if they did not even live by sense along with their desires but coupled them with the dullness of perception, they turn into plants; for it was this, the growth-energy [*enērgēi to phutikon*], which worked in them, alone or predominantly, and they were taking care to turn themselves into trees” (3.4.2.17–25). In the Hellenic context, the possibility of reincarnation in plants is already present in the thought of Empedocles; however, Plotinus does not differentiate among the species or kinds of plants, as he does in the case of animals. Nor is it spelled out, though this is implied, what happens to animals who do not guard their animality: they are, obviously, reincarnated in plants. As a rule, whatever the energy that gained an upper hand and steered the body-soul assemblage in life will be the very energy that will find an appropriate form for itself after this life is over (3.4.3.2). The intermittencies of death, death as the intermittency of life or of lives, is an opportunity for a correction, an adjustment (for this is, indeed, a matter of justice) of the predominant kind of soul to the body it receives. Plotinian metempsychosis manages a modified version of the phoenix complex, whereby the reincarnated soul may find its temporary home in a body that is not physically the same as the previous one but that is appropriate for this soul's habitual activities.

As a result, death is no more than the possibility of readjustment, of the soul's retraction from the body with which it is imbricated in this life, its return to the One, and its reenergizing plunge into a fresh and more suitable corporeal entity. Actually, since the body is what is superadded to the soul, it is “the soul [that] waits for the body to fall altogether away [*to sōma apostēnai*] from it” (1.9.2–4). As in later philosophies of immanence (notably, in Spinoza's), death is akin to a rearrangement of pieces, not to a radical break—the untying of a bond that is retied elsewhere, by other means, or

even by the same, assuming that one lived one's life in a way befitting the kind of being one was. To be sure, "no single individual thing lasts forever, but the unity of form [*to hēn tō eidei*]" (2.1.1.9–10). The phoenix is this unity of form (of *psuchē*, of *phusis*) personified, figuratively attributed to a "single individual thing." If he is born from death, that is because death is not just the dissolution but also the contrary, an occasion for further consolidating the form in its unity.

At the global level, the unity of living form conjugated with the constant flux of matter justifies the simultaneous sameness and difference of the phoenix, of the "universal living creature [*to pan zōon*] [that] would not remain the same thing, even if it remained the same sort of thing" (2.1.3.30). Within the elastic unity of form, matter is replaceable: the variability or substitutability (above all, the self-substitutability) at the core of the phoenix complex pertains to materiality. The flux of matter, however, is not chaotic: the synthesis of elements is such that "through the community of the universe [*kata tēn en kosmō koinōnian*], while remaining itself each [element] takes not the actual [other] element, but something which belongs to it" (2.1.7.15–16). Matter is, therefore, a combination of sameness and otherness, its "cosmic community" attached to the "all-embracing living creature" by means of its universality, the being-in-common of community (*koinōnia*), which resonates with "the all" (*to pan*) of the grand living creature.

Strangely, matter and the body taken in their universality corroborate the formal irreality of death in Plotinus. In the Ennead "On Heavens," which we have been reading quite closely, "the matter and body of all . . . cooperate toward the immortality of the universe [*tou kosmou athanasian*]" by "flowing in themselves; not flowing out [*rei gar ouk exō*]" (2.1.3.1–4). In his polemic "Against the Gnostics," Plotinus adds the following: "That which has nothing into which it can be dissolved will not perish" (2.9.3.15). Material forms dissolve back into matter, but matter itself does not dissolve into anything else. The phoenix principle is active here: across changes, fast or slow, the phoenix reverts back to the same because everything moves within a closed system lacking an outside. An inwardly directed flux is congruous with stasis.

The last two themes to take up with respect to death and materiality in the crucible of the phoenix complex, as Plotinus configures it, are spontaneous generation and disgust.

In the Ennead “On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit” (3.4), the theme of *generatio aequivoca* is briefly addressed. The generativity of the soul in the process of division is most clearly observable in plants: “Sometimes the soul remains in the same living being and gives [life to others], like the soul in plants” (3.4.6.41). A living plant is a phoenix that generates other living beings (like it) from the threshold of death, of being sliced into parts. (Note that, for Plotinus, division into parts is already a harbinger of demise, since, by bordering on others, each part is in a tense, finite coexistence, potentially annihilated by them.) “But sometimes,” Plotinus continues, “when it [the soul] goes away, it gives before it goes, as with plants which have been pulled up or dead animals, when from their putrefaction many are generated from one [*ek sēpseōs pollōn ex henos gennēthentōn*]” (3.4.6.42–44). Spontaneous generation from putrefaction is a birth from death that restages in miniature the origination of the many from the One, a source of tremendous wonder (*thauma*), as far as Plotinus is concerned (3.8.10.14). Both at the macroscale of the origin of the living as such and on the microscale of *generatio aequivoca*, there is a collaboration, a working-with, a synergetic assemblage (*sunergeia*) of the One and the many, that is, the bond holding together the power (*dunamis*) of a generative unity and the generated multiplicity: “The power of all things collaborates [*sunergein*], and the particular power which is the same here [of one decomposing body], too” (3.4.6.45). The synergy in question is also that of the One and the one in the process of decomposition, the arriving and the parting gifts of the soul.

Through spontaneous generation, the parting gift of the soul spawning life from a decomposing body rejoins the life-giving power of the One. Hence, in keeping with Plotinian logic, neither putrefaction nor death is disgusting: the former, participating in a synergic relation with the creative origin of life; the latter, a misnomer. What *is* disgusting is living matter itself at the farthest remove from the One: it is the worst (*cheiriston*), savage (*agrion*), and opaque. “Its product is a living being, but a very imperfect

one, and one which finds its own life disgusting [*kai duscherainon tēn autou zōēn*] since it is the worst of living things, ill-conditioned and savage, made of inferior matter, a sort of sediment of prior realities, bitter and embittering” (II.3.17, 20–25). In this passage, Plotinus speaks of plants and vegetal life. He ascribes to them disgust with their own kind of vitality (*tēn autou zōēn*), which means that they would have at their disposal, besides the consciousness of their life expressed in axiological notions, terms of comparison with other lives (more perfect, less savage, and so forth). In the last instance, it is the One disgusted with itself, contemplated and realized (realized by being contemplated) in vegetal form. The One reemerges as a phoenix from its every incarnation, passing judgment on itself.

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For Friedrich Schelling, too, the One is foundational, and the whole history of existence is a myriad paths, through which one becomes all. As he puts it in his 1804 text on “System of Philosophy in General and the Philosophy of Nature in Particular,” “All that is [*Alles was ist*] is to the extent that it is one.”¹⁵ And it is in the same text that the first of three extant mentions of the phoenix in Schelling’s corpus may be found. There, he writes apropos of the combustion process, *Verbrennungsproceß*: “Every combustion process is a sacrifice of individuality [*Jeder Verbrennungsproceß ist eine Aufopferung der Individualität*]. When the sun represents the ideal principle in relation to the earth, the earth, as it were, sacrifices itself to the sun, as it does in the volcanic process, although, like a phoenix, it again revives from the ashes by the power of its indwelling individuality and binds itself in a relation to the sun anew [*obschon sie, dem Phönix gleich, durch die Macht der inwohnenden Individualität immer wieder aus ihrer Asche auflebt, um sich aufs neue mit der Sonne zu verbinden*].”¹⁶

In combustion, the universal element consumes the particular, which sacrifices itself or is sacrificed to this element (namely, to fire) by losing its identifiable figure and material form. The allocation of particularity to the earth and of universality to the sun pits them against each other, but also, by subterranean means, reconciles them. On the one hand, the inner fire of the earth, our planet’s molten core, represents its inner sun, the universality

hidden in the particular that occasionally breaks through and out in the “volcanic process,” which Schelling cites, the process shaping and molding the landscape. The sacrifice of the earth’s surface to its fiery depths, which come to the surface, evokes the phoenix simile: the burning earth cools down and revives from the ashes as fertile soil, ready to welcome vegetal growth. Its renewed relation to the sun is then mediated by plants, with respect to which, likewise, it “represents the ideal principle.” The “indwelling individuality,” *inwohnenden Individualität*, of the earth is not only a new relatively stable form it receives once lava flows cool, but also, and especially, the forming and generative power that enables the growth of plants and the life of everything that is. The earth is, thus, reborn both as itself (with new geophysical formations: mountain ranges, valleys, etc.) and as the other (the plants that sprout from rich volcanic soil).

The phoenix, lest we forget, is a bird dedicated to the sun: its magnificent radiance personifies (individuates) the solar deity; it dies a fiery death, following some mythic narratives, when the sun ray or lightning strike its nest; its remains are, according to other narrative strands, buried or left on the altar of the sun god in Heliopolis, the city of the sun. Even granting that the phoenix incarnates something of solar universality, her rebirth from the ashes or from the fluids of her decomposing flesh is attributable to the earthy power of “indwelling individuality.” Vegetal mediators, the green phoenixes that plants are, combine the two elements in the most empirical, palpable, accessible mode: they strive toward the sun, as to the ideal principle of existence to which they sacrifice themselves, but they receive their individuality from this self-sacrifice as much as from the earth, in which they are rooted. Plants rise radiantly as they stretch in their upper portions toward solar radiance; they are the growing-metamorphosing-decaying *phenomena* (needless to say, derived from the same root as *phoenix* and earlier still, probably, the Egyptian *bennu*), partly appearing in the light and shining in and with their unique light.

So, although, as Schelling will say in his Stuttgart seminars (1810), “the element of fire is hostile to the *proper nature* or *selfhood* of things [*ist feindselig gegen die Eigenheit oder Selbstheit der Dinge*],”¹⁷ these very proper nature and selfhood are essentially beholden to fire. The “hostility” to formed

matter exhibited by the fiery element is of a piece with its formative (if not life-giving) effects. The figure, or the transfiguration, of the phoenix, brings under its wing the ambivalent relation of fire to life.

Pure life, imagined as fire, is indistinguishable from death—it is, as Schelling notes in *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, “the original phenomenon of absolute fluidity [*das ursprüngliche Phänomen der absoluten Flüssigkeit*],”¹⁸ and, hence, the flux of life without the living who could retain, however briefly, their forms or “selfhood.” It is, moreover, the flux that is only temporarily dammed by living forms that retain their vivacity to the extent that they temporarily slow down, reroute, and circumscribe this fiery-living flow, de-absolutizing it. The “proper nature” of these living forms is inseparable from such slowing down, rerouting, delimitation, and so forth, which are then swept back into the fiery flux of pure life, to which the phoenix willingly delivers himself at the end of another cycle of his existence. This is what Schelling means by the footnote he appends to the definition of fire as the “phenomenon of absolute fluidity”: “This being [of fire] inimical to all shape, and for this reason the favorite being for shaping—the universal *liquefying* principle, and therefore the mainspring of all formation and of all productivity in Nature.”¹⁹ Nothing guarantees that, when taken up into the biological formation process again, the unshaped, liquefied materials of past life will achieve the same form. Yet, holding out the hope of individual resurrection, the phoenix promises just that. How so?

The second extant mention of the phoenix in Schelling’s work provides us with a semblance of a response. In the third draft of *The Ages of the World*, dating from 1815, Schelling describes a “backward process” (*rückgängiger Proceß*) in the free development of life that is akin to spontaneous combustion (*freiwillige Selbstverbrennung*). “But that life,” he writes, “because in itself it is immortal and because it cannot not be [*jenes Leben, weil das an sich unsterbliche, das gar nicht nicht seyn kann*], always again revives itself anew out of the ashes, as a phoenix [*als ein Phönix*], and hence, the eternal circle emerges.”²⁰ More than an individual living shape, despite all its singularity and uniqueness, the phoenix is a shaped figure of the shapeless, the eternal life that, unable not to be, returns in circular motion after the backward process of reduction to ashes has been completed. A synecdoche of nature and

of the soul, the phoenix is a representation of vitality, of life's flux detained in and released from a determinate shape. This detention-and-release model produces the "eternal circle," in which immortality appears as an expression of *unfreedom*: a life that "cannot not be [*gar nicht nicht seyn kann*]." The coveted feature—immortality—becomes a sign of subjection to the necessity of life, to life as such as a necessity that blocks access to the realm of freedom.

The phoenix complex betrays its enabling limitation here: the collective or individual subject at its core is so obsessed with perseverance in being that this subject denies itself the possibility of freedom, which does not entail a choice between being and nonbeing, but which lies beyond (and, for Schelling, before) this choice. Such an obsession does not allow the subject to experience "the yearning to escape the eternal annular drive [*Umtrieb*] and to reach continuance and rest."²¹ It is not that the yearning, the desire is not there to begin with: the phoenix complex merely anesthetizes us to it and to the freedom it connotes. The ruptured continuation of a circle (what Schelling calls "cision," *Scheidung*) is a memory of the yearning that is perpetually repressed, pushed down and prevented from coming to the surface, from being expressed. Schelling recalls it with the assistance of Buddhist traditions, with Hinduism and Jainism, where the notion of *nirvāṇa* (also *mokṣa*, *vimokṣa*, *apavarga*, or *mukti*) refers to a release from the necessity of being into what, perhaps, is neither being nor nothingness.²² Schelling writes, "But in that eternally commencing life there lies the wish to escape from the involuntary movement and from the distress of pining [*Aber in jenem ewig anfangenden Leben liegt selbst der Wunsch, aus der unwillkürlichen Bewegung und dem Drangsal zu entkommen*]."²³ That wish is the obverse side of the phoenix complex.

The phoenix complex, above all as the binding-together of the expressed and the repressed, turns out to be at the heart of Schelling's investigations on the relation of freedom and necessity in nature. That is where the third, and final, mention of the phoenix in his oeuvre fits. In the 1821 Erlangen lectures "On the Nature of Philosophy as Science," Schelling summarizes the process in which "eternal freedom first adopts a particular form—an existence—and the way, proceeding through everything and remaining in nothing, it finally breaks through to eternal freedom again—as the eternally struggling, but

never defeated, forever invincible force that ends up consuming each form it adopts, and, hence, rising from each one like a phoenix transfigured by its death in the flames [*also aus jeder wieder als Phönix aufsteht und durch Flammentod sich verklärt*].²⁴ Schelling considers this movement as “the content of the supreme science [*Inhalt der höchsten Wissenschaft*].”

In light of philosophy’s absolute content, life is the organic force that expresses eternal freedom. To be sure, life is neither eternal freedom itself nor a particular form this freedom may adapt in existence but the movement of freedom, its “proceeding through” (*hindurchgehend*), everything while remaining in nothing. This movement is one, in the course of which freedom perpetually passes over into necessity when it commits to a form of existence (the moment of freedom’s self-delimitation), while necessity flips into freedom when that form is consumed by the movement itself (the moment of restoration that transfigures, surpassing a particular figure). Expression is the truth and its betrayal, the betrayal of truth and the truth of the betrayal. Life is a mediator between freedom and necessity, but its mediating activity is steeped in freedom that reigns before the circle closes and after it opens up again, as well as within the circle itself—in the cisions, that cut across every transition, not permitting transfigurations to be straightforward translations of the real into the ideal, and vice versa. Life’s mediating activity *is* its expressive function, seen absolutely, within the field containing the content of the highest science. And the phoenix is an expression of that expression, a figure of transfigurations that, in addition to a long chain of other figures, points toward the other of a figure.

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The scheme, in which freedom is the starting point (and a persistent presence, accompanying the rest of the development) of nature, is evident in Schelling’s *First Outline*. Everything begins, for Schelling, with the absolute and unimpeded activity of nature, which, as pure activity, cannot have any objects or products detaining it. Everything begins, then, with a nature (as activity, the unconditioned, or subject) without nature (as “the sum total of existence,” conditioned products, or objects).²⁵ This is a beginning that cannot surpass its initial stage. To begin developing, rather than merely to begin

beginning, the unconditioned activity of nature must contract, accepting limitations (indeed, self-limitations), temporary as they may be. The sum total of existence is the sum total of such self-limitations.

But, even when it generates certain outcomes, nature's activity contains "a trace of freedom" (*Spur der Freiheit*), which cannot be fully extinguished in any one of them. So, while everything begins with absolute activity and with the self-delimitation of the infinite (similar to the self-contraction of God at the origin of the world, as conceived in the Lurianic Kabbalah²⁶), the problem for human knowledge is to rediscover the infinite in the finite, or, as Schelling puts it, "the possibility of exhibiting the infinite in the finite—is the highest problem of all science [*Möglichkeit der Darstellung des Unendlichen im Endlichen—ist höchstes Problem aller Wissenschaften*]." ²⁷

The paradigm Schelling sketches out in his *First Outline* inverts the phoenix complex as documented thus far in this book. To be exact, it inverts the ontological side of the complex, while keeping the epistemological side relatively unaffected: the task of teasing out the infinite from the finite at the level of "science" (*Wissenschaft*) must contend with the opposite question of how the infinite delimits itself to begin with, temporarily stabilizing itself in a welter of finite products. The mechanics and machinations of finite beings projecting themselves into the future, beyond their final expiration date, through reproduction have an air of cunning only on the assumption that nature is identified with a "dead mechanism," the quintessentially modern view Schelling fervently rejects. "To philosophize about nature," he writes, "means to heave it out of the dead mechanism, to which it seems predisposed [*aus dem todten Mechanismus, worin sie befangen erscheint, herausheben*]." ²⁸ The predisposition to reduce nature to a dead mechanism is justifiable within a theoretical and practical vision beholden to the provisionally stabilized natural products. But as soon as its original activity comes into view, nature as a collection of ingenuous devices, of equipment for living, of means (*mechanē*) dissipates, letting the first nature without nature shine through this appearance.

There are two sites, two cardinal points, at which the active and infinite impulse of nature is felt most acutely, but even they do not lead us to the purely unconditioned and absolute natural activity. I am referring to reproduction

and death. In reproduction, the organism is the “means and *instrument*” of natural activity,²⁹ that through which the infinite or the unconditioned acts (i.e., neither squarely the subject nor the object of this activity). Such transcendental instrumentality reinstalls the logic of life’s reproduction in the “dead mechanism” of nature. In death, the organism undergoes fluidification, a loss of form, which is, however, never total, inasmuch as matter is a composite (hence, minimally “formed”) all the way down.³⁰ Both reproduction and death thus show that the unleashing of nature’s activity is coextensive with its inhibition: technicization and instrumentalization, but stopping short of utter objectification; fluidification and formlessness, but never complete. And, in fact, Schelling aims to understand “how nature could inhibit its product at particular stages of development, without ceasing to be active itself [*wie die Natur ihr Produkt auf einzelne Entwicklungsstufen hemmen könne, ohne daß sie selbst aufhöre thätig zu seyn*].”³¹ The phoenix, I claim, is the imagistic or mythical filter through which the simultaneity of inhibition and activity may be grasped.

As far as its reproduction is concerned, the phoenix perfectly fits Schelling’s assertion: “‘The product is inhibited at a determinate stage of development’ does not mean that it absolutely stops being active, but that it is limited with respect to its productions; it cannot reproduce anything to infinity except itself.”³² This inhibited activity or active inhibition is the lot of the phoenix that reproduces only itself to infinity. At the same time, modes of reproduction vary: it can be asexual or sexual, for instance. In the former mode, a potentially infinite growth of the same (implying an inhibition of possible difference, which is what we seem to witness in the case of the phoenix, at least in its vegetal incarnation) predominates. In the latter, growth stops, but the same is rendered fluid and malleable, its fixed form lost in the merging of the two progenitors (implying an inhibition of the individual that is akin to death, while something of the individual is carried over to the next generation).

For his part, Schelling proposes that sexual difference governs the development of the organic realm as a whole: “Throughout the whole of nature, absolute sexlessness is nowhere demonstrable, and an *a priori* regulative principle requires that sexual difference be taken as point of departure

everywhere in organic nature [*organischen Natur auf Geschlechtsverscheidenheit auszugehen*].³³ The types of inhibition in reproduction are, therefore, not as clear-cut as they are typically imagined to be. The ambiguity of the phoenix's sexual difference (and, in the first instance, of the difference between this difference and its lack) only highlights its irreducibility. As a synecdoche of nature, as an exceptional part that stands in for the whole, the phoenix illustrates the "*a priori* regulative principle" Schelling is discussing. Taken in and of itself, the sexual ambiguity of the phoenix combines the poles of activity and its inhibition: depending on which mode of reproduction prevails, one side or the other will predominate *within the same organism or organismic ensemble*. But if we add to this idea the phoenix's reproduction through death, by way of liquescence that involves, in keeping with Schelling, a fiery transformation and liquids properly so called (as in the life-giving emissions of the corpse), then the de-absolutizing cision of sexual difference is bolstered by the de-individuating effects of mortality.

Do de-absolutization and de-individuation fall on the side of nature's infinite activity or its inhibition? Unfixing the products of nature, these tendencies recover the productive impulse that was temporarily slowed down and detained in living forms. They free the infinite from the finite existence it became when it started to determine, delimit, and shape itself. Nonetheless, the freedom of ongoing dissolution is kept in check; its counterbalancing happens at a limit, which, delineating the spatiotemporal edges of a mortal being, signifies the common boundary of life and death. As a regulative *a priori* principle of organic nature, sexual difference is not self-sufficient; it must be tied in the already-familiar knot with mortality and radical individuation.

The unity and uniqueness—the unicity—of nature-qua-phoenix goes beyond individuality toward the one, or the One, in which difference is gathered. The following statement should remind us of Plotinus, who is an important precursor to Schelling's thinking of the absolute:³⁴ "If, according to our principles, the production of various genera and species in nature is only *one* production captured at different stages, then the formations of the opposite sexes in the *same* genus and species must be only *one* formation, one natural operation, such that the different individuals of the same genus amount to only *one* individual, but developed in opposite directions."³⁵

The phoenix lives up to Schelling's deduction as a genus of genuses, representing the whole by virtue of its exclusion from assorted orders of that whole (real, biological, taxonomical, and, in another way, symbolic, mythic, or mythological). On the body of nature, the different (even, opposite) sexes form one androgynous being. The births and deaths of different individuals are nothing more than the growing of new and shedding of old skin cells. Just as an organism is "a collective expression of a multiplicity of actions [*gemeinschaftliche Ausdruck für eine Mannichfaltigkeit von Aktionen*],"³⁶ so nature is a collective expression of genuses that, on its immense body, correspond to multiple intraorganismal actions. This is, actually, what Schelling calls "an absolute organism" (*absolute Organismus*), an archetype "without internal difference in kind, in which individual and species coincide, which is now neither individual nor genus, but *both at once*."³⁷ The phoenix's multiple exclusions are vital here: without them, it could not have become such an archetype, not least because, for Schelling, no individual existent can embody the absolute.³⁸

Not only in its organismic garb, but also as matter, the absolute in Schelling is phoenix-like. "*Absolute matter*" (die absolute Materie) is an infinite, self-reflected (circular) process of decomposition and recomposition: "Where it is decomposed, it must be composed anew in every moment [*wo sie decomponirt wird, in jedem Moment neu componirt werden muß*]."³⁹ What is absolute in absolute matter is the coincidence of activity and its inhibition (that phenomenally present themselves in the guise of analysis and synthesis), of freedom and necessity, a coincidence that is itself unconditional, not contingent on something else outside it. The absolute is not incompatible with time; it is just that, *from the vantage of the absolute itself* (be it as matter or as an organism), every moment in time replays the drama of the phoenix, burnt or rotten and reborn again from its ashes or putrefaction fluids, while, *from the vantage of individual or even species existence*, these moments are spread out across much longer time spans.

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Besides the absolute organism and absolute matter, the atmosphere is a kind of phoenix, "daily organized anew."⁴⁰ The ongoing renewal of the atmosphere

conforms to the dynamics of the phoenix to the extent that its life is each time recovered from the threshold of death, or, better yet, to the extent that its death is, in itself, life-giving, while its life is death-bearing. There are two ways in which we can appreciate these conclusions in the company of Schelling.

First, if life is understood in terms of combustion or of general combustibility, then its division into animal and plant vitalities amounts to atmospheric degradation and regeneration, death and life, in the overall life of the planet: “The animal destroys the atmosphere about itself, and preserves, increases and moves itself like the mobile, growing flame [*gleich der beweglichen, wachsenden Flamme*]. The plant returns the power of combustion to the burnt, ubiquitous substance, and returns to the atmosphere that substance which makes combustion possible.”⁴¹

It is easy to give a species-relativist answer to the question of what constitutes life and what corresponds to death: since the respiratory processes of plants and animals are diametrically opposed (the former “inhale” CO₂ and “exhale” O₂; the latter, the other way around), any definition of a vital milieu will have to take into account *whose* milieu it is. But such relativism comes up against its limits once life is equated to combustibility, which is fostered, in turn, thanks to the life activity of plants. The atmospheric phoenix is vegetal in its rebirth and animal in its demise. The “growing flame” that is an animal (doesn’t its *growing* make it, in part, vegetal?) preserves itself by destroying its own life-support systems; the flaming green growths that are plants provide the material conditions of possibility for burning twice over, both as the matter in which the flame rages and by emitting oxygen, without which there is no fire. The flames, in which the phoenix renews its existence, are the same ones that reduce its old body to ash. But fire, too, is a phoenix, enveloped by a more or less welcoming atmosphere and burning in a vegetal-animal substratum (of the bird’s body, the nest, and so forth).

Second, we need to concentrate specifically on oxygen in order to realize just how the atmospheric phoenix operates on and in bodies, organic and inorganic. For Schelling, oxygen, which enables burning, is itself a remnant of the burned: “Oxygen, or an element of it, *must* itself (if it is already

a *combusted* substance [*eine verbrannte Substanz*]) descend again into the categories of combustible [*die Kategorie der verbrennlichen*], i.e., chemically composite substances.⁴² The circular arrangement of the combusted and the combustible means that oxygen is a phoenix, preceding the phoenix's plant and, especially, animal life. And yet, a recovery of the combustible from the combusted—the recovery which, we might add, is far from assured when the phoenix complex is objectively destabilized and when the fragile conditions of life on earth are threatened—does not explain the *simultaneity* of life and death, that is, of the enlivening and the deadening in daily organismic and atmospheric organization.

This simultaneity revolves, in Schelling's estimation, around stimulation and, once more, oxygen (and oxidation). The means promoting life are the road toward the demise of a living organism: "Nature achieves its aim in precisely the opposite way than the way in which it attempted to achieve it; the activity of life is the cause of its own dissolution."⁴³ Steady stimulation leads to an equally steady desensitization toward the stimulus and, at the extreme, the body becoming "unreceptive to external stimulus, such that life itself is only the bridge to death."⁴⁴ Further down the page, Schelling returns to oxygen and its potentially lethal effects: to those who say "how wise it is that oxygen is not present in pure form in the atmosphere, because otherwise the vital air would consume the animals as quickly as a flame," he responds, "If the atmosphere were pure oxygen, then the organisms of the earth would have to be correlatively otherwise constituted." What is, of course, subtly implicit in Schelling's insight is how oxygen triggers the reactions of oxidation, known at least since Antoine Lavoisier coined the term in the eighteenth century, and more recently found to be involved in the production of chemicals ("free radicals") that damage cells in the body. In a very literal sense, then, "the activity of life is the cause of its own dissolution."

The atmosphere, the very air we breathe, is a phoenix both in itself—in its daily, if less and less assured, regeneration—and in us. It signals the immemorial infiltration of death into life and of life into death. In the third version of his *Weltalter* work, Schelling formulates the phoenix complex in two, apparently incompatible, theses: "There is no life without simultaneous

death [*Kein Leben ist ohne gleichzeitiges Sterben*]⁴⁵ and “There is no life without the overcoming of death [*Kein Leben ist ohne Überwindung des Todes*].”⁴⁶ To be fair, Schelling uses two different nouns in German, *Sterben* and *Tod*, both of them rendered as death in the English translation. *Sterben*, though, is a more “active” dying, as opposed to the fact of death that is *Tod*. It follows that living is dying and an overcoming of death, a living on or from death, of others and of oneself.

What Schelling describes is not ghostly survival, although in *Clara* he (or, at least, the character of the doctor as his mouthpiece) will be open to this possibility: “The true ruins are not those of ancient human splendor that the curious seek out in the Persian or Indian deserts; the whole earth is one great ruin, where animals live as ghosts and men as spirits [*die ganze Erde ist Eine große Ruine, worin Thiere als Gespenster, Menschen als Geister hausen*].”⁴⁷ Rather, living *as* dying and *as* overcoming death refers to the physiology of respiration, digestion, and reproduction. Each in its own way affirms and denies death: oxygen and oxidation; caloric intake and aging, not to mention the disintegration of the eaten; generation of another like oneself and dissolution of the individual in the genus.

The phoenix complex is lodged not only in our brains and not only in our lungs, but also in intestines and genitalia—in fact, throughout the corporeal extension and its relation to the environment. It is in part a “complex” and in part the living on of finite life, itself inventing and reinventing, dreaming up, contriving, and scrunching up again its infinitude. While full of machinations, the mechanism works, is effective; it spawns actual effects. The “inner life that incessantly gives birth to itself and again consumes itself” does not remain inner; it is, following Schelling, already an imitation of the force “concealed in everything,” and it is expressed in every act and actualization of the organism. “It is the constant inner mechanism and clockwork, time, eternally commencing, eternally becoming, always devouring itself and always giving birth to itself [*das beständige innere Trieb- und Uhrwerk, die ewig beginnende, ewig werdende, immer sich selbst verschlingende und immer sich selbst wieder gebärende Zeit*].”⁴⁸ The eternal commencement is an eternal ending; always giving birth to oneself, one always consumes and buries oneself. It is the rhythms of this beginning and ending, of dilation and

contraction, that constitute time. What or who remains constant across all these comings and goings, except the mechanism itself and the Moloch of hope attached to it? The phoenix complex is a clock that runs in circles, that with every turn of the dial causes the beginning to retreat, to come to an end having barely begun, and, as a result, to begin re-beginning.

Lest any doubts linger about the relation of this mechanism to the phoenix, Schelling adds the fire of the hearth, symbolizing the inner realm of domestic and psychophysical life, as well as cosmic fire and its flickering (measured rekindling and extinguishing) in Heraclitus. "This," he continues, "is the sanctuary (*hestia*), the hearth of the life that continually incinerates itself and again rejuvenates itself from the ash [*der Heerd des beständig sich selbst verbrennenden und aus der Asche wieder neu verjüngenden Lebens*]. This is the tireless fire (*akamaton pur*) through whose quenching, as Heraclitus claimed, the cosmos was created."⁴⁹ The difference between inner and outer fires, microexistence and macroreality, is similarly reduced to ash in Schelling's depiction of the mechanism that extends finite life past its limits. But, rather than level that difference, the phoenix complex reconstitutes it anew with each rejuvenation, each reconstruction of the hearth of life and of the cosmos from the ashes of their self-incineration. Recommencement is nothing if not non-indifference, a rebellion against ash gray, a resurgence of limits and boundaries, edges and outlines, delineating another identity in the place of the one that has been consumed, irretrievably lost in its singularity.

The rotary movement of "a life that eternally circulates in itself"⁵⁰ is the sole product of the mechanism that is the phoenix complex. The organic and physiological allegories of the mechanism abound: from the universe's exhalation and inhalation, through the alternations of expansion and contraction,⁵¹ to the pulse of the world with its systoles and diastoles representing "a completely involuntary movement [*eine völlig unwillkürliche Bewegung*] that, once begun, makes itself from itself."⁵² The phoenix's self-reproduction, her generation out of herself, classically taken as a sign of freedom, is ensconced in the unwilling rotations of the circle, the runaway gyrations of mechanical repetition. The phoenix complex presents us with a peculiar mix of freedom

and unfreedom that, though Schelling raises the question of the difference between mechanism and organism—should “the origin of the world system ought to be thought more organically than mechanically?”⁵³—invalidates this very question. Eternally recommenced with every gyration of the cycle, the origin is as mechanical as it is organic. The world’s breathing, heartbeat, expansions, and contractions are the products of a machine that, not at all separate from the world, makes the world what it is.

(In the present chapter and in the book as a whole, we too are moving in circles around the phoenix complex, starting anew every time. The book and its argument are a kind of machine—not free from the machinations that are wed to the mechanisms of argumentation—processing “philosophy of nature” through a mythico-theologico-philosophical grinder. Nevertheless, the occasional openings of the circle in excess of a mere widening, expansion, or dilation should, as I have already mentioned, point the way beyond the material at hand within this very material.)

Compared to the stoppage of what elsewhere I have christened “planetary metabolism”⁵⁴—the stoppage that is due to the mass of undecomposable or slowly decomposing substances released into the environment—the seamless circular workings of the universal heartbeat or respiration are indubitably better. But they are not the end-all and be-all of existence and philosophy, for Schelling in the first place. So, the undecomposable remains of industrial, energy-generating, and consumer activities clog being as a result of their resistance to passing into nothing, to becoming the past. The interplay of being and nothingness—of God’s negating power and affirmative potency, his eternal *yes* and eternal *no*⁵⁵—shapes the pathways of becoming. Planetary metabolism belongs here, with its worldwide mouth and anus rhythmically expanding and contracting, and with the transformative fire of digestion mediating between the two extremes. And then, there is the beyond-being (and beyond-nothing), which Plato and Levinas, Schelling himself, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions have variously alluded to.

The phoenix complex, precisely as a *complex*, is stuck between the second and the first stages of my improvised schema: metabolic activity proceeds unimpeded, yet there is a desire for the retention of the same material form

after every turn of the wheel. For Schelling, this is not enough: “Were life to remain at a standstill here, it would be nothing other than an eternal exhaling and inhaling, a constant interchange between life and death [*Bliebe das Leben hier stehen, so wäre nichts als ein ewiges Aus- und Einathmen, ein beständiger Wechsel von Leben und Sterben*].”⁵⁶ Life as a “constant interchange of life and death” is a life that enwraps and neutralizes death, that digests death into itself, that bridges the two incarnations of the phoenix with a fire that, despite reducing organic matter to ashes, represents a higher vitality. But, no matter the efficiency with which it countervails its other, this phoenix life does not lead to infinity before and after the ever-reinitiated circle. In other words, it does not culminate in freedom.

*

We seem to have raised the question before, but every time it is raised anew it displays before us its shining and previously unnoticed facets and edges. The question is, What does freedom before and after the phoenix complex look like in Schelling’s philosophy of nature?

Before the closure of the annular drive, it is the freedom of the infinite, the productive activity of which “must be inhibited, *retarded* [*muß sie gehemmt, retardirt werden*],” for finite products to appear.⁵⁷ Still, the outcomes of this inhibition or self-limitation of the infinite are going to harbor a trace of infinity within; Schelling states that they are “merely *apparent products* [*bloß Scheinprodukte*]”: “the tendency to infinite development must lie once again in every individual; every product must be capable of being articulated into products.”⁵⁸ On the one hand, it is this apparent nature of products and of a living finitude that is unmasked as *merely* apparent in the phoenix complex, when another creature or creatures like the initial one are released into the world. The trace of infinity develops, as though in a photographic negative, as soon as organismic life passes through the complex’s machinery. But, on the other hand, this is a trace of infinity without freedom, a distorted infinity that is highly conditioned, put to the task of reproducing the living form in question. The forces of inhibition are retained in the midst of a disinhibiting movement, which allows infinity to work, breaking through its apparently finite products.

The distortion (and the being-*complex*) of the phoenix complex has much to do with a disinhibiting inhibition. Schelling himself views “the condition under which the infinite in general is finitely presentable [*die Bedingung ist, unter welcher allein ein Unendliches überhaupt endlich darstellbar [ist]*]” and under which the finite projects itself forward (or back) to infinity as an “original antithesis in itself” of nature.⁵⁹ The psychological condition of disavowal, implying the acknowledgment and repudiation of a reality, is anticipated in this coincidence of acknowledgment and repudiation *in* reality itself, making reality what it is. (In his *Ages of the World*, Schelling will frame the issue in terms of the divine *yes-no*, the confluence of infinite negation and infinite affirmation, that creates the world.) The finite may open unto the infinite—indeed, may get back in touch with the infinity that is in it—from many sides and in a number of ways, echoing in each of them God’s creative *yes-no*. Its specific opening through the phoenix complex, however, overlays the “original antithesis” with the clash between freedom and necessity, irresolvable on the complex’s terms.

Paradoxically, the merging of freedom and necessity in the phoenix complex reenacts their coexistence in God prior to creation. “Necessity and freedom are in God [*Es ist in Gott Nothwendigkeit und Freiheit*],” Schelling writes. “Even though the God who is necessary is not the God who is free, both are still one and the same.”⁶⁰ But the reenactment of the divine paradox in the phoenix complex yields directly inverse consequences. The moment of a groundless decision just before the creation of the world refers to “the eternal freedom” that “is nothing,” that “is like the will that wills nothing, that desires no object, for which all things are equal [*wie der Wille, der nichts will, der keine Sache begehrt, dem alle Dinge gleich sind*]. . . . Such a will is nothing and everything.”⁶¹ The creative will is an overflow of nothing, from which everything comes into being without the least bit of desire, inclination, or predilection attributable to the cause of creation. The freedom and necessity that are in God are funneled into an absolutely free (because indifferent) gift of created existence, endowed with its own kind of (natural) necessity and determination.

The phoenix complex, conversely, activates a will that wills something very determinate, namely itself, the continuation of particular finite

existence in this world after death. In a different context, Schelling notes that “each being primarily wants itself and this self-wanting is later precisely the basis of egoity [*Das Erste jedes Wesens ist, daß es sich selber will, dieses sich-Wollen ist eben nachher die Grundlage der Egoität*], that through which a being withdraws itself or cuts itself off from other things.”⁶² The singularity of the phoenix is, subjectivity conceived, the principle of egoity taken to the extreme: a self-wanting that cuts the phoenix (say, as a soul) off from the rest of the world and that stimulates the spasmodic movements of contraction and expansion, a calculated self-misplacement—a cunning self-sacrifice—followed by the recovery of the self (even in the other). This is the absolute narcissitic predilection for oneself at the antipodes of the divine will that wills nothing. The freedom of infinity that persists within the finite, marked by its necessarily limited life span, is channeled into an absolutely necessary reaffirmation of past identity and the will to hurl it into a future beyond death.

Freedom *before* the phoenix complex resembles Plotinus’s nature without nature, without the constantly alternating expansion and contraction, without the annular drive that is at the origins of every nature.⁶³ Freedom *within* nature’s “eternal inhalation and re-exhalation”⁶⁴ that dynamically shape the phoenix complex lies in the moments of cision, of breathlessness even, of nature holding its breath, in memory or in anticipation of a nature without nature. Freedom *beyond* the phoenix complex, which has in the meantime monopolized the beyond, is, again, a nature without nature, albeit already transformed.

In the second draft of *The Ages of the World* from 1811, Schelling imagines “the authentic future, the future as such” as “what will come after the world [*nachweltliche*],” as opposed to the authentic past as “what came before the world [*vorweltliche*],” while time and history are “just . . . a repetition within a narrower sphere.”⁶⁵ The post-world that succeeds the repetitions instigated by the phoenix complex is not a post-apocalyptic reality. Or it doesn’t have to be *that*. The fragment “Spring” at the conclusion of *Clara* ends with the suggestion that “even this firm structure of the world will one day turn into spiritual, but only this external form will disintegrate, the

inner power and truth will persist to become revealed in a new transfiguration. The divine fire that now rests sealed within it will one day gain the upper hand.”⁶⁶

Is the sealed divine fire not the one that already breaks through the rotary movements of nature, consuming the aged body of the phoenix, just as the inner fire of the earth occasionally irrupts with volcanic lava? Gaining the upper hand, this fire will transfigure reality itself not as spirit that revivifies the flesh but as the spiritualization of matter, the liquescence of the world and the freeing up of its “inner power.” As far as I can tell, the image, cursory and patchy as it is, is Schelling’s vision of the post-world, of freedom beyond the phoenix complex. Whereas, currently, as the lament in an earlier passage from *Clara* goes, “The whole earth is one great ruin, where animals live as ghosts and men as spirits,” the fire of spiritualization will (1) level the difference between ghosts and spirits, or animals and humans, (2) bring the ruin-earth to its true and complete ruination—the liberating disintegration of its external form, and (3) come to a crescendo in a life of spirits living on spirits and on spirit alone. The authentic future and the authentic past meet in another circle, where what is after the end (of the world) does not perfectly mirror what was before the beginning.

*

I cannot help but mention the fourth, veiled allusion to the phoenix in Schelling’s oeuvre, in addition to the three with which our discussion of his writings commenced. Toward the end of the third version of *The Ages of the World*, he speaks of comets, “those enigmatic members of the planetary whole . . . in this state of fiery electrical dissolution.” Comets, Schelling avers, are the “living witnesses of primordial time [*lebendige Zeugen jener Urzeit*], since nothing prevents the earlier time from migrating through a later time via particular phenomena.”⁶⁷ We have heard Claudian call the phoenix, in the same vein, a witness to the whole of history: “You have seen everything that has ever been; you testify to the passing and turning of the ages [*vidisti quodcumque fuit; te saecula teste cuncta revolvuntur*]” (*Carmina minora* 27.104–105).⁶⁸ In the myth of Er, with which Plato closes *The*

Republic, having drunk of the water of forgetting in the world beyond, souls fall asleep and, in the middle of the night, are “suddenly wafted . . . upward to their birth like shooting stars [*hōsper asteras*]” (621b). The Heraclitan turns of fire between the past, the present, and the future of the world also support the idea of time travel or “migration” through time via a particular phenomenon, which, in its singularity, is the crux of phenomenality, of a shining emergence, a radiant coming-to-appearance of all that is. The flame, in which the phoenix is transformed, is the fire of the absolute past held back by everything that lives, and it is given a free rein in the absolute future of the post-world.

“In all ages,” Schelling insists, “human feeling has only regarded comets with a shudder as, so to speak, harbingers of the recurrence of a past age, of universal destruction, of the dissolution of things again into chaos [*einer Wiederkehr der vergangenen Zeit, allgemeiner Zerrüttung, Wiederauflösung der Dinge ins Chaos*].”⁶⁹ The “recurrence of past age” hints at the rebirth of the phoenix as an eon, an era, or an epoch, but a rebirth (hence the return of a seemingly bygone form—above all, the form of time) accompanied by and not at all inconsistent with death, dissolution, deformation. It is a sign of the co-belonging of life and death, generation and destruction, repetition and the frightening advent of the new in the conceptual, symbolic, and affective vicinities of the phoenix.

Despite all the suggestive imagery, I would have overlooked these references were it not for the book *The Phoenix: An Essay* by one John Goodridge from 1781, with a telling subtitle: *Being an attempt to prove from history and astronomical calculations, that the comet, which, by its approximation to our earth, occasioned the change made at the fall and the deluge, is the real Phoenix of the ancients*. Here, Goodridge sets out “to prove that the Comet is that so much celebrated emblem of Antiquity (perhaps of the resurrection also), the *Phoenix*,” whom he calls “most certainly an Egyptian hieroglyphical representation of the Comet.”⁷⁰

More than its visual resemblance to a fiery bird streaking across the night sky, the comet’s singularity gives credence to this comparison with the phoenix in light of Schelling’s work: “Evidently, the individual center of gravity (the separate life [*das eigene Leben*]) in a comet is not reconciled with

the universal center of gravity.”⁷¹ The comet is one of a kind, a separate life, but, as an exception from the cosmic order of gravity, it comes to represent the whole. “Comets are eccentric to such a degree that their movement can be regarded as a simple systole and diastole [*bloße Systole und Diastole*],” measured by their approaches to and retreats from the sun.⁷² In its eccentric singularity, the comet gathers into itself the entire breathing or pulsing of the universe, the systolic and diastolic movements of cosmic contraction and expansion, dwindling and waning. The comet, then, as a synecdoche of cosmos, but also as a reminder of what was before the world and a preview of what will be after it.

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