

Schelling and the Problem of Consciousness

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1. The question of how Schelling conceives the relation of consciousness to the material world may be understood in various ways. Some of these, in my view, are well-conceived and others not. We may be asking whether there is *some problem that Schelling himself formulates and addresses* which corresponds more or less to the ('hard') problem of consciousness as we understand it (Q1). Alternatively we may be asking if any answer can be returned to the question by employing *Schelling's ideas as a resource* (Q2). Both are legitimate. Each reflects a different practice in the history of philosophy or different way of relating philosophy to its history. I think the answer to Q1 is affirmative, but only with heavy qualifications, and once these have been spelled out, it will become clear that what Schelling has to say on the topic, as well as being of slight importance in his own terms, is of little or no interest to contemporary philosophy of mind. Regarding Q2, I have no proposal to make and cannot see much to be done, but the possibility that a contemporary philosopher concerned with the metaphysics of mind might find inspiration in Schelling cannot be ruled out. What should not be asked is: What is *Schelling's* solution to the problem of consciousness *as we understand it* (Q3)?, nor even, more cautiously, What solution to the problem of consciousness as we understand it can be either found in Schelling or extrapolated from his writings *on his behalf* (Q4)? Both assume *ab initio* the congruence of Schelling's philosophical project with contemporary concerns, an assumption which I will challenge. Had the answer to Q1 been different from what it is, Q3 and Q4 would have been cogent, but as it is, they are not.

2. What I have just said raises thorny issues of historical-philosophical methodology, which cannot possibly be dealt with here, but are worth brief mention. Strong historicists will object to Q2 on the grounds that it credits philosophical reflection with an autonomy, a potential for transcending its history, which it does not have. On such a view, found in Dilthey and perhaps Collingwood, Q1 alone is legitimate, subject to the further condition that 'the problem of consciousness as we understand it' is reconstrued as the task of tracing the historical development that has led to our present understanding of consciousness as posing a problem. The objection much more likely to be voiced, from the other end of the spectrum, is that denying *ab initio* legitimacy to Q3 and Q4 assumes that Schelling's agenda of philosophical problems simply cannot even in part be the same as, cannot overlap with, our own – an assumption which makes sense only if it is *impossible* for there to be trans-historical topics and objects of philosophical enquiry. Since, however, historical self-relativization is not an option for philosophical reflection, there is no alternative but to proceed

on the assumption that our present conception of the problem of consciousness is cogent and, accordingly, to interrogate philosophers of the past in its light – that is, to endorse Q3 and Q4 *ab initio*. To do so runs no risk of historical insensitivity or anachronism, so long as we are prepared to qualify our present-centric interpretations as 'reconstructive' rather than 'strictly historical'.

Strong historicism, though absolutely right (in my view) about the importance of viewing the philosophical agenda of the present in the perspective of the past, is not attractive. The opposite position, by contrast, has considerable appeal. My intention however is not to defend directly any general methodological standpoint but to offer Schelling as a case study. If I am right about the radical differences of framework and fundamental assumptions which separate Schelling's philosophy from contemporary philosophy of mind, then Schelling *cannot* have a solution to the problem of consciousness as we understand it, nor does the notion of a Schellingian solution to it extrapolated on his behalf make sense. Had Q3 or Q4 directed our enquiry, this would not have been grasped, with the result not only that Schelling would have been misunderstood, but also that we would have missed an opportunity to make a valuable gain in philosophical self-knowledge – viz., recognition of the live possibility that our way of conceiving consciousness as a problem is defective.

3. Much may seem to support a much more positive view, opposed to the line I am taking, of the prospects for meshing Schelling with present-day philosophy of mind. A contemporary philosopher who happens to come across Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* – the conception of Nature and natural science which Schelling first presented in 1797 and continued to elaborate until roughly 1804,¹ and which defined an entire research programme for his generation – may well consider that here, at long last, classical German philosophy exhibits some degree of attunement to the concerns of the present-day philosophy. Schelling seeks to tell a unified philosophical story which will allow us to regard consciousness and indeed self-consciousness as the final product of a single continuous development running up from the elementary forces of physics, via organic nature, to man as a rational being.² Schelling remains alien in several respects, not least in his rejection of mechanistic causality and the scientific ideal of mathematical exactitude, but there would appear to be full recognition on his part that rational consciousness must be set within and not beyond Nature, in direct contradiction with the subjective idealism of Kant and Fichte. In addition, in so far as he may seem to follow Spinoza in denying that anything stands above Nature,³ Schelling ought, arguably, to appear more congenial than Hegel, who also allows to run up to man as nature's product, but on the basis of a metaphysics of spirit that may be thought to make his Philosophy of Nature incompatible with even the weakest contemporary naturalism.

The arguable relevance of Schelling to contemporary philosophy lies, therefore, in his having apparently rediscovered the truth of naturalism from within the context of Kantian subjectivism, without reverting to the materialism of early moderns such as Hobbes, la Mettrie, or (many allege) Spinoza: to the contrary, Schelling preserves from his Kantian-Fichtean heritage the insight which is needed in order to grasp the hard problem of consciousness, the refined appreciation of subjectivity that makes Spinoza and Leibniz seem in Kantian retrospect somewhat clumsy in their dealings with the mind. Schelling thus appears (promisingly) poised between naturalism's mature and responsible recognition of the authority of the natural sciences for philosophical reflection, and the dualist's appreciation of the *a priori* distinctiveness of conscious mentality. The details of Schelling's metaphysics of mind and account of the mind-body relation are another matter, and for reasons already given it would be foolish to expect to find in him a clear anticipation of any of the possibilities explored in contemporary philosophy of mind, but in broad terms – and irrespective of whether anything might be extracted from Schelling to enrich contemporary philosophy of mind – it would seem that he may be considered an ally of sorts, a co-participant in the modern endeavour to find an intelligible metaphysical locus for the phenomenon of consciousness in a natural world cleansed of Aristotelian and other pre-modern fictions. Some may go further and argue that Schelling lends his weight to the 'panpsychist' solution to the problem of consciousness.⁴

4. This construal of Schelling is in my estimate, as I have indicated, headed entirely in the wrong direction. The foregoing characterizations of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* are all correct – or at least not incorrect – in so far as Schelling does indeed tell us that mind, though irreducible, emerges (in *some* sense) from matter in consequence of the nature of the latter, and that mind is conditional (in *some* sense) upon our embodiment and our position in the order of living beings; Schelling is indeed (in *some* sense) a non-reductionist and emergentist who believes that the totality of mind and matter is cognitively accessible and inherently intelligible. Everything turns, however, on the unpacking of 'in some sense', and when the *naturphilosophisch* tenets cited above are restored to their proper context – the broader standpoint within which Schelling developed *Naturphilosophie* and which becomes clearly visible when his philosophical development is viewed in its entirety – Schelling's position assumes a quite different aspect.

The connection as such of mind and matter – still less the hard problem of consciousness – is quite simply not a primary or self-standing philosophical problem for Schelling. Once a complete solution to the problems that properly determine systematic philosophical reflection has been discovered, no such problem remains. The problems that *per* Schelling define the task of philosophy are (1) the derivation of the finite, determinate, objectual world from the absolute, (2) the relation

between the two domains into which the absolute cleaves primordially, viz., the subjective (or 'ideal') and the objective (or 'real'), and (3) the nature and reality of freedom. These are conceived by Schelling in terms that abstract from individuated human existence: questions of epistemology and human freedom which are indexed to individual subjects of self-consciousness (are my knowledge claims justified? do I meet the conditions of responsibility for my actions?) are subordinate to their impersonal counterparts (how can the subjective-ideal relate in the modes of cognition and causality to the objective-real? where and in what forms is Freedom expressed in Nature?). *Naturphilosophie* is part, but only a part, of the solution of (1)–(3): it tells us how Nature must be conceived in order for it to derive from the absolute and for scientific theories of natural phenomena to be genuinely explanatory – namely as 'autonomous', 'autarchic', and possessing 'unconditioned reality'.⁵ And when Nature has been made rationally transparent – shown to be structured in accordance with fundamental principles derived from the absolute, and to culminate in rational consciousness – still nothing has been revealed *within* it that bears specifically on our contemporary problem of relating consciousness to its neural base. For Schelling this relation is no *explanandum* but merely a further instance of the original duality which furnishes the entire structure of Nature itself and finds itself repeated itself at every level, in every natural product: light and gravity, heat and electricity, the sun and the Earth, the morphology of plant and animal species, all of these are to be understood as magnet-like bipolar syntheses of opposed principles, distinguished by their internal structure and relation to one another.⁶ There are specific things to be said about sensation (and 'qualitative experience') as a phenomenon in the *Stufenfolge* of Nature and as a component of human cognition,⁷ and about the brain as an organ,⁸ but they cannot bear on the 'hard problem of consciousness': at a point where they arise for consideration, the mind-body relation has already been accounted for, as implied in the very possibility of a world, and thus as something not to be sought within it.⁹

5. The full account of how Schelling arrives at this position is another (and lengthy) story, but we catch a glimpse of its motivation by noting how Schelling has accepted and developed further two lessons of Kant's: demotion of the mind-body problem from the position of pre-eminence that it occupies in early modern philosophy, and its supplanting by the new problem of Freedom and Nature. The first belongs to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant explains that the soul-matter problem of the early moderns, which called forth such hypotheses as physical influx and pre-established harmony, has been overtaken by the metaphysics of transcendental idealism, which specifies the *a priori* principles of interconnection of 'inner' and 'outer appearances', i.e. mental states and things in space. All further questions are consigned to the realm of the 'problematic'; to find the mind-body relation puzzling, Kant argues, is to mistake its relata for things in themselves.¹⁰

The possibility that Kant leaves open – that mind and matter share a supersensible ground which is not of the nature of either – Schelling embraces, converting Kantian ignorance into positive cognition: we have according to Schelling immediate knowledge in intellectual intuition of the absolute as ground and identity ('absolute indifference') of the subjective and objective. The second lesson comes from the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where Kant takes up the task of restoring continuity between our thought about the order of nature and the moral order which reason prescribes for freedom.¹¹ Here too Kant's solution consists in an interconnection of subjective *a priori* principles, which Schelling again ontologizes, according unconditioned reality to what Kant had left problematic: the absolute as 'indifference point' of the subjective and objective is also the ground and identity of Freedom and Nature.

The details of these moves and their putative justification are not important for present purposes, the essential point being that Schelling takes Kant's ground-breaking reconfiguration of the early modern agenda – Kant's replacement of questions concerning substance and essence into questions concerning the logic of the subject-object relation, and the interrelations of principles in rational self-consciousness – and transposes it into a metaphysical structure. Kantian principles of self-consciousness thought become the principles that constitute reality as it is in itself.

6. Having shown how Q1 is to be answered, it is a fairly straightforward matter to reconstruct Schelling's attitude to the contemporary hard problem of consciousness.

The philosopher who holds up 'brain states' and 'subjective mental processes' and asks how these two isolated things can be related to one another, is engaged in a nonsensical enterprise – as if a philosopher sought to answer the question how mathematics can have application *a priori* to the physical world by contemplating two apples and asking where in the properties of the apples their relation to the number 2 is located. The hard question of consciousness is arrived at by stripping away the perspective of the I on sensation, as if the distinction of 'sheer qualitative consciousness' from I-thinking reflexive consciousness were a real and not merely a formal distinction. The contemporary philosopher of mind may retort that animality shows the distinction to be real, and Schelling will reply that the mistake has just been repeated: animality has been torn out of its proper context and posited as metaphysically and explanatorily independent of the *total* order of Nature within which alone it is intelligible.

The exponent of Schelling's standpoint may press the point by raising a question about the hard problem of consciousness which, though absolutely basic, or perhaps for that very reason, is rarely considered. In every statement of the problem, essential use is made of some such expression as 'subjectively given', 'immediately presented', 'inwardly accessible', 'endowed with a first-person aspect', and so forth. Now the primary meaning of all these phrases is in a broad sense epistemic:

they refer not to the intrinsic constitution of any set of items but to *our mode of access* to them. (Thus the hard problem of consciousness, in its initial formulation, is not equivalent to the general non-epistemic problem of how, if at all, the physicist's world of mathematically determinable quantities can support qualitative features.) The question is therefore: Why attach importance – *any* importance, of a *philosophical* kind – to that mode of access? Why suppose that it matters what is and isn't accessible to 'immediate inward presentation'? (It matters no doubt for epistemology, but the justification and rational reconstruction of cognitive claims are not the present issue.) The answer cannot be: 'Because *we* are the very beings who *have* that mode of access' – since that question merely raises another: Why suppose that beings of our kind are such that it is of metaphysical significance what does and doesn't show up in what we, animals of a certain species, call our 'inner perspective'? Nor can it be: 'Because the mode of access is *constitutive of* the items in question' – which again merely begs the question why this particular instance of an item's being part-constituted by a relation should be regarded as metaphysically distinctive. (That this mode of access leads us to *conceptualize* the items to which it leads in a distinctive way is indisputable but irrelevant, for it is exactly that connection – the assumption that modes of access are of more-than-epistemic significance – which needs grounding.) The dialectic will run and run, but at some point – this is what the Schellingian maieutic aims to reveal by estranging us from what of course seems utterly self-evident – the philosopher of mind will have to simply turn her spade and avow a baseline commitment to the notion that the distinction of consciousness and its contents from other things *must go deeper, must* carry more metaphysical meaning, than the distinction of quarks from bosons or of reptiles from mammals, and that the fact that we understand it as a *unique* distinction, not an instance of a more general *type* of distinction within Nature, is rightfully taken as no mere contingency, attributable to the narrow angle of vision which conditions our conceptualizations. To say this, however, is to make implicit appeal to a higher, hitherto unavowed standpoint, which cannot be allowed to remain indeterminate.¹² The basis of this standpoint – presupposed by the claims to positive metaphysical knowledge which are needed to formulate the 'hard problem of consciousness' – is exactly what Schelling seeks to articulate in his theory of the absolute. And because he constructs this theory by transposing concepts from an idealism (Kant and Fichte's) which gives primacy to rational self-conscious subjectivity – allowing Nature to be understood as an expression and realization of the laws of our mind, 'mind made visible'¹³ – no puzzle or problem concerning the justification for attaching metaphysical significance to mental concepts can arise for Schelling, as it inevitably does for contemporary philosophers.

The situation of the modern philosopher of mind should be understood in historical terms. Various decisions made at the inception of analytic philosophy cut it loose from the major currents of nineteenth-century philosophy – all of which, it is plausible to contend, were in one way or

another descendants of classical German philosophy, either pursuing its agenda in modified ways or, at the very least, formed in reaction against its legacy, seeking to correct its idealism, apriorism, etc. The quarrels with Bradley in the early analytic literature merely served to draw a line under the philosophical past, over which nothing was to be carried into the present, and the idea that the overarching task of philosophy is determined, as Kant maintained in the Third *Critique*, by certain aboriginal interlocking dualisms – of reason and sense, Freedom and Nature, and so on – disappeared from view. The growth of philosophy of mind as a central area of philosophy is a major chapter in the story of analytic philosophy's relaxation of its methodology and expansion of its problem-agenda, and it is fair to say that it has come to be regarded as *the* decisive high-level battlefield in the argument of (for want of a better word) humanism with (what it perceives as) scientism. The peculiarity of the present situation lies in the intention to determine whether minds are 'more than' neural states of organisms without recourse to general metaphysics, assisted only (for some) by cognitive psychology and brain science – as if Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce agreed to decide the issue between them through consideration of the latest results in vertebrate palaeontology.

What makes Schelling irrelevant to the philosopher of mind, and simultaneously makes the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness' inconsequential in Schelling's eyes, is therefore a consequence of the fact that Kant's paradigm-shifting reconfiguration of the philosophical agenda, whose stamp is borne by classical German philosophy and all its legates, has been reversed: the mind-body problem has returned to centre stage, with the difference that it is now dissociated from the theistic (and associated broader metaphysical) concerns of the early moderns – meaning in effect (by virtue of what contemporary treatment of the problem excludes) that it has become an issue that must be solved, if at all, on empiricist terms. The hegemony of empiricism is reflected in the three characteristically empiricist mistakes that, in Schelling's view, the philosopher occupied with the hard problem of consciousness makes: the mistake of looking for the key to the relation of brain and consciousness or of mind and matter *within* the world, as if it could be an empirical matter; the mistake of *atomism*, of supposing that items which experience may seem to present as 'simples' can be taken as given elements out of which the complex and more puzzling constituents of reality are constructed; and the axiological mistake of *anti-humanism*, in so far as the human subject is conceived as needing to appeal to something as etiolated and conceptually void as evanescent qualitative consciousness in order to lay claim to any of the metaphysical privileges that were regarded once upon a time as, quite literally, the gift of God, and that classical German philosophy sought to reinstate in a defensibly modern, God-independent form. With these assumptions in place, the problem of consciousness is neither soluble nor worth solving – its insolubility signifies no triumph for humanism over hard naturalism, since the irreducibility of

'qualia' is, in the terms that prevail, a fact without any metaphysical meaning. In this confused and deficient situation, the first thing that is needed, Schelling might say, is a Copernican revolution.

References

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¹ The chief texts in translation are F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797, 2nd & revised edn. 1803), trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), and *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), trans. Keith Peterson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004). References prefixed 'SW' (followed by volume and page number) are to Schelling's *Sämmtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61).

² *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1978), pp. 16–17 (SW III, 356), and *Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses* (1800), §63 (SW IV, 75–78).

³ This requires qualification, for as indicated below, Schelling upholds a (conceptual if not formal) distinction of Nature from 'the absolute'.

⁴ See Michael Blamauer, 'Schelling's Real Materialism', *Minerva* 16, 2012, 1–24, and Iain Hamilton Grant, in *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 188: 'In many ways, Schelling's naturalistic

realism offers a counterpoint to the eliminativist strategy in contemporary neurophilosophy: if ideation is electrochemistry, electrochemistry grounds, rather than undermines, all ideation.'

⁵ *First Outline*, p. 17 (SW III, 17).

⁶ See the first part of *Von der Weltseele, einer Hypothese der höheren Physik* (1798) ('Über die erste Kraft der Natur'), SW II, 379-490, on duality and polarity in Nature.

⁷ See *Ideas*, pp. 207-208, 237 (SW II, 259, 298), on quality and sensation, and *System of Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 51-60 (SW III, 399-411), on 'original sensation'.

⁸ On the brain, see *Weltseele*, SW II, 532, 563-564; *First Outline*, pp. 45n, 130, 143-145 (SW III, 58, 179, 198-200); *System der gesamten Philosophie* (1804), §222 (SW VI, 438-440); and 'Einiges über die Schädellehre' (1807), SW VII, 542-543.

⁹ Schelling discusses the relation of mind and body (*Seele* and *Leib*) in the following places: *Weltseele*, SW II, 563-564; *System of Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 92, 127-129 (SW III, 453, 497-500); *Fernere Darstellungen* (1802), SW IV, 373, 387-388; *Bruno, or On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things* (1802), trans. Michael Vater (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1984), pp. 178-184 (SW IV, 281-287); *Propädeutik der Philosophie* (1804), SW VI, 88-97; and *System der gesamten Philosophie*, §64, §§273-282 (SW VI, 217, 502-510).

¹⁰ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A384-393, B427-428.

¹¹ *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Introduction, Section IX.

¹² See Dieter Henrich's comments on Thomas Nagel in his review of *The View from Nowhere*, 'Dimensionen und Defizite einer Theorie der Subjektivität', *Philosophische Rundschau*, 36, 1989, 1-24, esp. pp. 10-11.

¹³ *Ideas*, pp. 41-42 (SW II, 55-56).