

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling: Introduction

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Late in his career, surveying the development of recent philosophy, Hegel wrote: 'Schelling worked out his philosophy in view of the public. The series of his philosophic writings also represents the history of his philosophical development and the gradual process by which he raised himself above the Fichtean principles and the Kantian content with which he began. It does not thus contain a sequence of separately worked out divisions of Philosophy, but only successive stages in his own development.'¹

Hegel wished to portray Schelling's philosophy as unfinished and merely preparatory to his own form of absolute idealism. This verdict is of course highly questionable. What nonetheless gives some basis to Hegel's remarks is that Schelling's writings allow themselves to be assigned to distinct periods, in which he adopts standpoints which are clearly different and (at least on the face of it) not always compatible. According to the standard periodization, at least half a dozen stages can be distinguished in Schelling's development, and since this needs to be borne in mind whenever Schelling's writings are approached, it makes sense to begin with an overview of Schelling's trajectory, which will also serve to flag his main ideas and concerns.

In the same year that Kant published the work that was to conclude and complete the Critical system, the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), Schelling joined the Tübinger Stift to undertake theological study. In pieces composed at the Stift the young Schelling discusses the Fall in Genesis and the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, in both cases following the official model of *Aufklärung* rational-reconstructive exegesis, while also displaying an advanced knowledge of Kantian philosophy. Of particular note is Schelling's view of mythopoeic thought as containing truth that philosophy needs to retrieve, a feature of his outlook that would later show itself in his most distinctive contributions to German Idealism: while embracing the Critical demand that all claims be submitted to the court of reason, Schelling at the same time (and in the spirit of the third *Critique*) regards philosophical reason as obliged to engage with its various 'others' – natural science, art, mythology, religion – in order to plummet its own depths.

Schelling's philosophical development proper may be said to begin, as Hegel observes, with his endorsement of Fichte's philosophy as the rightful successor to Kant's idealism. Schelling was not however, even at the outset, a mere follower of Fichte. In the works in question – *On the Possibility of a Form of Philosophy as Such* (1794) and *Of the I as Principle of Philosophy* (1795) – Schelling incorporates elements from Fichte's recently published *Foundations of the*

Wissenschaftslehre, but he arrives at Fichte's central proposition – that there is an absolute I which contains all reality – through a different route, to be examined later.

Having taken Fichte's side in the dispute then raging among Kant's followers concerning the proper route to be followed in developing the Critical philosophy, Schelling struck out in an altogether new direction. Philosophical reflection on Nature, Schelling maintained, had hitherto failed to do justice to its object. Idealism should inform natural science in ways extending far beyond the modest *a priori* grounding of physics proposed by Kant, and the assumption that mechanism provides the key to Nature should be repudiated.² Ultimately Schelling envisaged a system which would allow the full derivation of all natural kinds and laws of nature from teleological principles supplied by transcendental reflection. Schelling's programme of *Naturphilosophie* or, as he also called it, 'speculative physics', brought him into contact with the latest work in the material and life sciences, and occupied him from 1797 until the early 1800s. Key texts of his *naturphilosophisch* period include *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), *Of the World Soul* (1798), and *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799).³ By the end of the decade, chiefly on the basis of his *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling had established himself as an innovative post-Kantian idealist whose ideas consorted better than Fichte's with the Romantic tendencies of the age: Goethe's recognition of Schelling's creativity, and congeniality in relation to Goethe's own scientific ambitions, helped to secure his first academic appointment, a professorship at Jena in 1798, at an extraordinarily young age, and the impetus that Schelling gave to non-materialist, non-Newtonian interpretations of Nature extended far into the nineteenth century.

Though Schelling's natural scientific writings are rich and fine-grained, enquiry into nature was not, for him, an end in itself. What really mattered was to demonstrate that Nature is a single dynamic entity with organic form, which differentiates itself in accordance with the laws of its infinite active self-production, and once this general metaphysical result had been secured, Schelling's attention returned to the central issue facing post-Kantian idealism. The crucial question pressing on Schelling at the turn of the nineteenth century concerned the exact relation between transcendental idealism and *Naturphilosophie*, a matter on which he appeared to have equivocated: it was, in short, uncertain which of these provided the foundation of the other. Schelling addressed the issue squarely in 1800 in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*,⁴ which proposed a system with a symmetrical dual structure: on the one side, the philosophy of nature informs us concerning the chain of being which runs up from the most primitive natural phenomena – gravity, light, magnetism, electricity – to the production of intelligent beings, while on the other side transcendental idealism explains how the world is constituted in our cognition and how we come to be constituted as rational agents within it. The unity of the system arises from the parallelism and mutual implication of its component parts, each of which renders intelligible the presupposition of

the other: transcendental idealism shows how it is possible for us to *know* Nature, and *Naturphilosophie* explains how Nature, as an articulated totality, is *metaphysically* possible. It is therefore unimportant, Schelling maintains, whether we begin on the side of Nature or that of subjectivity, since each leads to the other. The system required however a coping stone, something to seal the join of its two halves, and this Schelling identified with the work of art, a metaphysically supreme object which exhibits, he argued, the underlying identity of free self-consciousness with unconscious natural productivity. Art thus stands above nature and spirit, and articulates – non-discursively – the point of conversion of the one into the other. The orientation which Schelling displays here reflects his close association with all three of the major early German Romantics thinkers: his friendship with Hölderlin had begun at Tübingen, and Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel belonged like Schelling to the *Frühromantik* circle at Jena. Though Schelling rejected the Romantics' skepticism concerning the possibility of achieving the ends of philosophy by systematic means, his position in 1800 incorporates, in a limited form, the aesthetic turn which they advocated.

The following year Schelling reformulated the relation of Nature and subjectivity in a frankly Spinozistic manner, implying his dissatisfaction with the epistemology and architecture of the 1800 *System*. The change was concurrent with the coming into the open of his differences with Fichte, a parting of ways which had been long overdue.⁵ In his *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801) Schelling maintains that subjectivity and Nature are unified at a single point, an 'absolute identity' which can and must be grasped *independently of* and *prior to* its differentiation into subject and object: everything in philosophy turns, Schelling now claims, on the insight that there is nothing outside the absolute conceived as infinite self-cognition, 'A = A'.⁶ This so-called Identity Philosophy represented the culmination of Schelling's development to date and formed the basis for his collaboration with Hegel – also a friend from Tübingen days – who was persuaded that Schelling had raised philosophy to a new level and wrote an extended defence of Schelling's claim to have overcome decisively the 'merely subjective' idealism of Kant and Fichte.⁷ To all appearances, the post-Kantian development had reached its conclusion, at least from the standpoint of anyone who agreed that Kant's philosophy faced problems which justified a stronger and more systematic form of idealism, yet could not accept either the moral-practical slant of Fichte's philosophy or its arguable subjectivism.

It is therefore remarkable that only three years later, in a work significantly titled *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), Schelling began to introduce complexities into the Identity Philosophy and to explore theological themes whose relation to the system he had set out in 1801 was not at all clear. Schelling appeared no longer content with the account he had given of the relation between the finite and the infinite, and to consider furthermore that elements of Christian doctrine, relating to the concepts of sin and fallenness, needed to be worked back into the system of philosophy. A

contemporary reader of this text would have had difficulty determining where Schelling wanted to leave things – whether he regarded the Identity Philosophy as merely in need of elaboration, or whether some fundamental innovation in the substance and method of his philosophy had been signalled – but in retrospect 1804 can be seen to mark the beginning of Schelling's abandonment of his belief, originally shared with Fichte, that it would be possible, by a suitable enlargement of philosophical reason, to show that all reality lends itself to rational cognition.

The process of deconstructing a system that Schelling himself had brought to perfection comprises the second of the two great narrative arcs which make up his philosophical development. Unlike the first, it proceeded over many decades – a full half century, no less – and is characterized by barely any publication of his work, in contrast with the frenetic first decade of his philosophical life. The material available for studying Schelling's later philosophy in the form of lecture course and unfinished book manuscripts is nonetheless extensive, and much of it is in highly polished form. Schelling's later thought formed itself gradually, and does not allow itself to be divided easily into discrete periods, but two main phases can be identified.

The theological turn hinted at in 1804 resurfaces in Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), probably his most widely read work.⁸ Here Schelling returns to the criticism that Jacobi had made of philosophy (at any rate, of all philosophy that refuses to admit its own dependence on feeling and faith) with reference to Spinoza: that any system which is sufficiently coherent to satisfy the full demands of philosophical reflection must also, by virtue thereof, preclude human freedom (and consequently eliminate agency, virtue, and any real species of value). Schelling joins this task, of showing the compatibility of pantheism and human freedom, with a second concern: namely that the metaphysical reality of evil be demonstrated in a way that gives meaning (as, he thinks, Kant and Fichte had not done) to the choice between good and evil, without which, Schelling now believes, human freedom is strictly non-existent. What is required for the solution of both problems, Schelling argues, is a reconception of God which will furnish an appropriate ground for the existence of finite rational beings for whom the choice of the Good is open. Schelling proposes to do this by distinguishing two aspects *within* God – (i) the 'ground' of God's existence, and (ii) God *as existing* – which, though inseparably united in God himself, are capable of separation in his creatures, with the result that the latter may undertake the abortive project of setting themselves up in God's stead. *Human Freedom* has therefore a striking, ambiguous character, on the one hand steering German Idealism back towards engagement with traditional questions in Christian theology – talk of the absolute is now largely replaced by talk of God, to whom a moral personality is ascribed – and on the other presenting an utterly innovative, radically unorthodox conception of God indebted to neoplatonism and the mystical writings of Jakob Boehme.

What the *Freedom* essay offers is highly condensed, and over the next decade Schelling made repeated attempts to expand it into a work that would have borne the title *The Ages of the World*, of which only the first part, 'The Past', was more or less completed (the text exists in three versions, from 1811, 1813 and 1815⁹). The theogony sketched in *Human Freedom* is here enlarged into a highly complex narrative involving an eternal antagonism of expansive and contractive forces – a model employed in a relatively simple form in the *Naturphilosophie* but now greatly elaborated and extended in order to explain both the possibility of God and the structure of human personality.

The second phase of Schelling's later philosophy comprises his so-called positive philosophy. More precisely, his later view is that negative and positive philosophy are both essential parts of what comprises philosophy as a whole, the first of which is however (in some sense) superseded by the latter. It is, Schelling argues, through the endeavour to derive all things *a priori* from pure reason, as he had himself done in his Identity Philosophy and as Hegel had continued to do, that we come to realize the purely and necessarily 'negative' character of the system that results – that is, its ontological emptiness and merely ideational status – and the consequent necessity of arriving at metaphysical truth in some other way.¹⁰ This other way can only be *a posteriori* and Schelling now describes his position as 'metaphysical empiricism' – that is, an outlook which opens itself to experience of the supersensible, in opposition to the merely sensory empiricism of Locke *et al.* Schelling's turn to mythology and revealed religion, treated intensively in his lectures from the 1840s, follows in this light.¹¹

Negative and positive philosophy are therefore not related in the fashion of the transcendental philosophy and *Naturphilosophie* of the 1790s, nor do they fit together in the way that Kant envisages *a priori* forms and the sensory manifold as combining. At their foundation lies Schelling's insistence – recalling Kant on the ontological argument, and Jacobi's critique of idealism – on the separation of the 'that' of existence from its 'how', which Hegel, the prime target of Schelling's positive philosophy, is charged with having confounded.

This sketch may seem to bear out Hegel's assessment: there is indeed an evolutionary dimension to Schelling's thought not found in Kant's Critical works or in Hegel's writings after the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It can seem moreover that, with regard to several fundamental philosophical issues, Schelling goes from one extreme to the other and back again, as if resolved to play out all the possible combinations and permutations of idealism and realism, libertarianism and necessitarianism, and rationalism and anti-rationalism. Schelling's position on human freedom is a case in point. Thus whereas in the early *Of the I*, Schelling declared freedom the *ne plus ultra* of philosophy in terms redolent of Fichte, in writings from the Identity period it is in effect eliminated in favour of absolute necessitation, determination by the absolute; and yet in Schelling's final period

human freedom is presented as that for the sake of which philosophical rationalism must be rejected. Other important changes of mind are in evidence. The hyper-valorization of art in the *System* is eliminated in Schelling's 1803–04 lectures on the philosophy of art. Again, in 1800 Schelling justified the state as a mere mechanism for implementing natural right through the enforcement of legal order, but in 1803–04 it is regarded platonistically, as a self-subsistent aspect of the absolute.

In light of all this, what are we to make of Schelling's philosophy? Assuming, that is, that we wish to consider it not simply as a historical link between Kant and Hegel or a basis of later developments in philosophy, but as holding systematic interest on its own account, as an attempt to answer the questions that compose the agenda of classical German philosophy.

One possibility, it may be thought, is to take Schelling's texts, or the more obviously coherent groupings of these, singly, and to confine our systematic interest to the Schelling of a certain work or period. But this route is, very definitely, neither systematically viable nor adequate for purposes of historical understanding: the phases of Schelling's thought are not independently intelligible, and if his *oeuvre* is fragmented into discrete portions, then we lose sight of the relations between them, which belong just as much to the content of his thought. It is in any case not necessary to reduce Schelling's philosophy to a mere aggregate, for its diversity runs along systematic lines, and when these are brought into the open, an underlying unity comes into focus.

A start can be made by noting that the axis on which Schelling's changes of doctrine most often turn is defined by the opposition of Kant and Spinoza. Schelling may be viewed accordingly as expounding, sequentially, their possible modes of combination, the different ways in which the demands of, on the one hand, a monism that satisfies the principle of sufficient reason, and, on the other, recognition of the irreducibility of subjectivity, might be coordinated. The second key point is that the two parts of Schelling's narrative – from 1794 to 1804, and from 1804 until his death in 1854 – proceed at different levels, for while both of course centre on the absolute, they do so with different aims in view. Schelling's early philosophy seeks to supply the *grounds for assuming* the absolute, the considerations that lead us to affirm it, and in addition to unfold the *implications* of that assumption, that is, to specify the conceptions of Nature, the self, freedom, and so on, which we must form in the light thereof. The later philosophy takes up the different task of articulating the *nature* of the absolute. As it may be put, the former considers the absolute relationally, while the latter probes its interior, the full complexity of which was not visible at the outset. What rationalizes this strategy of treating the diachronic diversity of Schelling's thought as an exploratory map of philosophical possibilities, is that, if Schelling is right, then the nature of the absolute is mirrored in his philosophical development: like a work of art that discloses its meaning in the multiplicity of interpretations that it inspires, or a ray of light that in passing through a prism separates into its

component colours, the absolute displays its aspects, and elusiveness, in the manifold of Schelling's philosophy.

In the space that remains I will do two things. First, with reference to his early philosophy, I will give a synoptic view of the motives that originally led Schelling to postulate the absolute. Second, I will try to clarify the problem that Schelling finds in its postulation and the solution that he considers necessary, and indicate how this defines his position within the German Idealist constellation.

(1) In his first full statement of his early philosophy, *Of the I*, Schelling presents himself as attempting to combine the respective insights of Kant and Spinoza not in a merely eclectic fashion but in a way that discloses a new and higher unity. It is important to recognize that neither Kant nor Spinoza has the upper hand in this endeavour: Schelling is not seeking simply to recuperate Spinoza's thought in the wake of Kant – as if his Spinozistic convictions had been formed independently of Kant, whose critique of pure reason had however made necessary a rearticulation of the *Ethics* – nor is he simply a post-Kantian who has discovered that certain results of transcendental reflection can be mapped onto claims of Spinoza's. Rather Schelling's claim is that one and the same insight stands at the centre of both systems, though only when each is viewed in the light of the other can it be grasped adequately, and the appropriate revisions then made to Kant's and Spinoza's expositions of their respective philosophies.

The strangeness and boldness of this claim is apparent when it is considered that Kant not only rejects Spinoza's epistemology for its reliance on rationalist methodology – the notion that it is possible for a concept to attest to its own truth – but also presents his philosophy as the metaphysical antithesis of Spinoza's. In one important place Kant argues that, as far as reflection on human freedom is concerned, the sole alternative to transcendental idealism is Spinozism, which is the unavoidable conclusion of any philosophical reasoning that takes the objects of our knowledge to be things in themselves.¹² This elevation of Spinoza – above Leibniz, and the Wolffian philosophy – shows the effect of Jacobi's *Letters Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, which had since its first edition in 1785 induced belated public recognition of the philosophical power of Spinoza's system. Jacobi upheld, however, the orthodox construal of Spinozism as atheistic and fatalistic, and in subsequent writings ranged Kant alongside Spinoza in so far as the epistemological and axiological implications of both systems are, he argues, equally nihilistic. Jacobi did not, therefore, draw the sort of deep and positive connection between them posited by Schelling.

The union of Kant and Spinoza requires two things above all. First, since the grounds on which Spinoza maintains that infinite substance, *Deus sive Natura*, enjoys absolute primacy in the true order of knowledge as well as the order of being, cannot for Schelling straightforwardly be those given in the *Ethics*, Schelling must show that what Kant calls the unconditioned – identified

with what Kant calls the Ideal of Pure Reason, reason's idea of a sum-total of all reality¹³ – must be accepted as a transcendental condition of cognition and accorded unqualified reality. Second, if there is to be any prospect of conserving Kant's affirmation of human freedom – on which Schelling as much as Fichte sets a premium – then Spinoza's conception of substance must be interpreted in terms homologous with Kant's.

A basis for the argument which Schelling requires for the completion of these tasks had been supplied by Fichte in the prospectus to his forthcoming lectures at Jena, *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1794).¹⁴ There Fichte argues that if the challenge of skepticism is to be answered, then the familiar Agrippan trilemma must be avoided, and that this requires a self-grounding cognition, something that is known in and through itself, which can only be the (pure) I. Schelling rehearses this line of thought in §1–§3 of *Of the I*, but with a vital difference of emphasis. Fichte envisages what is required in order to non-dogmatically halt the regress of reasons as *subjective*: it is whatever in the subject allows itself to be taken as playing a foundational role. Schelling by contrast emphasizes at the outset the *realist* condition on knowledge, in a way that suggests his appreciation of Jacobi's criticism of Kant's transcendental idealism as ontologically empty: knowledge requires, Schelling affirms, an 'ultimate point of reality on which everything depends', and this must be not just something through which thought reaches reality, but also 'something in which and through which everything that is reaches *existence* [Dasein]'.¹⁵ This entails the following difference from Fichte concerning the overall order of argument. Fichte argues from the requirements of knowledge directly *to the pure I*, which is absolute in the sense of preceding and grounding the subject's determinate cognition (only in this sense is it true for Fichte that the absolute 'exists'). Schelling by contrast argues from the requirements of knowledge directly *to the existence of the absolute*, which he then, in a second step, identifies with the pure I. He does so on the basis that the absolute must be *self-realizing* and so must have a reflexivity possessed by the I but missing from the thing in itself, the concept of which underlies Spinoza's God-or-Nature (*Of the I*, §10).

The task of 'Kantianizing' Spinoza's substance is achieved, since subjectivity has been installed within it, but a complication emerges in Schelling's position in *Of the I*. Though Schelling believes there are compelling grounds for identifying the absolute with the pure I, the metaphysical location that he intends for it is not on the side of (within) the subject, but *equidistant between subject and object*: its role is to hold together thought and being in an inseparable unity. The resonances of this conception are both Leibnizian (it suggests a pre-established harmony of mind and world, in place of Kant's Copernican uni-directional determination of the latter by the former) and Spinozistic (it recalls the isomorphism of the order of modes across the attributes of Thought and Extension). The way is thus prepared, we can see, for Schelling's Identity Philosophy: a

modification of the second step allows the absolute to be severed from the pure I on the basis that our capacity for philosophical construction allows the 'A = A' of absolute identity to be *abstracted* from our pure self-intuition, yielding an absolute to which we again access *by way of* the I but which *transcends* it.

Also to be noted is Schelling's crucial employment in *Of the I* of a new logico-metaphysical concept, that of a unitary ground which is (a) sufficient for both terms of an overarching opposition, (b) yet not strictly distinct from either. Schelling's term for this is an 'indifference point': an *Indifferenzpunkt* is 'indifferent between' the opposing terms which it sponsors in the double sense (i) that it is no more the one than it is the other, and (ii) that it is not something different from either. It is in one sense both-subjective-and-objective, and in another sense neither-subjective-nor-objective; and it is each of these in such a way as to imply the other.

Practical interest converges with epistemology in requiring the postulation of the absolute, Schelling argues, and here again he sets himself apart from his predecessors. Kant regards the capacity for autonomy which is demanded by the moral law as requiring the insufficiency of empirical causality to determine human action. Kant means to secure this by positing an intelligible self. Fichte does so, more radically, by identifying freedom outright with an I-hood which simply 'is because it is'. These strategies make sense when autonomy is conceived in terms of self-legislation, but Schelling instead follows Spinoza in holding that freedom can be realized only in a 'free cause', that is, a being that acts from the necessity of its own nature and thus unconstrainedly, and which must therefore also *exist* from the same necessity. Only the absolute itself can fulfil this demanding condition, but freedom can nonetheless belong to finite agents in so far as they *derive* from the absolute. The different conceptions of human freedom that Schelling produced over the course of his career are various attempts to model this relation of derivation. (Another important difference from Kant and Fichte, again reflecting Spinoza's influence, is involved here and worth noting. Schelling rejects their absolutization of moral value, and the primacy which they accord to the practical point of view; for Schelling, virtue is a conditioned value, and it is not intelligible to project practical thought beyond the limits of theoretical reason.)

The pressure of skepticism and interests of human freedom are jointly sufficient for the postulation of the absolute, but also lending its weight is a third motive, the importance of which for Schelling is testified by his *Naturphilosophie*. In the third *Critique* Kant addresses the problem that, while our fundamental understanding of Nature is necessarily mechanical, we are also obliged to regard it teleologically, since it contains living organisms whose possibility we cannot make intelligible in mechanical terms. The antinomy which is thereby generated can be solved, according to Kant, only by treating both principles – mechanism and teleology – as merely 'regulative', that is, as methodologically validated by their function for our reason, but not as constitutive of nature.

Schelling however considers that Kant underplays his hand here, and that a stronger, metaphysical conclusion is warranted. For Kant also (a) affirms that our thought about nature requires the additional posit of a supersensible ground unifying the mechanical and the teleological orders, and (b) argues that to conceive nature teleologically is to deploy implicitly the concept of nature as the object of an intuitive understanding.¹⁶ Kant wishes to leave these auxiliary concepts in the limbo of the problematic – mere reflective adjuncts to our enquiry into nature – but in Schelling's view they should be resolved into the constitutive thesis that nature *is* in its essence the unitary absolute.

(2) One thing that should be clear from the way Schelling has introduced the concept of the absolute, is that it cannot be fixed in any single order of grounds, or sphere of reason: it cannot be said to *belong* to either theoretical or practical reason, or to the philosophy of nature, to the exclusion of the other. This means that our relation to it cannot be expressed in familiar and unequivocal terms. The sense in which we 'know' the absolute must be continuous with yet cannot be the same as that in which we enjoy all other knowledge: the absolute *is known* but not an *object* of knowledge; its existence, though a matter of absolute certainty, cannot be proven.¹⁷ Once again it helps to fix Schelling's innovation in relation to Kant and Spinoza: Schelling's epistemology of the absolute employs Kant's method of transcendental proof in parallel with Spinoza's method of definitions & axioms, his claim being that when we regress far enough in the order of transcendental conditions, the *absolute itself*, and not merely the *idea* of the absolute, reveals its priority; the absolute *shows itself to be anterior* to any act of presupposing. A Kantian 'transcendental presupposition' is thus endowed with objective reality (it is no longer a mere 'necessity of representation') and is raised to the status of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge. Nor, again, can our practical relation to the absolute be brought under any one heading, since it is neither an object of will, nor simply an ideal regulating our intentions, nor merely a theoretical posit which is required in order to underwrite practical thought. In several places, drawing on Kant's moral theology, Schelling employs the concept of a postulate – an affirmation shared by theoretical and practical reason, transcending their respective doxastic and conative modes; a doing that is at once a knowing – in order to indicate its distinctive status.¹⁸ Our assumption or 'postulation' of the absolute is thus of an unparalleled and indeterminable nature.

Also clear is the weight that Schelling puts on the concept of an indifference point. It is what allows him to maintain that, although of course in one sense the absolute sets a problem for philosophical reason, our ontological commitment to it can be unreserved, in contrast with Kant's 'problematic' concept of the thing in itself. In his 1801 exposition of the Identity Philosophy the importance of the concept is explicit: Schelling employs it in his opening definition of absolute reason – 'I call *reason* absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective'; indifference is the 'form of being' of absolute identity and the form

in which the absolute cognizes itself – and argues that we come to understand it by reflection on what is needed to make sense of the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity.¹⁹

Schelling might have continued to take this characterization of absolute identity in terms of absolute indifference as not susceptible to further elucidation, but his later philosophy shows a number of factors combining to propel him into attempting a speculative decomposition of the absolute into its constituent factors. A full account is not possible here, but Schelling's ground plan can be summarized very briefly by saying that, as *Human Freedom* shows, he comes to regard a number of the problems which had occupied him earlier – in particular the problem of freedom, the problem of the existence of the world, and the possibility of judgement – as interconnected at a much deeper level than he had hitherto succeeded in bringing to light, and as involving a shared structure which must be regarded as having its root in God or the absolute, and as manifesting itself in the very form of judgement as such. What we call being or existence, Schelling speculates, is not in truth the conceptually simple, all-or-nothing matter which our acquaintance with finite empirical entities leads us to suppose: prior to the formation of the stream of worldly becoming, being as such involves a pre-temporal movement or process, which cannot be represented as a movement of thought, or which, when cast in that form, exhibits incoherence. Without this fracture in being, there would be neither a world nor freedom.

The baroque conceptual figures which surface in Schelling's later writings are not easy to grasp. Lest their obscurity be taken as a reason for reverting to Kant's conclusion that the unconditioned is an abyss for human reason, to which we should not pretend to be able to direct our thoughts, a word may be added on why Schelling thinks that discursive articulation of the absolute, 'abyss' though it may be, is not impossible. The difficulties that we encounter in our attempt to think the absolute mirror, Schelling supposes, its metaphysics: the problem that we find, for instance, in conceiving God as both free and necessary – a necessary existent, yet whose self-causing is not necessitated – belongs, so to speak, to God himself. Schelling's conceptual innovations – God as preceded by a 'longing' for existence, and so on – find their justification here.

When Schelling's philosophy is set alongside the systems of Kant and Hegel, it may appear relatively indefinite in its implications, offering neither the finality of Hegel's speculative fulfilment of the interests of reason nor Kant's firm redirection of these into the practical sphere. Hegelians commonly represent Schelling as unable, for want of the right concept of dialectical method, to give coherent form to his original insight concerning the absolute and to reap the benefits of absolute idealism.²⁰ It is therefore important to stress once again that what may seem to be a deficiency of Schelling's thought is by his own lights a truth-tracking virtue. If Schelling is right, then the definiteness offered by Kant and Hegel is illusory, for philosophical reason cannot be contained

within Kantian bounds (Kant's differentiations of practical from theoretical reason, of freedom from nature, and so on, invoke the very unity that he says we must affirm our ignorance of), and nor can it close the circle on itself (what Hegel calls absolute knowing or the absolute Idea presupposes his erroneous logicism, and in any case – because it is arrived at through the self-sublation of the finite – amounts to a deflated, mere *ersatz* absolute).

Schelling does not stand alone among the German Idealists in taking up a complex and qualified position on the question of the ultimacy of systematic knowledge. Fichte too, in his late versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804 onwards, supposes (for reasons different from Schelling's) that the final knowledge to be acquired through philosophical reflection involves an acknowledgement of the limits of discursive reason.²¹ If Schelling and the late Fichte are correct, then the project of systematicity requires a finer resolution than those offered by Kant and Hegel: philosophical reason does encounter limits, *contra* Hegel, but these do not leave a residue, *pace* Kant; rather it is in grasping how and why the point of limitation is reached that philosophy completes itself. The road less travelled in German Idealism passes between Kant and Hegel and, if sound, takes us beyond them.

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¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896; repr., Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 513.

² Relevant influences on Schelling here are J. G. Herder and K. F. Kielmeyer.

³ *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797, 2nd & revised edn. 1803), trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), trans. Keith Peterson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004). *Of the World Soul* (1798) is without an English translation.

⁴ *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1978).

⁵ The correspondence has appeared recently in English translation: F. W. J. Schelling and J. G. Fichte, *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*, trans. and ed. David Wood and Michael Vater (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2012). The mutual criticism of Fichte and Schelling extends throughout their later writings: see the texts of Fichte and Schelling assembled in Wood and Vater's edition, and the chapter on Fichte in Schelling's *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (c. 1833–34), trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶ *Presentation of my System of Philosophy* (1801), trans. Michael Vater, in Schelling/Fichte, *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling*, §1, p. 349. A partial translation by Michael Vater (§§1–54 of the text) appears in *Philosophical Forum* 32, no. 4, 2001, 339–371. Other texts of the Identity Philosophy include *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy* (1802), parts

of which (Sections II and IV) are translated by Michael Vater in *Philosophical Forum* 32, no. 4, 2001, 373–397 (reprinted in Fichte/Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling*), and *Bruno, or On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things* (1802), trans. Michael Vater (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁷ See in particular Hegel's important work, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801), trans. and ed. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977). The collaboration took shape in the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* which Schelling and Hegel jointly edited and composed from 1802 to 1803.

⁸ *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* (1809), trans. J. Gutmann (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989); also as *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. and ed. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

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¹⁰ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy* (1842–43), trans. and ed. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

¹¹ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* (1842), trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

¹² *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:100–102, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A571/B599–A583/B611. Schelling's earliest published work, *Of the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy* (1794), in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays 1794–1796*, ed. Fritz Marti (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), is extremely helpful in understanding his appropriation of Kant's philosophy.

¹⁴ *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), in J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ *Of the I*, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, p. 71 (emphasis added), and p. 67: 'If I may say it in the words of Jacobi, philosophy seeks to unveil and reveal that which is [Dasein].'

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §§76–78.

¹⁷ The ontological proof of God betrays the philosophical insight which gives rise to it: *Of the I*, p. 72 and p. 76n, and *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795) (also in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*), p. 174n.

¹⁸ *Of the I*, p. 128, and at greater length in *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, pp. 168–178, and in *Treatise Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge* (1997), in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), Appendix, pp. 132–138.

¹⁹ Schelling, *Presentation of my System of Philosophy*, §1, p. 349, and §§15–18.

²⁰ See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, Part Three, Section Three, D, esp. pp. 525–527 and 536–537.

²¹ See Fichte, *The Science of Knowing: J. G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. and ed. Walter W. Wright (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005). This version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is influenced by Schelling, in so far as Fichte here attempts to show that he can incorporate all that is justifiable in Schelling's conception of the absolute; see esp. the Fourteenth Lecture.