The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von Günderrode's Philosophy of Nature

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<th>Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie</th>
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The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von Günderrode’s Philosophy of Nature

I. Introduction

The idea of ‘nature’ and the question concerning the human place within the natural world were at the heart of the German romantic and idealist projects. In fact, recent research has argued that for the romantics and idealists, the philosophy of nature was not only one concern among many, but the grounding concern of these movements—such that it is their philosophies of nature that furnished these thinkers with the basis for their epistemology and metaphysics, their philosophies of art and aesthetics, and their political and social philosophies.\(^1\) Interestingly, what this research has also shown, albeit implicitly, is that there are two main strands of romantic and idealist philosophies of nature and what distinguishes them is their conceptualization of the relation between the human being (and human morality), and the natural world.

The first strand emphasizes epistemological and metaphysical questions, such that moral questions (i.e., questions concerning the human vocation and human freedom) are largely peripheral. This strand is most well-represented by Friedrich Schelling, who considers the philosophy of nature to be the essential starting point for developing a theory of knowledge and a theory of being, and its legacy can be traced back to Spinoza’s influence on romanticism and idealism.\(^2\) Thus in 1799 *First Outline of a System of a Philosophy of Nature*

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\(^1\) On the centrality of the philosophy of nature for the development of romanticism and idealism, see Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, Beiser, *German Idealism* and Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, especially Chapters 9 and 10. On the connection between epistemological and metaphysical questions in romantic philosophy of nature, see Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute* and (with specific reference to Schelling) Steigerwald, ‘Epistemologies of Rupture’.

\(^2\) Beiser, in particular, emphasizes this legacy and its outcomes for romantic and idealist moral philosophies. See *German Idealism*, 583-4; *Romantic Imperative*, Chapter 10.
(Erster entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie), where Schelling attempts to derive all of reality (including human consciousness) from the fundamental forces of nature, the human being is regarded as a member of nature, such that human subjectivity, and with it human freedom, are understood as the highest, most complex manifestation of natural productivity (HKA 1/8, 31). On this account, human morality is an outcome of nature’s activity, such that moral acts are understood as nature (as the absolute) ‘acting through me’ (SW 6, 305). The goal here is contemplation (of what is) rather than realization (of what ought to be). Or, as Friedrich Schleiermacher puts it in his 1799 Speeches on Religion, religion, the highest aim of humanity, ‘tends to inactive contemplation’.3

The second strand of romantic and idealist Naturphilosophie agrees that the human being must be regarded as part of nature, but in the place of contemplation, emphasizes the active realization of (potentially unrealizable) moral ideals—ideals that involve the transformation of nature.4 Friedrich von Hardenberg (i.e., Novalis) is exemplary in this regard. Speaking of poets, he writes: ‘We are on a mission: we have been called to educate the earth [zur Bildung der Erde sind wir berufen]’ (NS 2, 427, no. 32). And he goes on to describe this education as moral: ‘Nature will become moral. We are her educators—her moral tangents—her moral stimuli’ (NS 3, 252, no. 73). The implication is that it is only through transforming nature to align with (our) moral ends that nature can be complete.5

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, 280. In his Explanations of the Speeches Schleiermacher notes that ‘those who are early absorbed in a pure contemplative endeavour’ are led to the proper understanding and practice of religion. On Religion, 22.
4 Manfred Frank’s interpretation of the romantics as good Kantians emphasizes this strand to a greater extent. The view here is that the romantics do not assume an original unity as the starting point of philosophical inquiry (or regard it as achievable), but posit it as a regulative ideal and thus regard it (to some extent) as a moral task. Frank, ‘Unendliche Annäherung’, 851-7. On the differences between Beiser and Frank, see Millán-Zaibert, ‘The Revival of Frühromantik’.
5 On Novalis’s moral understanding of nature, see Nassar, The Romantic Absolute, Chapter 3.
There is no doubt that any attempt to categorize these authors fails to account for the nuances and complexities of their accounts. Nonetheless, these two strands are representative of the our current understanding of romantic and idealist conceptions of the human-nature relationship and of the human place within (and moral imperative toward) nature. The aim of this paper is to show that there is a third romantic-idealist response to the question concerning the relationship between the human being and the natural world—one that has been largely ignored, but which might be the most relevant strand today. It is the position articulated by Karoline von Günderrode (1780-1806) in her essay ‘Idea of the Earth’ (Idee der Erde).

Günderrode, who was a published poet and playwright with some renown during her lifetime, first gained widespread philosophical recognition through the 1840 publication of Bettina Brentano von Arnim’s Die Günderode, which was loosely based on the correspondence of the two women in the years immediately preceding Günderrode’s death. The earnestness of the exchange between the women, and the sophisticated philosophical content which the letters contained, made Die Günderode particularly popular among American intellectuals (Emerson and Margaret Fuller among them), who saw the text as a paragon of Platonic friendship.

6 Thus one can argue that Beiser emphasizes the first strand, while Frank emphasizes the second.
7 The spelling of Günderrode’s name as Günderode in Brentano von Arnim’s text may have been intentional, as a means of indicating editorial authority. The author also offers a different spelling of her own name (Bettine instead of Bettina).
8 Fuller partially translated Die Günderode into English in 1840 under the title Correspondence of Fräulein Günderode and Bettine von Arnim. Although Fuller published her translation anonymously, in 1842 she wrote an essay on Die Günderode for Emerson’s journal, The Dial.
Günderrode’s philosophical significance has been more recently revived through the publication of her complete works in the early 1990s, which include a volume of notes on Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Hemsterhuis, Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel (among others), and the appearance of a number of works which convincingly situate Günderrode within philosophical romanticism and idealism. Thus, we now know that Günderrode was an avid reader of philosophy, and that her poetic writings were inspired by the same philosophical questions and concerns that inspired romanticism and idealism. We also know that Günderrode wrote a number of philosophical essays, which she was unable to publish during her lifetime, but which contain the ‘kernel’ of her philosophical thinking.

This is above all the case with ‘Idea of the Earth’, which she composed in 1805, at the height of her engagement with philosophy. It was during this period that Günderrode read Schelling’s writings on the philosophy of nature, and composed lengthy commentaries on

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11 ‘Idea of the Earth’, in particular, was regarded as one of Günderrode’s most interesting and significant works from the beginning. Its first reader, Friedrich Creuzer, writes in a letter to Günderrode from 1 December 1805, ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve liked anything as much as I like your “Idea of the Earth”’. *Friedrich Creuzer und Karoline von Günderrode*, 78. More recently, Westphal has argued that ‘Idea of the Earth’ contains the ‘kernel’ of Günderrode’s ‘thinking about nature [Naturdenken]’. *Karoline von Günderrode und ‘Naturdenken um 1800’*, 99.

12 Günderrode intended for this piece to be published along with her collection, *Melete*, before her death in 1806. However, the philologist Friedrich Creuzer (her married lover) halted publication following Günderrode’s death, for fear that his affair would become common knowledge (he recognized himself in the figure of ‘Eusebio’ in the play and the prose pieces accompanying it). Creuzer did not only suppress publication of these works, but also destroyed various versions of them. See Hille, *Karoline von Günderrode*, 119-121. Today we have two versions of ‘Idea of the Earth’, one which is titled ‘To Eusebio’ (An Eusebio) (and is in the form of a letter to the character Eusebio) while the other is titled ‘Idea of the Earth’. Both are available in GSW vol. 1.
them, and it was also during this time that she read Fichte’s popular 1800 work *Bestimmung des Menschen* (*Vocation of Man*) [BdM] and responded to it in her notes.

Despite the fact that Günderrode was working through both Schelling and Fichte shortly before writing ‘Idea of the Earth’, scholars have focused on Günderrode’s connection to Schelling, ignoring her interest in Fichte. As such, ‘Idea of the Earth’ has been generally interpreted as a creative adaptation of Schelling’s philosophy of nature. Indeed, Günderrode’s claim that the earth is both ideal and real appears to coincide with Schelling’s understanding of nature as infinite productivity (natura naturans) and the (apparently finite) material product (natura naturata). Similarly, her view that a fundamental polarity underpins nature’s activity parallels Schelling’s emphasis on the original duality of nature.

There are, however, important elements in ‘Idea of the Earth’ that do not map onto any Schellingian concerns or themes. Günderrode’s view that the earth must be ‘realized’ and her claim that this realization depends on human (moral) activity carries echoes of Novalis’s

13 The editor of Günderrode’s collected works, Morgenthaler, argues that the piece should be interpreted as part of Günderrode’s interest in Schelling (GSW 3, 336). Similarly, Westphal situates the text entirely within her reading of Schelling. Karoline von Günderrode und ‘Naturdenken um 1800’, 99-104. In contrast, Dormann contends that the work does not only address nature-philosophical but also ethical and aesthetic concerns. However, Dormann continues to interpret these aesthetic and ethical concerns from an entirely Schellingian framework, writing that for Günderrode the ethical should be understood in terms of chemical sympathies. Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 184-189.

14 In the Introduction to the *First Outline*, Schelling explains that ‘nature’ is both the productivity of nature and its (apparently finite) products (HKA 1/8, 46). In her notes on *Naturphilosophie* Günderrode writes that ‘nature is an eternal activity, a self-producing product, an ever enduring becoming, for if it were a being, then its productive activity would be cancelled out by this completion…’ (GSW 2, 364).

15 Günderrode speaks of the ‘primal connection of both forces’ of nature in her notes on *Naturphilosophie*, while in ‘Idea of the Earth’ she describes life as the coming together of two forces (GSW 1, 446). In the *First Outline* Schelling argues that the view that nature is composed of two opposing forces is the ‘absolute hypothesis’ of the philosophy of nature (HKA 1/8, 35).
statement that the earth must be ‘educated’. Furthermore, the text appears to be addressing questions concerning the human vocation—questions which Fichte poses in BdM and which Günderrode interrogates in her notes on Fichte’s text. That Günderrode is specifically concerned with the human relation to the earth also brings her closer to Novalis and Fichte, both of whom regard the cultivation of nature to be fundamentally connected to the human (poetic) vocation.

Nonetheless, despite her proximity to Novalis and Fichte, Günderrode’s account of the human vocation departs from theirs in significant ways—and this departure makes Günderrode a particularly interesting interlocutor for us today. According to Günderrode, the human vocation is not to transform the earth in order to make it more amenable to human moral goals (Fichte and Novalis), but to be transformed for the sake of the earth’s vocation. This position, which distinguishes Günderrode not only from Fichte and Novalis, but also from Schelling, is based on Günderrode’s account of the self and nature, which she develops in her notes on Fichte’s BdM.

As such, to fully grasp the moral significance of ‘Idea of the Earth’, to discern its argument and its distinctive understanding of the human vocation, it is necessary to read it alongside Fichte’s BdM and Günderrode’s notes on Fichte’s text. My claim then is that by reading ‘Idea of the Earth’ in light of BdM and Günderrode’s assessment of it, we begin to see an argument about the human moral vocation that we might otherwise miss (and which others have indeed missed)—and that it is in this argument that we find Günderrode’s distinctive position.
The paper proceeds as follows: I begin by examining Fichte’s text, focusing on his conceptions of nature and the earth—precisely those aspects which concern Günderrode in her notes. I consider Günderrode’s interpretation of these conceptions, investigating the reasons why she diverges from Fichte. I argue that Günderrode poses two challenges to Fichte: the first concerns his conception of the self; the second his understanding of nature—both of which become key themes in ‘Idea of the Earth’. In the final section, I turn to ‘Idea of the Earth’, homing in on the meaning of Günderrode’s claim that the earth must be ‘realized’.

2. Günderrode’s first challenge

Fichte wrote BdM as a popular text, with the goal of bringing his philosophy to a wider audience, and enabling his readers to better grasp the idea that underpins his philosophy, namely the summons to produce the fundamental acts of the self for oneself. Fichte had emphasized this in earlier works, especially in his two introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1797, where he calls upon his readers to undertake intellectual intuition. In the BdM, by contrast, the reader is invited to participate in an internal dialogue—an internal drama of sorts—in which the speaker critically assesses and dismisses various systematic attempts to grasp the self, arriving, finally, at the only portrayal of the self that can adequately account for human freedom.

Fichte’s text comprises of three sections that bear different titles: doubt, knowledge, faith. As it is in the first and final parts of the book (‘doubt’ and ‘faith’) that Fichte takes up the question of the relation between the human being (and human freedom) and the natural world most directly, I will focus on these two parts, and on Günderrode’s response to them.
Book 1 kicks off when the speaker raises the question ‘what is my vocation?’ and in raising it, comes to realize that what he regards as his vocation was something that he was given (by education, by society, etc) rather than having determined for himself. He begins by asking who or what he is, and to respond to these questions brackets all previous knowledge and proceeds with a self-examination, claiming that he will ‘honestly accept the result whatever it may be’ (BdM, 7; VoM, 3). In the end, he does not honestly accept the result of this investigation. For he rejects the account developed here not because it is untrue or dishonest, but because its conclusions are ‘unbearable’ and can only result in ‘despair (Verzweiflung)’ (BdM, 65; VoM, 33). For Günderrode, by contrast, the conclusions that Fichte achieves in this section do not lead to despair or require her, as Fichte’s speaker assumes, to transition to a different perspective.

What then are the conclusions? According to Fichte, the first examination of the self gives us the self as part of a larger whole, namely nature. This leads the speaker to question what nature is. At first sight, we are told, nature is a chain of causes and effects, ‘in which every link is determined by that which has preceded it, and in its turn determines the next’ (BdM, 14-15; VoM, 7). However, the speaker continues, this conception of nature does not account for the forms of things—what makes a flower a flower, for instance, cannot be explained by external, antecedent causes, or as Fichte puts it ‘mere passivity [Leiden]’ (BdM, 18; VoM, 8). There must be something in nature that enables things to achieve their distinctive forms. This capacity, we are told, must be internal rather than external and active as opposed to passive. Thus the speaker arrives at the notion of ‘formative powers [bildende Kräfte]’—picking up on the language developed by Blumenbach and adopted by Schelling and other
Now although all natural entities are underpinned by formative forces, the speaker continues, these forces must differ in different beings, corresponding to their distinctive forms and capacities. The human being thus possesses not only the formative power of the plant and the motive power of the animal, but also a thinking power:

I, like the plant, am a particular mode or manifestation of the formative-power; like the animal, a particular mode or manifestation of the power of motion; and besides these I am also a particular mode or manifestation of the thinking-power, and the union of these three original powers into one—into one harmonious development—is the distinguishing characteristic of my species. (BdM, 29-30; VoM, 14-15)

However, the speaker continues, the fact that the self is a member of nature—an expression of a natural force—implies that the self is not self-grounding, but grounded in something outside of itself. This implies that it is not free. For who I am, how I behave, what I choose, are not determined by me—by my will or intention—but by external circumstances (BdM, 33-34; VoM, 17). Such a conception of the self, Fichte contends, denies me all action and thus any possibility of a moral self: ‘I do not act at all; it is nature that acts through me… I am not the author of my own being, but nature has made me myself, and all that I am’ (BdM, 49; VoM, 25).

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16 Blumenbach introduces the notion of a Bildungstrieb (formative drive) in 1780. Kant cautiously lauds Blumenbach’s notion in the Critique of the Power of Judgment, while Schelling argues that Bildungstrieb is a foundational notion for the philosophy of nature (HKA 1/6, 217-8). For a useful overview of the idea of Bildungstrieb in the philosophy of nature, see Richards, The Romantic Conception of Life, Chapter 5.
Although Fichte does not claim that this perspective results in *logical* incoherence, he does claim that it ‘contradicts the profoundest aspirations, wishes and wants of my being’ (BdM, 51; VoM, 26). For it ‘contradicts all the purposes for which alone I live, and without which I should loathe my existence’. The problem with this account is that who I am and how I act are out of my hands—a realization that results in ‘horror’ (BdM, 53; VoM, 27). The horror, in other words, results from the realization that an externally-determined self is not a free self; in fact, it is no self at all. For what we have is not a *self*-determining being, a being that is cause and effect of itself, but a being that is determined by external forces.

In her notes, Günderrode follows Fichte’s account of nature, his understanding of the formative forces and his portrayal of the self within nature. She does not, however, follow his critical assessment of *Naturphilosophie*, nor does she agree that this account results in an elimination of the self. Instead, she emphasizes the value of seeing myself as part of a larger whole, claiming that it is only through others that I become a self.

To begin with, she notes that determination (*Bestimmung*) is only possible in relation to the whole: ‘That I am this and nothing else [i.e., that I am determined] is necessarily determined in conjunction with the whole’ (GSW 2, 290). Such determination does not, however, imply elimination of the self. Rather, it is only by being with others that the self comes to realize its limits and—through these limits—recognizes its individuality. As Günderrode puts it: ‘Because I am therefore only a part of *being* overall, and there are multiple *beings* that are not me, I become conscious of my own being in its circumscribed state, which emerges through the *being* of the other *beings*’. These others are, importantly, concrete others, such that the

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17 The English translation of Günderrode’s works referred to here are by Anna Ezekiel and are forthcoming in 2019.
limits that they impose upon me are real limits—limits which enable me to recognize how I am at once *like* and *different* from them. In fact, it is the specificity and reality of these limits that enables me to recognize myself not as an abstract or pure I, but as my self. As she puts it, in recognizing myself as one of the many possible expressions of humanity I become ‘known to myself as my *self*’ (KvG’s emphasis). Günderrode’s claim is that to be a self is to recognize one’s self as one’s self—not to regard one’s self abstractly as a formal principle. This means that to be a self is to be a concrete, real individual—something that can only be achieved through interacting with other concrete, real individuals. Here then we see Günderrode’s first divergence from Fichte. The self refers to *my* self—not to an abstract self.

This divergence follows from Günderrode’s larger critique of Fichte’s understanding and treatment of nature. His claim is that the self cannot be a member of nature, because that would undermine its self-grounding character. The trouble is that this conclusion follows neither from the account of nature that Fichte himself offers, or the account that is developed in *Naturphilosophie*.

As we have seen, Fichte argues that nature is a formative power and allows that the human species exhibits a thinking power that distinguishes humans from other natural beings. Such an account appears closely aligned with Schelling’s understanding of nature as a nexus of dynamic and developing forces, wherein natural products are not ontologically distinguished from the productivity that underlies them—but are finite manifestations of nature’s productivity, which achieve increasing consciousness and ultimately, in the form of the human being, freedom. From a Schellingian perspective, nature is not opposed to (human) freedom, but the source of it.
Schelling’s key claim is that nature exhibits the *very same structure of self-determination* that underpins the I.18 This structure comes to consciousness in the human self, and in coming to consciousness, it is an expression of freedom.19 Thus one can say that nature achieves freedom *in* the human being. What is important to emphasize is that, for Schelling, the structure of self-determination that Fichte locates in the self (i.e., self-consciousness) is more originally (and fundamentally) the structure of organized beings. In fact, one could argue that Fichte adopts the idea of a self-determining being that is both cause and effect of itself (i.e., the structure of intellectual intuition) from the emerging life sciences and their attempt to describe living beings.20 The point is that for Schelling, freedom and self-determination do not stand in opposition to nature, precisely because nature exhibits structures of self-determination, such that human self-determination can be understood as a more complex, conscious, and thus free, manifestation of these structures or capacities.

As we have seen, Fichte perfectly understood the notion of nature as a dynamic unity of self-determining beings when he distinguished the view of nature as ‘mere passivity’ from the view of nature as composed of formative forces. However, despite his evident understanding

18 Thus Schelling famously writes in the concluding remarks to his 1797 introduction of *Ideen* ‘Nature should be visible spirit, spirit should be invisible nature’. SW 1/2, 56.
19 This is the thesis of Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which, in a letter to Schelling, Fichte claims to have read. In their letter exchange from this period, Fichte disputes the fundamental premise of the philosophy of nature, and argues instead that all we can know are the laws of our intelligence (SFB, 176). For Fichte nature can never be the starting point of inquiry. Fichte’s elaboration of a philosophy of nature akin to Schelling’s and his attempts to contest it (on practical grounds) in the BdM can thus be read as his public reply to Schelling.
20 Mensch has shown that Kant’s understanding of reason originates in his study of the life sciences and specifically the theory of epigenesis (which argues that organized beings emerge out of unformed matter that has the capacity to self-form). The argument could be extended to claim that Fichte’s conception of self-consciousness as an original act in which the self as subject and the self as object has its sources in the description of living beings as self-organizing. Mensch, *Kant’s Organicism*. 

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of this difference, when he turns to criticize the conception of the self that emerges out of
*Naturphilosophie*, Fichte reverts to the first elaboration of nature that he offers, i.e., of nature
as a chain of ‘rigid necessity’ based purely on external efficient causality (BdM, 49; VoM,
25). For his claim that myself and my actions are not mine—i.e., not determined by my
will—is based on the view that what I am is caused by something external to me, with the
implication that there is no self-determination in nature.\(^{21}\) A nature that lacks internal
determination would of course have no place for anything like a self-directing or self-causing
entity, such as the I. This would mean, however, that it also has no place for any self-
directing or self-causing entity, whether it be plants or animals. From this it appears that
instead of properly taking up and challenging a vaguely Schellingian account of freedom in
nature, Fichte is offering an account that does not cohere with either Schelling’s
understanding of nature or with the account that Fichte himself had developed. Günderrode’s
choice to dismiss his conclusions and assert their opposite makes this evident. Her claim is
that it is only if the self is a member of nature, a part of a larger community, that it can
emerge, and, she does not think there is anything logically inconsistent or morally abhorrent
about this, given that nature itself exhibits organization or self-direction. As a member of
nature, the self is capable of self-directed action.

A serious challenge to Schelling would have to take on the specific conception of freedom
that he develops, i.e., as self-determination modelled on the cause-effect structure found in
organized beings—something which Fichte does not do here, but which he attempts to do in
the third part of the text. In her notes on this third part, Günderrode appears more sympathetic
to Fichte’s critique—and with good reason. For she agrees with Fichte that any consideration

\(^{21}\) Fichte writes: ‘the reference of my being, and of all the determinations of my being, to a
cause lying outside of myself… this is that from which I so violently recoiled’ (BdM, 53;
VoM 27).
of the human-nature relation must have a moral angle (something that Schelling’s account lacks). Nonetheless, her agreement with Fichte is contingent upon her distinctive conception of the self—or more accurately, her understanding of the self as both part of a larger, transforming reality, and as bearing a special moral responsibility toward this reality.

3. Günderrode’s second challenge

Having argued in Book 1 that nature is not the space in which human freedom can develop, in Book 3, Fichte elaborates the view of nature as a space of rude unfreedom, which must be transformed in order to accord with human ends (BdM, 223; VoM, 116). This is imperative, he argues, because it is only by cultivating nature that we can achieve our vocation (BdM, 224-5; VoM, 116-7).

Although Fichte appears to emphasize the need to transform the earth to accommodate human morality, he goes on to argue that the human vocation cannot in fact be fulfilled on the earth. Rather, he maintains that it is only in a super-sensible (überirdisches) realm that human freedom can be properly practiced. This is because to remain on the earth or with the earthly would be to remain with a problematic conception of human freedom. As he puts it, on the earth, ‘there is no true freedom for us, no freedom which holds the ground of its determination absolutely and entirely within itself. Our freedom is, at best, that of the self-forming plant’ (BdM, 280; VoM, 146). From this statement, it is clear that Fichte is once again attempting to challenge the conception of freedom that emerges out of Naturphilosophie. In contrast to his earlier challenge, however, Fichte is specifically contesting the freedom implied in the notion of self-formation, claiming that the activity of self-formation in nature is not equivalent to human freedom, even if earthly human freedom
is a more complex, more conscious instantiation of that activity. And his contestation is based
on the claim that human freedom is not of the earth—and thus requires that we posit a non-
exteenly or super-sensible realm.

Importantly, Fichte claims that das Überirdische is not elsewhere: ‘the super-sensible world is
no future world; it is now already present’ (BdM, 271; VoM, 141). Nonetheless, he does
think that the move to the super-sensible requires ‘the renunciation of the earthly
[Verzichtleistung auf das Irdische]’ (BdM, 278; VoM, 145). And, as we shall see, his
argument can only work if the super-sensible is in fact elsewhere, i.e., if there is an
ontological difference between the earthly and das Überirdische.

Fichte offers several justifications for the need to posit something beyond the earth, only two
of which, I think, make sense—and so I will focus on them. The first has to do with the fact
that as a reasonable being, I set a purpose before myself, which I seek to achieve through will
and determination. In setting this purpose, I must expect it to be realizable; otherwise, I
would not set it. However, if my goal is to achieve moral acts, by following the voice of
conscience, I quickly realize that this goal is not achievable in the world of sense. In the first
instance, it is possible that my intention (which is moral) does not achieve the consequence
that I had intended (a moral intention can result in an immoral consequence). There is a

22 Fichte’s first argument (which, I think, is not successful) begins by describing a utopic
vision of life on earth, in which strife is eliminated and humanity lives (with nature) in a state
of eternal peace and harmony. However, Fichte notes that if this is the purported goal of
earthly life, it is finite (because it is achievable) which means that upon achieving it, human
activity would lose all purpose (BdM, 246-7; VoM, 127). For this reason, Fichte goes on to
argue that there must be a higher, non-earthly goal that grants meaning to human existence.
This argument does not cohere with Fichte’s premise in the Wissenschaftslehre (that the goal
of human achievement is infinite) or with what he says later in BdM (that it is impossible to
achieve moral ends on earth). On the tension between this argument and the
Wissenschaftslehre, see Farr, ‘The Vocation of Postmodern Man’, 299. On contradictions in
Fichte’s arguments within this text, see Steinberg, ‘Knowledge Teaches Us Nothing’, 65.
separation between my will and its consequences, a separation that is tied to my sensible existence: my intention can be easily hindered or transformed by external causes, beyond my control. In the earthly realm, as Fichte puts it, my will is not the only cause; other causes necessarily enter the picture and impede it. However, as a rational being who sets and seeks to achieve ends, I must assume that my will can be realized—and given that this realization cannot occur in the realm of the sensible, I am required to posit a super-sensible realm in which my moral ends are realizable.

The second argument that Fichte offers is as follows: if it were the purpose of our existence to produce an ‘earthly condition of our race’, then all we would need to be are ‘an unerring mechanism’ whose actions achieve pre-determined goals (BdM, 254-5; VoM, 132). However, the fact of freedom, the fact that I am capable of consciously choosing the moral, requires that I posit a non-mechanical, i.e., super-sensible realm, in which this freedom would make sense. Or as Fichte puts it,

…there is something in me and there is something required of me, which finds in this life nothing to which it can be applied, and which is entirely superfluous and unnecessary for the attainment of the highest objects that can be attained on earth.

There must therefore be a purpose in human existence which lies beyond this life.

(BdM, 263-4; VoM, 137)

In both cases, Fichte’s claim is that the fact of reason and the fact of freedom demand that we move beyond the earth. This is because both reason and freedom are self-grounding, which means that they cannot have their source in the sensible world, where everything is caused by something else. There must therefore be a super-sensible realm. However, it is not only their
source that is non-earthly, but also their realization, because it is only in the super-sensible that rational ends and free will are not impeded—i.e., in a sphere in which mechanical cause and effect do not rule. In such a sphere, there is no separation between will and its consequence, because will is the only cause—nothing can hinder its realization.

Fichte’s argument appears to be falling back on a mechanical conception of nature, and thus once again failing to address Schelling’s conception of freedom. There is, however, an important difference between the argument he is launching here from the one developed in Book 1: By distinguishing human freedom from the activity of the self-forming plant, Fichte is claiming that human freedom cannot be anything like earthly freedom, and thus requires us to posit a super-sensible realm. As such, his new challenge to Naturphilosophie is based on his introduction of the super-sensible, such that its success depends on the success of his justification of the super-sensible. The two arguments which I’ve reviewed depend on one key claim which is, I think, largely implicit. It is the claim that self-determination requires complete determination of the self, wherein nothing impedes it. For it is on the basis of this claim that Fichte is able to make the two further claims: that self-determination cannot be achieved in the sensible world, where it faces impediments, and a non-sensible world must be posited.23 Thus the success of Fichte’s argument depends on the distinction he draws between the two worlds—a distinction that does not only claim that the source of the will is in the super-sensible, but also that the will can only be realized in the super-sensible. This means that, despite his insistence on the contrary, Fichte created two worlds: a world in which the will is realizable, and a world in which it is not.

23 Fichte describes the properly free will as follows: ‘a will which operates purely as will; by itself, and absolutely without instrument or sensible material of its activity; which is, at the same time, both act and product; with whom to will is to do, to command is to execute; in which therefore the instinctive demand of reason for absolute freedom and independence is realized…’ (BdM, 290; VoM, 151).
In her notes, Günderrode homes in on the need to posit a super-sensible or spiritual world. Achieving one’s moral vocation, she writes, requires belief in the spiritual, because ‘in the sensory world my free obedience does not work directly towards the command of duty; only an act can work, no matter what attitude it occurs with’ (GSW 2, 295). And, she continues, ‘this drives me to the belief in the spiritual world, where my spirit can work immediately, i.e., by mere will’. Interestingly, Günderrode is not claiming—with Fichte—that the spiritual is the only space in which my will can be realized. Rather, her claim is more specific: the spiritual is the space in which the will can work immediately. Furthermore, she allows that my will can be partially realized in the sensory world (via an act).24 Günderrode does not make the stronger claim that the will can only be realized in the spiritual world, because she does not need to—unlike Fichte, she is not launching a challenge to *Naturphilosophie*. In fact, she goes on to identify the will not only with human freedom, but with the activity of animals and plants as well. Fichte needs to make the stronger claim (that the will can only be realized if its realization is complete) because it is the claim that forms the basis of his distinction between human freedom and plant self-formation.

The question remains, then, as to why Günderrode posits the super-sensible at all. The answer, I think, can be found in a footnote, where Günderrode introduces the idea of opportunity. She writes: ‘My best will does not work in the world if I do not have the opportunity to show it in acts; if I do not have this opportunity, what is it worth, if there is

24 This perspective is also evident in Günderrode’s other writings, which investigate the possibility of action within a particular social and political context (rather than conceiving of our activity within nature more generally). In those writings (including her plays *Muhammad*, *Hildgund* and *Magic and Destiny*) she does not overlook the constraints of these contexts (in fact, she emphasizes them, as she does in the footnote to her notes on Fichte—see below) but she nonetheless maintains the importance of attempting to realize these ends, even if only partially, in the world (rather than beyond it).
only a sensory world?’ (GSW 2, 295, note). While Fichte argued for the necessity of the super-sensible on the basis of the separation between will and consequence, Günderrode posits the super-sensible because the sensible does not furnish me with the opportunity to realize my intention. Günderrode is pointing to the possibility of finding oneself in a situation in which one cannot even attempt to realize one’s intention—a problematic far more basic than the separation of will and consequence. For Günderrode this scenario was of course not simply imagined, but speaks of the reality of being a woman intellectual in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus one can say that insofar as it concerns opportunity, the spiritual provides an imaginal space in which I do not realize my will, but imagine a reality that offers me the opportunity to realize it. In other words, the spiritual furnishes me with a normative ideal of what the world ought to look like, in order to provide me with the opportunity to realize my will. On this account, the spiritual is not a different world, nor is it the space in which my will is realized. It is, rather, the ideal which I posit as necessary for my continued moral striving, my transformation, in this world.

To some extent, this is what Fichte also wants. However, to maintain that the spiritual is not elsewhere but here, would mean that the spiritual and the earthly are not as opposed as Fichte would have it. It would mean that the earthly must also be a manifestation of the spiritual, must be capable of realizing moral ideals, such that our moral striving would not require us to ‘give up on the earth’, but to remain with it. One can mistake this for Fichte’s view, given that he describes the will as ‘the common mediator [Vermittler] between us all…’ (BdM, 294; VoM, 152). When we look more closely, however, it becomes evident that for Fichte, the common denominator here—the ‘us all’ of which he speaks—specifically applies to human beings, to the exclusion of other beings (and indeed it must, if his challenge to Naturphilosophie is to succeed). For, Fichte explains, the acts of human beings differ from
those of all other beings because they ‘are not brought about by the mere mechanism of
nature, but by a free will elevated above all nature [durch einen über alle Natur erhabenen
freien Willen]’ (BdM 297-8; VoM, 155).

In deep contrast, Günderrode contends that nature as a whole expresses a will—that all
natural beings are self-directed in some way:

I am related to that will and everything around me is related to me. And its life is (as well
as I can grasp) a self-forming and presenting willing that flows through the whole universe
in manifold forms. A force that organizes itself in the plant, moves in the animal, and
presents its own world in each. (GSW 2, 297)

This statement, which strikingly differs from Fichte’s attempt to distinguish human freedom
and will from that of a self-forming plant, regards the will not as a distinctively human
capacity but as a natural capacity—recalling the notion of formative forces that Fichte
introduced in Book 1.25 As such, however, Günderrode does not disagree with Fichte’s view
that transformation is necessary. What she disagrees with is his claim that the capacity to
transform (the will) is specifically human, and that in transforming one’s self, in willing, one
rises ‘above all nature’. Her claim, ultimately, is that the will underpins all of reality, such
that all beings are self-transforming, self-directed in some way. She does, however, note a
difference between human willing and other forms of willing—a difference that has to do

25 Fichte appears to be challenging his distinctions, just a few pages later, when he writes that
the will is ‘the creator of the world’, and goes on to disagree with those ‘who regard the will
as building up a world of an everlasting inert matter, which must remain inert and lifeless…’
(BdM, 302; VoM, 157)—the implication being that the will animates the world in its entirety,
such that nothing in it is inert or lifeless. Thus, Fichte seems to be affirming, rather than
challenging, a unity between the natural and the spiritual, the earthly and that which he
designates as beyond the earth.
with our particular ability to consciously seek to transform ourselves. It is, ultimately, this ability that sets us apart, but it is also this ability that grants us a special responsibility towards the earth.

4. ‘Idea of the Earth’

‘Idea of the Earth’ was written shortly after Günderrode’s reading of Fichte. Although the themes of the essay are ones that Günderrode considers in other contexts, in ‘Idea of the Earth’ she focuses on the question of the relation of the human being to the earth from a moral perspective—a perspective which can be easily missed if not read alongside her notes on Fichte.

To begin with, Günderrode notes that the earth is constantly transforming, and indeed striving. As such, the earth appears to be directed toward a specific goal, which Günderrode describes as the ‘realization’ of the ‘idea’ of the earth (GSW 1, 446). To speak the earth as an idea that strives seems strange at first sight. For it implies that the earth is not only a material reality, but somehow also an ideal reality. In light of her notes on Fichte, however, Günderrode’s conception of the earth as an ideal or spiritual reality gains some clarity.26 On the one hand, Günderrode is drawing on the notion of formative force, which, as Fichte explained, cannot be gleaned with the physical eye. As he puts it: ‘I can describe this power only through its effects, and it is to me no more than the producing cause of such effects’, i.e., of plants, animals and organic forms generally (BdM, 21; VoM, 10). Following

26 While we could also draw on Schelling to interpret Günderrode here, Günderrode diverges from Schelling on this important point—and, I believe, comes much closer to Fichte. As Ruth Christmann has noted, Günderrode’s emphasis on striving toward a final goal distinguishes her from Schelling, who instead focuses on the original duality that makes possible nature’s infinite productivity. Christmann, Zwischen Identitätsgewinn und Bewußtseinsverlust, 112.
Blumenbach, Fichte describes formative force as the means by which organic beings maintain their distinctive forms (their form as plant, as animal, or as human) over time (both individually and as a species) and also as the means by which to explicate their distinctive capacities—growth, nourishment, and reproduction. As such, although formative forces cannot themselves be seen, but only assumed, we can see their effects—in the material bodies of living beings. To speak of formative forces is thus to speak of an ideal or spiritual reality, which is not opposed to the material, but manifests itself in the material (its effects). Thus by speaking of the earth as an ideal, Günderrode is drawing on this perspective, which she further developed in her notes when she connected the notion of formative force to will. As she puts it in 'Idea of the Earth':

The earth is a realized idea, a simultaneously effecting (force \([\text{Kraft}]\)) and an effect (appearance \([\text{Erscheinung}]\)). [It is] thus a unity of soul and body, the latter [is one] pole of her activity in which she [the earth] turns outward and which we call existence, form, body; the former is turned inward [and we call it] intensity, essence, force \([\text{Kraft}]\), soul.

(GSW 1, 446)

On the other hand, Günderrode is working with the view—also developed in her notes—that the ideal or spiritual places a normative claim upon us, a claim that calls for transformation. The earth, she writes, must be ‘realized’ and it is our task, as members of the earth’s

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27 In \(\text{Über den Bildungstrieb}\), Blumenbach invokes the Newtonian idea of a ‘\text{qualitas occulta}’ when speaking of the Bildungstrieb. He writes: ‘I hope it will be superfluous to remind most readers that the word Bildungstrieb, like the words attraction, gravity, etc. should serve, no more and no less, to signify a power whose constant effect is recognized from experience and whose cause, like the causes of the aforementioned and commonly recognized natural powers, is for us a \text{qualitas occulta}…’ Blumenbach, \(\text{Über den Bildungstrieb}\), 25-6.
Blumenbach was not the only eighteenth-century life scientist to make use of Newton’s Hypotheses non fingo. See Wolfe, ‘On the role of Newtonian analogies in eighteenth-century life science’. 
community, to help realize this idea/ideal (GSW 1, 447). The earth, in other words, is placing a normative claim upon us, and it is our task to understand what this claim requires and to act accordingly.

Now, Günderrode explains that all members of the earth’s community ‘give back to the earth…’—a giving back that involves becoming more alive, more attuned to the earth and one another, and more unified in mind and body (GSW 1, 447). As a member of the earth’s community, the human being contributes to this giving back, which, in the case of the human, involves a more conscious form of self-transformation: transforming the way we think and feel, the way we perceive and understand, such that what appear to be distinct or separated (mind and body, self and other, sensation and cognition) are connected. Or, as Günderrode puts it, the realization of the earth requires unity between ‘being (body) and thought (spirit)’, to such an extent that they begin to ‘penetrate one another’ and become ‘indistinguishable’ (GSW 1, 448). It is the state in which ‘body [Körper] is simultaneously spirit, thought is simultaneously body [Leib]…’ (GSW 1, 448).

While this may strike us as highly speculative, Günderrode’s ultimate claim is that self-transformation must involve achieving greater harmony or unity. This is particularly significant for human beings who—more than any other beings on earth—experience a separation between inner and outer, self and world. It is thus the human being’s special task to transform herself to become more aligned, not only with herself, but with others. And this self-transformation Günderrode describes as unity with oneself.

Fichte too had argued that self-unity is the highest goal of humanity. For Fichte, however, self-unity specifically implies formal unity (i.e., non-contradiction), unity with one’s pure I,
which in turn means self-determination, or as he puts it, the human being must “determine
himself and not permit himself to be determined by something foreign.” Such an account of
self-unity follows from Fichte’s conception of the self as absolutely self-grounding, which
entails that the self cannot emerge through relation with others, but that others emerge out of
(not prior to, or in relation with) the self. As he puts it in BdM: ‘The ground upon which I
assume the existence of something beyond myself, does not lie outside of myself, but within
me, in the limitation of my own personality’. It is only via a deduction from myself, that I can
go on to make an ‘inference’ with regard to the existence of others (BdM, 41; VoM, 21). In
light of Fichte’s understanding of the self, it follows that the goal of self-unity means only
unity with one’s self—not unity with others.

For Günderrode, by contrast, the self emerges only through being with others. Others are thus
not secondary to the self, but are at its very foundation. As such, to achieve ‘unity’ or
‘harmony’ with oneself is to achieve unity or harmony with others—or, to put it in terms of
‘Idea of the Earth’, unity with and through the earth.

28 Here is the full passage which comes from Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the
Scholar: ‘Man is always supposed to be at one with himself; he should never contradict
himself. Now the pure I cannot contradict itself, since it contains no diversity but is instead
always one and the same…’ to which he adds that for the empirical I, which does contradict
itself, the goal must be ‘to determine himself and not permit himself to be determined by
something foreign’. This implies that the fundamental principle of morality, as Fichte
explicates it, ‘is to act so that you could consider the maxims of your willing to be eternal
laws for yourself’. ‘Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar’, 149; GA 6, 297-8.

29 While in ‘Idea of the Earth’ Günderrode’s focus is on the earth and the more-than-human
community of which we are part, the view that the moral vocation involves transforming
one’s self in order to become part of a larger community—without, however, annihilating
one’s individuality in order to achieve this unity—is present throughout her work. See
Ezekiel, “Metamorphosis.”
It is thus not surprising that Günderrode goes on to claim that the goal of human moral activity—i.e., unity with oneself—is essential for the realization of the idea of the earth. Her point is not that I must be identical with myself alone, but that I must come to identify with the earth’s community, and in so doing, help realize the earth’s vocation. Thus she explains that truth, justice, beauty, love, goodness and charity are all based on the idea of unity, but this unity, Günderrode importantly adds, implies connection with others, or in some instances, totality (Allheit). In fact, she goes on to claim, in order to realize these ideals, the individual must free herself from the ‘bonds of personality’, for in each case, achieving the ideal involves bringing oneself to harmonise with that which is beyond oneself, in this way achieving a real and vital connection with other human beings, animals, and the earth itself (GSW 1, 449). Or as she puts it in ‘To Eusebio’, virtue is ‘the forgetting of personality and particularity for totality’ (GSW 1, 361).30

Self-unity as harmony with others is, Günderrode concludes, the realized idea of the earth. Or as she puts it: ‘What is always one with itself, in harmony with itself, not torn into particularity… is that which I have referred to as the realized idea of the earth…’ (GSW 1, 449). The realized idea of the earth is thus the achievement of truth, justice, beauty and goodness through unity not with oneself in the limited sense, but with oneself in an extended sense.

In this way, Günerrode reimagines the human vocation, such that what it means to be human and achieve virtue necessarily involves transforming oneself for and with the earth. This

30 Günderrode’s explanation of the relationship between one’s self and others in ‘To Eusebio’ similarly articulates this extended notion of the self, but recasts it in slightly different terms, as the ‘resolution of the many into the one’ (GSW 1, 361). The implication is that I start to regard others as part of myself—precisely because who I am is inseparable from (and dependent on) the world around me.
reimagining is made possible by Günderrode’s understanding of the self and of nature as
developed in her notes on Fichte. Precisely because the human being emerges in relation with
concrete others, the self is not alienated from the earth community, but can only exist within
it. The relationship between self and earth is thus re-configured: from one in which the earth
exists for me, to one where I exist because of the earth. This does not mean, however, that the
self is annihilated for the sake of this transformation or for the sake of the earth. Rather, as
we have seen, for Günderrode the self is born out of this original relationality. In turn, this
relationship between self and others (more-than-human others) allows Günderrode to
reimagine our moral vocation, which does not involve transforming the earth to align with
our ends, but rather, to be transformed with it, in order to help the earth achieve its ends.

Günderrode thus offers a distinctive vision of our moral vocation and our relationship to the
earth—one which both resounds with and can contribute to contemporary efforts to rethink
the human-nature relation. Her claim that the self—human culture, human ways of thinking
and perceiving—must be transformed such that our thinking and perceiving are unified
prefigures the work of eco-feminist Val Plumwood, who has argued that the environmental
crisis is a ‘crisis of reason’, more specifically, of a reason which has failed to accommodate
itself to the earth and its demands.31 What Plumwood calls for—a transformation of mind in
order to adapt to the earth and its inhabitants—not only appears to harken back to
Günderrode’s demand for a transformation of our sense of self, but to be founded on
Günderrode’s reconceptualisation of the self, such that others are no longer seen as external
or foreign entities, but as essential parts of one’s self.32 This means, importantly, that one’s

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32 Plumwood describes this as a ‘dialogical model of the self’ though she does not go into
great detail, which in many ways coheres with and is prefigured in Günderrode’s expanded
sense of responsibility extends beyond a responsibility for one’s actions and includes all those whom I regard as myself. Thus in contrast to Schelling’s ‘virtually debunking’ the notion of responsibility, we find here an expanded conception of responsibility, founded on an expanded conception of the self.

Günderrode’s reimagined understanding of the human vocation thus distinguishes her not only from Fichte—who regarded our relationship to the earth as one of mastery—but also from her fellow romantics, who saw it as our task either to transform the earth or merely contemplate it. Günderrode’s claim is that we must be transformed for the earth, a claim that, in the place of mastery, education and contemplation, emphasizes service.

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33 Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 186.
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Abbreviations of Primary Literature

Fichte


Günderrode


Hardenberg (Novalis)


Schelling


Other Primary Literature and Secondary literature


Steinberg, Michael. ‘Knowledge Teaches Us Nothing: The Vocation of Man as Textual Initiation’, in *Fichte’s Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, 57-78

