

9-1-2012

Schelling's Philosophy of Identity and Spinoza *Ethica more geometrico*

Michael Vater

Marquette University, michael.vater@marquette.edu

Published version. "Schelling's Philosophy of Identity and Spinoza *Ethica more geometrico*," in *Spinoza and German Idealism*. Eds. Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Y. Melamed. New York: Cambridge University Press, September 2012: 156-174. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9781139135139.010](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139135139.010). © Cambridge University Press 2012. Used with permission.

Schelling's philosophy of identity and Spinoza's
Ethica more geometrico

Michael Vater

Schelling is one of the most historically minded philosophers to work in modern philosophy. Though Hegel decisively came to *his* philosophy while lecturing on the history of philosophy at Jena, Schelling's style of appropriating the past varied throughout his long career. At times he simply reproduces past contributions; at others, he actively combats the settled views of such figures as Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant. While I am tempted to suggest that Schelling's *many* philosophies trace an ellipse determined by the twin foci of Kant's and Spinoza's thought, that is too simple a picture. I suggest instead that Spinoza is a lens or a filter for all of Schelling's appropriations of past thinkers, but one that would not stay fixed. Perhaps, as for his friend and mentor, Goethe, from whom Schelling borrowed the text of the *Ethics* while working out his *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801), Spinoza functioned as a 'strange attractor' for Schelling's speculation as it veered from version to version in its attempt to embody both poles of Kant's ambiguous heritage: the view that critical philosophy must take the form of a *system* of human knowledge while maintaining a rigorous theoretical silence on that which is most worthwhile in human reality, the apparent endowment of *freedom*.

As with all the German Idealists and Romantics who struggled to incorporate into transcendental idealism Spinoza's view that freedom is illusory in a cosmos both unitary and fractured along lines of perfectly traceable causal determination, Schelling's appropriation of Spinoza is mediated by the celebrated 1780 conversations on Spinoza between G. E. Lessing and F. H. Jacobi. These are variously reported in Moses Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* and Jacobi's *Doctrine of Spinoza*. What came down as the watchword of those rich (or ironic) conversations was the epitome: "there is no leaving the absolute," or no transition

between the infinite and the finite.¹ In his early philosophical essays (1794–1796), where he presented a metaphysical version of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling argued the converse: there is no ascent to the absolute from the finite, i.e., no cosmological demonstration of God's reality. In his writing on *Naturphilosophie* (1797–1800), Schelling warms to the logical face of a Spinozistic universe and distances himself from the pulse of freedom that animated Fichte's thought. More mature phases of his thought, beginning with the 1801 *Presentation of My System* and extending through the 1809 *Essay on Human Freedom*, show Schelling struggling with two of Spinoza's least negotiable positions: that no transition between the infinite and the finite orders is thinkable, and that freedom is a conceptual surd, given that the sole human capacity to explain or demonstrate is the schema of causality or sufficient reason.

This chapter will focus on the first of Schelling's difficult moments with Spinoza: the attempt of the philosophy of identity simultaneously to maintain that the finite has no being except as embraced by the absolute, and that the finite's individuation within appearances can be explained through a 'minor-key' logic that substitutes geometrically constructed concepts of *quantitative indifference* and *quantitative difference* for the qualitative concepts of identity and difference, which fail to explain individuation and finitude. The first text to portray this struggle is the 1801 *Presentation of My System*. The problem of ontologically vindicating the finite order, at least enough to present a philosophical mirror of nature in *Naturphilosophie*, is the philosophical impulse of Schelling's apparently seamless reproduction of Spinoza's monism in this work. Though the philosopher can intuit an order of identity or creative expression underneath the apparently diverse mechanisms that organize natural phenomena, her real endeavor is to show that differentiations in nature have the character of repetitions, not elaborations, and that the activities of

¹ Thus Jacobi reports that he replied to Lessing's query on the *spirit* of Spinozism by stating that Spinoza had produced a totally abstract version of *ex nihilo nihil fit*, whereby any origination within the infinite or any "transition from the infinite to the finite" was denied. See F. H. Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), pp. 173–251 (pp. 187–188). Schelling comments on Jacobi's report in his 1795 *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, noting that the "no transition" dictum results also from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, except that the "spirit of Criticism" insists with Fichte that philosophy's chief task consists in solving the problem of the existence of the world – the feeling of objectivity that accompanies presentations (SW 1:313–315).

diverse forces in nature aim at a return from relative difference to relative indifference – the collapse of the natural cosmos back into the absolute.

We must first speak of Schelling's philosophical method in the 1801 essay, then address the initial fifty sections that set out the metaphysics of identity before we can focus on Schelling's appropriation of Spinoza. Despite formal similarities between Spinoza's geometric method and Schelling's numbered mathematical-geometrical construction, Schelling's direct debts to Spinoza are few: first, the Cartesian definitions of *substance* and *attribute*; second, an account of phenomena or modal being that reproduces Spinoza's teaching that nothing is intrinsically finite; and finally, a concept of 'potency' or natural force modeled on *conatus*.

METHOD IN THE 1801 PRESENTATION OF MY SYSTEM

From remarks that Schelling makes in his Preface, the intent of the *more geometric* presentation in *My System* is to let the subject speak for itself,² leaving aside the intent of the author and all extrinsic labels like 'realism' or 'idealism.' Though *perhaps* Fichte had up to this point presented a subjective version of idealism based on reflection, while Schelling, both in his essays on nature and in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, had presented an objective idealism based on the productive power of the idea, the reader will learn nothing from such labels.³ Spinoza is adopted as the paradigm for presenting the new system, says Schelling, because he is closest in form and content to the system of identity and because the geometric form allows for brevity and clarity.⁴

I use the word *exposition* rather than *deduction* for Schelling's elaboration of his new views, for Schelling's procedure is loosely 'axiomatic' and refers the reader to previous theorems, corollaries, and explanations, not to demonstrate new propositions with strict Euclidean necessity, but to

² Schelling, *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, in HKA 10:116. A full translation of the *Presentation of My System* appears in J. G. Fichte and F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*, ed., intro., and trans. M. G. Vater and D. M. Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

³ Schelling, *Darstellung*, in HKA 10:111. Schelling is careful to speak of a "possible difference" between his standpoint and Fichte's, an accurate depiction of the state of discussion between the two philosophers that the *Schelling–Fichte Briefwechsel* documents (F. W. J. Schelling and J. G. Fichte, *Schelling–Fichte Briefwechsel*, ed. H. Traub [Neuried: ars una, 2001]). It is Hegel's *Difference*-essay (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977]) that first asserts that Fichte is enclosed in a subjective idealism, while Schelling has broken through to objective idealism, a charge that Schelling repeats and amplifies in the 1802 *Bruno*.

⁴ HKA 10:115.

clarify grounds previously adduced and to present new propositions in the light of the *evidence* of those previously established. The procedure is Cartesian, not strictly Euclidean, and depends on theorems attaining plausibility as the upshot of an extensive meditation on fundamental principles. Early on Schelling asserts that the proposition 'Outside reason is nothing and inside it is everything' would require no proof or even explanation, but would stand as a transparent axiom if humans were not accustomed to view things from the standpoint of appearances rather than reason, and were habitually incapable of making the *abstraction* that philosophy requires, i.e., surrender of the personal or subjective point of view.⁵ So Schelling's task is not to provide a Euclidean deduction from obvious definitions and transparent axioms, but to tear the reader away from subjective *reflection* and invite her toward the *salto mortale* of intellectual intuition⁶ through a combination of argument, exposition, and a circle of logical evidence that the reader must in fact generate in herself. Though *reductio* and destructive dilemma are the devices that move the march of theorems, at crucial points self-evidence is evoked,⁷ or a leap is made in Leibnizian fashion between the possibility of a situation in one theorem and its assertion as a truth in the next – a move comprehensible only if the reader has taken the trouble to discover the *Evidenz* – or beam of clarity – that illuminates the move to the latter.

This is as much as matters of method get formally discussed *inside* the *Presentation*, but after he broke off the elaboration of its philosophy of nature, Schelling penned several essays for his new *Journal for Speculative Philosophy*, which discussed topics such as intellectual intuition and construction. It is obvious that Spinoza's third kind of knowledge (intuition) and the 'intellectual love of God and the universe' that follows from it form the background for the idea of intellectual intuition, not only for Schelling, but for Fichte and Kant before him.⁸ In the second essay, published in 1802 and later collected into the *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy*, Schelling offers three overlapping definitions of intellectual intuition, as: (1) a generalized or God's-eye-point-of-view version of what we call, from the outside, the ontological proof for divine existence;⁹ (2) a double-coincidence of thought and being, so that intuitive thinking comprehends absolute reality and, conversely, reality expresses itself as intuition ('formally absolute cognition') of the absolute; and (3) immediate insight into the uniqueness of this point where cognition wholly

⁵ *Ibid.* 10:117–118.

⁶ *Ibid.* 10:116.

⁷ Most strikingly at §21, 124.

⁸ See E2p44s2; E4p24f.

⁹ SW 4:367–368.

comprehends its object.¹⁰ Just as the geometer constructs a quasi-sensible intellectual intuition in space, the philosopher deploys his constructions in a rational intuition that is the presupposition of all non-temporal and non-spatial thinking.¹¹ On this view, philosophy is not at all an account of the finite, so something like Plato's conundrum on the origin of virtue applies to it: can this essential tool of philosophy be learned, obtained by practice, acquired by instruction, or it is perhaps a divine gift? The answers are all negative.¹² These remarks hardly amount to a satisfactory exposition.

It is somewhat clearer what the philosopher does *with* intellectual intuition – to engage in *construction*, the production of a world-picture where every individual finds his place in the totality and the totality determines the place of every individual. Intellectual intuition's product is a taxonomy that integrates universality and particularity, just as the intuition that motivates it unites knowing and being. The 'universality' and 'particularity' under discussion, however, are not just logical abstractions: 'universality' comprehends being and knowing, since it is the universal or ideal aspect of the absolute, and 'particularity' is not the bare finite of sensible experience, but the finite that is organic or identical to the infinite. They are to one another as *original* and *copy*, with a vanishing difference between them, such that the particular displays the whole absolute as much as the universal does.¹³ Philosophical construction locates archetypical individuals in an eidetic taxonomy. In imitation of the 'divine imagination' (*Einbildung*), the philosopher maps distinct orders upon one another, and in this intellectual in-forming (*Ineinsbildung*) brings the twofold striving of the absolute, for totality and for individuality, into equilibrium.¹⁴ I cannot pretend this Platonic taxonomy is clear. As in the essay on intellectual intuition, Schelling is clearer on what construction is not (namely, deduction of the real world) than what it is.

THE METAPHYSICS OF IDENTITY
IN THE 1801 PRESENTATION

Before we can assess Schelling's reception of Spinoza, we must review the overall structure of the metaphysics of identity in §§1–50. The densest section of the text contains the initial nine theorems where the themes of reason's peculiarly non-personal way of thinking, of the idea that its

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 4:369. ¹¹ *Ibid.* 4:361, 369n. ¹² *Ibid.* 4:361.

¹³ *Ibid.* 4:393–394. ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 4:395–396.

sole logic is the law of identity, of the doubling that is nonetheless hidden in the law of identity, and of the reinterpretation of identity as the non-difference of all finite predicates are introduced.

Reason and identity

No preliminary definitions or axioms are offered. Schelling begins with a verbal definition of reason as the complete indifference of the subjective and the objective. In a first explanatory paragraph, he acknowledges that the reader will have to struggle with terminology and usual ways of reflective thinking to attain the logical ether in which this thinking moves: "Reason's thinking is foreign to everyone; to conceive it as absolute, hence to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking."¹⁵ The only path offered to this stance is negative; one must reflect on what philosophy presents as standing midway between the subjective and objective, and which behaves indifferently against both extremes.¹⁶ The only gloss Schelling ever offers on this reflective ascent to the starting point comes in a footnote that connects the two sections of methodological essays written after the *Presentation* was published in the spring of 1801. Schelling there explains the logic of indifference and the intellectual intuition that it deploys as an activity of determining

the absolute as that which is in itself neither thought nor being, but which, for that very reason, is absolute. Since reason is challenged to think the absolute neither as thought nor as being, but to think it nonetheless, a contradiction arises for reflection, since it conceives the absolute either as a case of being or a case of thinking. But intellectual intuition enters even into this contradiction and produces the absolute. In this breakthrough lies the luminous point where the absolute is positively intuited.¹⁷

This text was written when Hegel was working at Schelling's side in Jena,¹⁸ and betrays the former's dialectic conception of 'reflection,' which plays such a large part in the 'Schelling' section of his *Differenzschrift*.¹⁹ It is not obvious from Schelling's footnote exactly how philosophy can locate something midway between two ultimate opposites, or can demand of

¹⁵ HKA 10:116. ¹⁶ *Ibid.* ¹⁷ SW 4:391–392n.

¹⁸ See Schelling in Jena to Fichte in Berlin, October 3, 1801, in Schelling and Fichte, *Briefwechsel*, p. 220. Schelling there announces Hegel's publication of the *Differenzschrift*.

¹⁹ In Hegel's view, reflection gets stuck in abstract opposites and so can assert only half-truths like "no transition from the infinite to the finite." Reason's work, reflection-potentiated, as Schelling would say, is to connect the opposites into antinomy: "Only in real opposition can the Absolute posit itself in the form of the subject or of the object, and only then can there be a transition of subject into object or of object into subject ..."; Hegel, *Difference*, p. 159.

reflection that it surrender its binary logic and move on to one of identity as non-difference.

A second paragraph of comment to §1 notes that it is the nature of reason to consider things as they are in themselves, apart from all succession, temporality, and spatial externality, which are frameworks imported by imagination – a direct echo of Spinoza’s E2p44c2d: “It is the nature of reason to perceive things truly ... to wit ... as they are in themselves, that is ... not as contingent but as necessary.”

The second theorem, “Outside reason is nothing, and in it is everything,” echoes Spinoza’s “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (E1p5). Associated remarks maintain, without explicitly invoking ‘intellectual intuition,’ that reason is coextensive with reality; that it is a unitary, self-same domain; and that the whole business of philosophy is to consider things as they are in and for reason. That everything *is* within reason and nothing has reality outside it should be a transparent axiom, says Schelling, except for our habit of taking appearances as things or failing to realize that things *are* outside reason only insofar as they are posited outside it through a false use of reason, unable to abstract from the subjective point of view.²⁰ But what does this do for us, who both live in a world of appearances and think – particularly if there is no exiting the absolute, no transition between reason-reality and existence in time and succession, the frameworks that imagination imports into reason?²¹ We seem lost in the “night absolute” of *Fernere Darstellungen*, where Schelling says: “The *essence* of the absolute in and for itself says nothing to us, it fills us with images of an infinite enclosure, of an impenetrable stillness and concealment ...,” until the absolute’s form asserts itself in its own shape, “the day in which we comprehend that [essential] night and the wonders hidden in it, the light in which we clearly discern the absolute.”²² How are we to get from the essential self-enclosure of reason to form’s articulation of its contents? How are we to get on with philosophy’s obvious business of explaining the world?

Section 4 and the definition in §5 move us toward a non-temporal, non-discursive duality within absolute identity – the seed of difference that will manifest itself in appearances with its apparent individuals and its actual universal expression of identity as totality. For now, Schelling notes that reason operates in the domain of the eternal with its sole rule, the law of identity ($A = A$) – perhaps echoing Spinoza’s contention that reason’s nature is to consider things “under a certain form of eternity” (E2p44c2).

²⁰ HKA 10:117–118. ²¹ *Ibid.* 10:117. ²² SW 4:404–405.

Within this sole law of reason, however, there is a doubling of content therein, since A is named once as subject and again as predicate.²³ Despite this doubling of reason-identity, neither subject nor object is posited as real or in its own right, but only identity itself, which subsists independently of subject and predicate.²⁴ In a remark, Schelling in effect conceals this conceptual move from monolithic identity to articulated two-place identification by noting that the law of identity requires no demonstration, but is instead the ground of all demonstration.²⁵ Demonstration was not in play in previous theorems, however; they were dependent on reflection or so-called intellectual intuition. With the two-place unpacking of absolute- or reason-identity as the incontrovertible discursive 'law of identity,' difference has been smuggled into the absolute. Succeeding theorems cash this out rather dramatically as unconditioned cognition of absolute identity, or the coincidence of the *being* of absolute identity and unconditioned truth, again anchored by appeal to the law of identity.²⁶ The corollary to §8 shows that comprehension of these theorems moves in the ether of intellectual intuition, or involves something like an ontological proof: "Absolute identity cannot be thought except through the proposition $A = A$, yet it is posited through this proposition as *standing in being*. Therefore it *is* by virtue of being thought, and *it belongs to the essence of absolute identity to be*."²⁷ Section 9 and its corollary complete the terminological equation of reason, absolute identity, and unconditional being or reality. I suggest that if these propositions establish their content, it is by way of a meditative approach to ontological proof, whereby Cartesian criteria of clarity, distinctness of idea, and hence conceptual evidence might eventually be attained; it is certainly not Spinoza's demonstrative or axiomatic process. Apart from the initial decree that philosophy's standpoint is that of reason, not imagination, Spinoza has been absent from the exposition except by way of verbal echoes. Perhaps we might view these initial pages as a somewhat labored attempt to convey what Spinoza simply does by his definition of substance: that which is in itself and is conceived through itself.²⁸ Schelling might have recalled Spinoza's wonderful image from E5p23s: "Logical proofs are the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things."

Spinoza plainly enters the discussion in the next eleven theorems and associated comments. Sections 10–11 conclude from previous theorems

²³ HKA 10:118–119. ²⁴ *Ibid.* 10:119. ²⁵ *Ibid.* ²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* The last phrase echoes Spinoza's assertion in E1p7. ²⁸ E1d3.

that absolute identity is simply infinite,²⁹ capable neither of limitation from within or from without, and incapable of essentially being abolished as identity, since suspension of identity would entail that being ceased to pertain to its essence.³⁰ If everything is essentially infinite, everything is one, hence nothing *has come to be*, since everything is in its being absolutely eternal³¹ – that is, as Spinoza defined eternity, its being cannot be comprehended except as following from the essence of absolute identity, which is without reference to time or duration.³² Section 12 and its corollaries clarify that everything that is *subsists* within absolute identity, whose singular identity and intrinsic reality can never be canceled.³³ From the unqualified infinity of absolute identity, §14 directly follows: “*Nothing considered in itself is finite*,” which may indirectly echo Spinoza’s assertion that all things which follow from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes are eternal and infinite (E1p21). Schelling adds the following clarification:

The fundamental mistake in all philosophy is the supposition that the absolute has actually stepped beyond itself and the [ensuing] struggle somehow to make this emergence from itself, however it happens, intelligible. Absolute identity has never ceased to be identity, and everything that *is*, intrinsically considered – is also not the appearance of absolute identity, but absolute identity itself. Further, since it is the nature of philosophy to investigate things as they are in themselves, that is, insofar as they are infinite and themselves absolute identity, so true philosophy consists in demonstrating that absolute identity (the infinite) does not step forth from itself, and that everything that is, insofar as it *is*, is itself infinitude, a proposition known only by Spinoza among all previous philosophers, even if he did not completely pursue its demonstration, nor express it clearly enough to avoid being misunderstood ever after.³⁴

This passage recalls Jacobi’s epitome of Spinozism, “there can be no transition from the infinite to the finite.” If Schelling can show that, despite the web of appearances that arise in what we take to be the independent

²⁹ Paragraph 10, “*Absolute identity is absolutely infinite*,” echoes Spinoza’s definition of God as an absolutely infinite being (E1d8).

³⁰ HKA 10:120. The constructive dilemma that is the proof of §10 depends on E1ax1; that of §11 on E1ax7.

³¹ HKA 10:120–121.

³² E1d8expl Cf. Letter 12 to Ludwig Meyer, where Spinoza argues that since we can abstract *quantity from substance and conceive duration apart from eternity, the imagination can form the thoughts of number, time, and measure which have no foundation in re* (Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 233–234).

³³ Schelling utilizes E1p4c1 and 2, and E1p15 to expound these points.

³⁴ HKA 10:121. It is difficult to see the justice of Schelling’s charge that Spinoza did not demonstrate this adequately; see E1p21–23 and associated proofs.

orders of finite being (nature and consciousness), identity remains the essence of all 'things' and that all 'things' have their being not in themselves but in the absolute, he will have succeeded in importing Spinoza's metaphysics into the post-Kantian world. But if he thinks himself excused from the labor of explaining a real derivation of the finite from the infinite, he faces the equally formidable task of explaining how appearances arise in seeming independence of absolute identity, and seem to have a temporal sort of being incommensurable with simple being or 'eternity.'

Indifference in the totality, difference in the individual

Schelling employs three conceptual maneuvers to explain the being of appearances.

(1) He employs Spinoza's distinction between *substance* and *attribute* – in his language, *essence* (*Wesen*) and *form* or 'form of being' – to argue that if absolute identity is to *exist* or appear in the framework of conditioned being, identity must carry with it an original cognition of being, so that whenever identity is posited in a conditioned aspect it is posited as cognition-and-object – or 'idea' and 'body' in Spinoza's terminology. This view is argued in §§15–17 and associated comments.³⁵ Crucial to Schelling's argument is the move, introduced in §§4–8, that identity is conceived by reason as synonymous with the law of identity, and his apparently empty two-place interpretation of substantial identity as the identity of subject and predicate. Identity may be monolithic in essence, but in form it is the identity of cognition and being, so when §15 advances the idea that "*absolute identity IS or SUBSISTS only under the form of the law $A = A$,*" a coeternal infinite cognition of identity is introduced alongside identity, at once coextensive with it and replicating it so that "*absolute identity IS only under the form of an identity of identity*" (§16, supplementary note 2). It is this *identity of identity* that makes *essential* identity and its form of being (*cognition* of identity) inseparable. In this section we see a clear use of Spinoza's concepts of substance and attribute: absolute identity is self-existent substance or the 'absolute in essence'; cognition of identity, with the implicit division into the conceptual orders of knowing and being, is the absolute's 'form.'

(2) In succeeding theorems, the assertion of §17 – "*there is a primordial cognition of absolute identity and this is directly established with the proposition $A = A$* " – receives a distinctly Fichtean interpretation. Section 18

³⁵ HKA 10:121–123.

asserts that everything that *is* is essentially identity, but that in its form or mode of appearance it is a cognition of absolute identity. The infinite self-cognition that is identity's form or mode of being, however, cannot exist or appear as such, and though its identity with substantial identity is asserted, its realization evidently entails that an *endless* positing of *finite* instances of cognition-and-being or subject-objectivity is necessary. Says Schelling in §21: "*Absolute identity cannot infinitely cognize itself without infinitely positing itself as subject and object.* –This proposition is self-evident." Perhaps brevity and directness are salutary here. If there is no transition from the infinite to the finite, then perhaps a Jacobean *salto mortale* is in order, an abrupt caesura indicating an argumentatively indefensible jump from the order of reason to that of imagination.

In the last twelve theorems, Schelling utilized first Spinoza's doctrine of substance and attributes, then his less articulated view of philosophy's inability to account for modal limitation or finite entities as such.

(3) The following ten theorems, which clinch Schelling's argument, substitute a logic of primordial non-difference (*Indifferenz*) for the logic of identity deployed up to this point. It is a conceptual leap, and perhaps a reflective one, to go from primitive identity, even 'the identity of identity,' to identity as the *neither/nor* of all possible predicates.³⁶ Kant had cashed out the logical freight of the idea of God as the *Inbegriff* of all possible predicates; the only way to conceptualize identity along that path is to view it as simultaneously identity and difference, both containing and suppressing the difference of articulated sets of antithetical predicates.³⁷

Based on the identity of essence and form in the absolute, and the mere 'place-holder' difference between subject and object if they are posited under the law of identity, Schelling first asserts that there is no intrinsic difference between subject and object – that is, no *qualitative* difference between them is possible.

Since ... no difference between the two is possible with respect to being itself (since [identity] *is* equally unconditioned and in essence the same in both s[ubject] and o[bject]), there remains only a quantitative difference possible, that is, the kind of difference that occurs with respect to the *magnitude* of being,

³⁶ In *Bruno*, under the influence of Hegel, Schelling defines the absolute as the identity of identity and non-identity. Hegel had said in the *Differenzschrift*: "... the Absolute itself is the identity of identity and non-identity, being opposed and being one are both together in it" (Hegel, *Difference*, p. 156). In *Bruno*, Schelling says: "To make identity the supreme principle, we must think of it as comprehending even this highest pair of opposites and the identity that is its opposite as well, and we must define this supreme identity as the identity of identity and opposition, or the identity of the self-identical and the non-identical" (SW 4:236).

³⁷ See KrV, A573/B601–A578/B606.

namely that one and the same identity is posited, but with a preponderance of subjectivity or objectivity.³⁸

Quantitative difference (apparent preponderance of subjectivity or objectivity) implies the active positing of 'form' or subject-objective difference; it cannot characterize the absolute in essence, for that is monolithic identity. Quantitative difference is possible, therefore, only *outside* the absolute.³⁹ From the perspective of imagination or reflection, where difference seems to obtain and involves not only quantitative but qualitative distinctions, *individual beings* or finite 'things' seem to be. But these arise and are discriminated only within *totality*, for "absolute identity is absolute totality," at least insofar as it *is* or is expressed under form.⁴⁰ Schelling then aggregates these distinctions to assert:

- (A) Quantitative difference, or apparent predominance of subjectivity or objectivity, is conceivable only with respect to individuals, not the totality of individuals or the universe.
- (B) If we imagine that quantitative difference occurs with respect to individual things, then we must conceive the absolute identity insofar as it *is*, or is expressed in the form of being, to be the quantitative indifference of subjectivity and objectivity.⁴¹

To summarize these most important points of the *Presentation*, the absolute is identity in essence; in form it is both quantitative indifference as *totality* (the universe) and quantitative difference as *individual* or in the perspectives (potencies) where individuals are grouped and discriminated.

Individuation: the infinite nature of the finite

The next ten theorems consolidate the formulae just presented – the absolute *is* as the indifference of the subjective and objective in the universe or totality, but *exists* qua individual as the quantitative difference of the subjective and the objective, as multitudes of subject-objects or items involving cognition – under the Spinozistic formula: "each individual," or the finite item of appearances, "while not absolute, is infinite in its kind" (§40). In a note added to §30 of his copy of the *Presentation*, Schelling writes, "The absolute therefore *is* only under the form of totality, and this expression 'quantitative difference in individuals and indifference in the whole' says exactly what 'the identity of the finite and the infinite' does."⁴²

³⁸ HKA 10:125–126.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 10:126.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 10:127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 10:127–130.

⁴² *Ibid.* 10:128.

Schelling was misunderstood on this crucial point even by Fichte, who accused him of positing difference in the absolute.⁴³ Hence it is important for Schelling to establish the identity of the absolute and the produced universe – as its immanent or indwelling cause, not its extrinsic or transient cause⁴⁴ – and to argue that even though the absolute is expressed as the universe, its essence remains indivisible and eternal.⁴⁵

But these moves seem to make the finite simply infinite, and so finitize the absolute. So Schelling must insist that the finite individual is a modification of the being of absolute identity, not absolute identity itself, that it has its ground of being outside itself; having being not essentially but by deferral or dependence on another, it is determined by another finite being, which in turn is determined by another, and so forth.⁴⁶ Determination, limitation, or conditions upon its being are contributed by other finite beings in succession or contiguity, even though the finite's being is part of the form of the absolute's necessary existence or expresses the being of the absolute. That is to say, the ground of finitude is other finites, or, in Schelling's terms, the '*quantitative difference* of the subjective and objective,' while the reality of the finite is infinitude, or the '*quantitative indifference* of the subjective and objective.'⁴⁷ Schelling has not succeeded in simplifying Spinoza's thorny doctrine of vanishing finitude by translating it into an alternate language. He is nonetheless prepared to advance the claim that since the finite exists with the indivisible and indestructible being of absolute identity, identity exists under the same form in the individual and in the universe or totality:⁴⁸ it is infinite in its finitude, hence a presentation of the one existent, the universe.

⁴³ Fichte misread Schelling's letter of October 3, 1801, which had carefully stated: "This absolute, I claimed in my *Presentation*, exists under the form of quantitative difference in the individual (this is intuition, which is always a determinate item) and of quantitative indifference in the whole (this is thought)" (Schelling and Fichte, *Briefwechsel*, p. 211). In a letter to Schelling on October 8, 1801, Fichte writes: "You say 'the absolute' (concerning *which* and whose *determination* I completely agree with you, and whose intuition I have also possessed for a long time) 'as I claimed in my *Presentation*, exists under the form of quantitative difference.' This is clearly what you assert; and it is *precisely because of this* that I found your system to be in error and rejected the *Presentation* of your system" (p. 233).

⁴⁴ HKA 10:131. Cf. E1p18. ⁴⁵ HKA 10:131. Cf. E1p13.

⁴⁶ HKA 10:132 – an obvious use of Spinoza's formula for linear causality, E1p28.

⁴⁷ HKA 10:132–133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 10:134. Compare §51, supplementary note, pp. 144–145, where Schelling discusses the three ways of viewing matter – as 'real,' as infinite, and as not existent since there is only absolute identity – in terms of Spinoza's three grades of cognition (E2p4os2).

Potency, conatus, and the constructed line

In his writings on the philosophy of nature in 1799–1800, Schelling abandoned the static categories of Kant's construction of matter and Fichte's alternation between productivity and product, and put in their place the idea that nature expresses itself in a series of nested levels that replicate and resume one identical structure or dynamic process.⁴⁹ These levels are called *Potenzen* – potencies, or powers – and bumping up a level, or expressing the same structure in a more dynamic or organic form, is called *Potenzierung*. The terms express the ideas of possibility, power, force, and exponential increase (as in squaring or cubing a root in mathematics). Though Schelling does not explicitly refer to Spinoza's *conatus* or the finite being's endeavor to preserve itself in being, perhaps there is some resonance with the latter's psychology of striving and transcending limits in the discussion of potentiation in §§ 41–50. It is clear in the ensuing philosophy of nature that Schelling recognizes the homeostatic quality of natural systems and the involvement of subordinate levels of natural processes in higher ones, so that, for example, the duality of attractive and repulsive forces found in gravity is manifested again as polarity in magnetism, positive and negative charges in electricity, etc.

As he develops this final, most schematic section of the *Presentation's* metaphysics of identity, Schelling relies on the idea already proved that “every individual is, with respect to itself, a totality” (§41), or, otherwise expressed, every expression of quantitative difference (every $A = B$) is in itself quantitative indifference ($A = A$) or a clear expression of the absolute, hence a totality – but a *relative* totality.⁵⁰ This idea of relative totality captures the expressive power of potentiation: whatever appears as subject or object is in itself only a subject-object or an indifference of knowing and being. Only in comparison to other finite subject-objects will one item be relatively subjective and another objective, and so able to be grouped with other subjective phenomena (for example, humans as moral

⁴⁹ In the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling still speaks Fichte's language of “epochs in the history of consciousness” that correlate to various stages in Kant's construction of matter. Not until the *Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses* of 1800–1801 can one see a shift from talk of a “construction of matter” through “the basic categories of physics: magnetism, electricity, and chemical process” (§§1, 4) to talk of letting the various moments in this construction “go free and develop themselves” in order to display genetically moments that exist all at once in nature and show the philosopher, already the highest “*potentiation*” of the process, the truth about himself by following the path that nature herself has taken (§§30, 63). See Translator's Introduction, in F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. K. Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), p. xxviii.

⁵⁰ HKA 10:135.

agents) in one order of appearances that seems to be opposed to another that is more objective (for example, humans as actors in national or world history). Since what exists is always only the indifference of subjectivity and objectivity or knowing and being, whatever the sorts of phenomena that appear in the finite order (nature) or in the infinite order (embodied consciousness), each in relation to itself is simply an instance of indifference.⁵¹ Comparisons among phenomena are not extrinsically generated and imposed as a foreign taxonomy; amenability to taxonomy is ontologically grounded in the sameness of phenomena as indifference-in-the-guise-of-difference. I cannot pretend that Schelling's exposition of what 'potency' means is clear at this point. Not until 1802 or 1803 will he be able to convey the ideas of potency and potentiation in plainer language, as the reflection of the infinite into the finite and the resumption of the latter into the former.⁵²

Two further ideas complete the metaphysics of identity and facilitate the transition to a unified philosophy of nature. The first is that "*all potencies are absolutely contemporaneous*" (§44),⁵³ which implies there is no intrinsic order in natural or social wholes, and no definite process that is fundamental. For the purpose of explanation, philosophy distinguishes various levels that in truth exist all at once; though nature is one and wholly consistent in its behavior, we view phenomena successively and first have to learn mechanics, then the physics of electrical and magnetic phenomena, then chemistry and biology to begin to understand its ways. Nature does not evolve in time, as far as Schelling can imagine the possibility, but understanding must undertake a developmental process in order to approximate to a robust naturalism. The contemporaneity of all potencies also seems to imply a more subtle version of the *hen kai pan* that so frightened Jacobi.⁵⁴ The universe is the absolute *without remainder*, but only the totality adequately expresses the absolute; this is rather like Spinoza's idea that the "face of the whole universe" or the composite ratio of motion to rest in the whole is a steady-state or invariant upshot of local variations in velocity and interaction among so-called individual entities.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 10:135–136.

⁵² See Supplement to the Introduction (1803) in F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature (1797/1803)*, trans. P. Heath and E. Harris (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 49–51.

⁵³ HKA 10:136.

⁵⁴ Jacobi, *Doctrine of Spinoza*, p. 187.

⁵⁵ See Letter 64, Baruch Spinoza to G. H. Schuller (Spinoza, *Ethics and Selected Letters*, pp. 253–254); and E2lem7s.

The second move that completes the metaphysics of identity is the construction of a schematic line that represents the complicated idea of 'indifference in the whole, difference in the parts' in simple directional terms. The finite, whether viewed as totality or as individual items, is expressed as $A = B$, where B represents what is, and A that which is not, but which cognizes B .⁵⁶ These real and ideal factors of finite difference, which represent Spinoza's two orders of attributes known to us, extension and thought ($E_2\pi_1$ and 2), can be represented as different tendencies or directions (*Richtungen*)⁵⁷ – though this seems a rather arbitrary presupposition unless one assumes something like Fichte's primordial category of activity as that which can unify both being and knowing. If they are opposed tendencies or directions, they can be represented on a continuous geometrical line, with one terminus representing subjectivity or cognition, the other objectivity or being, and the midpoint representing the indifferent reality expressed in every point of the line.⁵⁸ What the constructed line adds to the explanation of potentiation is the ability visually to portray apparent difference nested within real indifference, for the line, while endlessly divisible, is never divided, and any arbitrarily selected point chosen to represent an individual (or any segment chosen to represent a potency or taxonomic collection) is fundamentally three points: $*A = B$, signifying the subjective pole or predominate subjectivity; the midpoint, $A = A$, signifying the ontological basis of indifference; and $A = B^*$, predominant objectivity. With this schema in place, the stage is set for a depiction of nature that owes as much to Plato's *Timaeus* as to the physical speculation of Spinoza, Newton, Leibniz, and Kant. For nature is not so much a series of nested domains, each operating with its own specific laws, as an interconnected whole whose domains are functionally demarcated but operate in concert, as do the organs and supporting biochemical mechanisms in the animal.

Matter and the philosophy of nature

Space will not permit an extensive look at the *Naturphilosophie* of the *Presentation*, but perhaps an overview will be informative. For the

⁵⁶ HKA 10:137–138. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 10:138,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 10:139–140. In the Preface, Schelling credited his collaborator in *Naturphilosophie*, Carl Eschenmayer, with the idea of representing the nested orders of nature as a divisible but undivided line, extending from its point of origin to negative infinity on one side and to positive infinity on the other. See C. Eschenmayer, "Deduktion des lebenden Organismus," in A. Röschlaub (ed.), *Magazin zur Vervollkommnung der theoretischen und praktischen Heilkunde*, Vol. 11.3 (Frankfurt am Main, 1799), pp. 329–390.

replicative, nested ladder of potencies shows that one structure prevails throughout the levels of nature that the sciences discriminate, and that this structure is emergent from one fundamental activity – a twofold endeavor to abolish difference and return quantitative difference (whether that involves predominant ‘objectivity’ or ‘subjectivity’) to quantitative indifference. Just as singular entities are ‘imaginative’ or merely conceptual products of dividing the field of interaction into multiple but transient centers of power, so all ‘qualities’ or ‘activities’ that can be discriminated are only functional, relative to others, and emergent from processes rather than fundamental properties of things. This is a highly social or interactive view of nature – such as would have displeased Newton, Clark, and Kant, and pleased Leibniz, Goethe, and Whitehead. It is consonant with Spinoza’s physics insofar as in it entities are discriminated on the basis of temporary shifts in the ratio of motion and rest, and insofar as ‘motion and rest,’ while they are concepts basic to a mechanistic worldview, are conceived as relative, not absolute, qualities, measurable for science not by some absolute standard but by conventional agreement based on human physiology and perceptual capacities.⁵⁹

The transition from metaphysics to speculative physics or *Naturphilosophie* involves a bit of conceptual fudging. Schelling reaches back to his Fichtean roots to import an egological interpretation of the opposed directions of quantitative difference: B, or indefinite extension, limited by the cognitive *principle* that in a sense constitutes it, is denominated the *outward* direction; and A, the cognitive principle or Spinoza’s infinite attribute of thought, is called the *inward* direction.⁶⁰ From the elements of the constructed line of potentiation, parsed as an overlay of relative totality on the vanishing distinction between relative identity and relative duplicity, space is constructed as the potentiation of relative identity (length), relative duplicity (breadth), and relative totality (depth) in light of the ‘first presupposed item’ – the purely directional line expressing difference vis-à-vis indifference.⁶¹ There is some deductive hocus-pocus here: nature must begin, as Kant appreciated, with impenetrable *filled* space, and there seems to be an element of ‘there’ even in empty space that thinking cannot pull out of its ethereal hat.

With space established and a twofold directional striving of the relatively differentiated item, Schelling concludes that matter is present. It is called the ‘first existent,’ though it might well have been called the

⁵⁹ See the axioms and lemmata, as well as the associated corollaries and proofs, of E2p13.

⁶⁰ HKA 10:141–142. ⁶¹ *Ibid.* 10:143–144.

sole existent, since matter is coextensive with nature. Matter occupies or 'fills' space as the mutual check of outward- and inward-working tendencies. The expansive or subjective pole is an outward that never gets outside, so a mere outer that is no outer, and the objective or limiting tendency is likewise an inner that never gets inside, so a mere inner, or one that is no inner. A mere outer checked by a mere inner is no motion: a pure 'there,' so in its most basic manifestation matter just occupies space. Schelling adds that if we view matter through the trifocals of Spinoza's three modes of cognition, viewed in sensible terms, matter is just dead stuff from the standpoint of the infinite or cognition; it is totality and a field of infinite activity, and one can "finally recognize that matter, absolutely considered, simply is not and only absolute identity is."⁶² The metaphysics of identity had viewed what is through the lens of exact or speculative cognition and found nothing but absolute identity; the philosophy of nature will view it as a field of infinite and self-potentiating activity.

SCHELLING'S APPROPRIATION OF SPINOZA

We have argued that Schelling took over Spinoza's Cartesian definitions of *substance* and *attribute*, that which exists in itself and that which is conceived through itself; that he adapted Spinoza's vanishing concept of the being of modes, which maintained that no entity is intrinsically finite; and finally that he elaborated his own concepts of 'potencies' or orders of phenomenal being and natural force, by looking to Spinoza's 'endeavor' or *conatus*. To assess his success in this takeover of a historical text, we can look back at his intent. At the beginning of the Preface, Schelling announces that though he had previously expounded two philosophies, one from the side of nature and one from the side of consciousness, he had always figured the two as rooted in a common ground, a philosophy of identity that he now somewhat prematurely presents, owing to pressures from critics on both sides: the forces of realism and those of idealism.⁶³ Despite Schelling's claim, it is clear that the metaphysics of identity is newly minted in 1801, and that both in its content and its method it is radically different from the genetic style of earlier deductions Schelling crafted for both nature and consciousness, modeled on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.

⁶² *Ibid.* 10:144–145. Cf. E2p40s2, ⁶³ HKA 10:109ff.

Schelling's Spinozistic *Presentation* of 1801 was not his only attempt to appropriate a historical philosophy and refashion it within the transcendental movement. He did not try again to think and speak in the terminological guise of Spinoza, but in ensuing essays decked out his *essential* Spinozism – the *eternal's embrace of both the finite and the infinite orders* – in Neoplatonic garb. I think Schelling was successful in identifying Spinoza's key doctrines, in adapting his style of presentation, but the first text of the philosophy of identity is more abstract, metaphysical, and self-concealing than its model, and it lacks the warmth and humanity of Spinoza's ultimate soteriological intent.⁶⁴ The acute reader can, as Schelling says, anticipate the author, and in main outlines at least see the glimmers of a psychology, social philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of history that will return her to herself. But if even Fichte failed to appreciate the pivotal conceptual formula: *the absolute is qualitative indifference, the totality quantitative indifference, and the individual quantitative difference*, what hope is there for the non-professional reader? The mature Hegel rightly assesses Schelling's chief conceptual failing – overdependence on categories of quantity. Or perhaps that is symptomatic of a deeper failing: trying to overcome a binary logic with more binary logic.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 10:211n.

⁶⁵ See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 375–408, 444–478.