

Dissertation Abstract

In my dissertation, “[On the Political Uses of Creative Darkness: Freedom, Subjectivity, and Normativity](#),” I explore the concepts of nature and politics as conditioned by the global ecological crisis posed by climate change. Notably, the relationship between politics and the philosophy of nature has informed the tradition of Western political thought from its inception. In its modern formulation, this tradition generally opposes the domains of the natural and the political, casting the natural in terms of determinism or necessity and the political in terms of decision or freedom. Accordingly, this dissertation pursues a range of questions about how theorizing nature and politics in new and different ways allows us to revise for core political concepts such as subjectivity, freedom, and normativity.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I repurpose elements from the 19th-century German Idealist F. W. J. Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* in order to lay the groundwork necessary to redescribe the concept of nature in terms of an alternative process philosophy of nature. This redescription lets me remap the conceptual landscape to allow foundational concepts like freedom, subjectivity, and normativity to appear within nature, rather than in contraposition to nature. Schelling’s own materialism emphasizes emergence as a material process that nature generates and sustains. Accordingly, I redescribe Schelling’s materialism as a form of new materialism, or what I call *noir materialism*, which reconstructs our understanding of matter in resolutely processual terms. Ultimately, this project of redescription provides me with an ontological toolkit useful for breaking away from modern conceptions of nature and matter as dead or static and the commonly perceived downstream consequences of this for political theories of the subject.

In Chapter 3, I use Schelling’s philosophy of freedom and evil to illustrate how freedom in nature is possible. For Schelling, it is only in the domain of nature that freedom can take place, as freedom is an ontological power that takes shape as the creative agency of subjects. Freedom results from the ongoing existential decision between good and evil that ultimately issues forth ontological alterations in the order of things. Schelling defines evil as the willful identification of the subject with the entirety of existence. In this regard, Schelling’s definition of evil helps us recharacterize the ecological crisis primarily in terms of a fundamental ontological disorder. Foreclosing on evil thereby opens up the possibility of reconsidering the relationship between nature and normativity, and redescribing freedom in this way allows the eventual reconciliation of nature and politics, at least in conceptual and political theoretical terms.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I propose a theory of the ecologically conditioned subject and explore some longstanding questions about the relationship between nature and normativity. In Chapter 4, I develop at length the novel concept of *companion ecologies*, which are the composite, multimodal phenomena that constitute the ecological conditions necessary for the emergence and individuation of embodied human subjects. To flesh out this concept, I examine architecture, the microbiome, and poststructuralist anthropology in the Amazonian context. In Chapter 5, I elaborate the groundwork of a new normative naturalism – a theory of *econormativity* – which articulates an appeal to the normative implications of our irreducibly ecological condition. From the Italian political theorist Roberto Esposito’s work on biopolitics and immunological dynamics, I salvage a naturalistic conception of normative obligation capable of informing political decisions, judgments, and even policies without introducing unwanted elements of coercion or violence.