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# Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling

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# Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Von

(1775–1854), German idealist philosopher.

Schelling contributed to aesthetics early in his career, especially in 1798–1803, years spent in Jena with the Romantic critics Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel, and August Wilhelm von Schlegel, but close to the classicist Weimar of Friedrich von Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. His work in aesthetics was theoretical rather than critical, exploring the interfaces between epistemology, psychology, and hermeneutics or philosophy of language. On the formal side, he followed Immanuel Kant in treating aesthetics as a quasi-cognitive domain, but deepened the theory of “aesthetic genius” by adding an account, inspired by Baruch Spinoza and Goethe, of unconscious knowing and producing in the artist. By focusing on the dialectic of conscious and unconscious intention in the artist's psyche, Schelling shifted the inquiry from the cognitive processes of the artist to the work of art itself, to its multiply determined (or “symbolic”) meaning inside the public world of cultural objects. Implicit in his treatment of aesthetic production as the function of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) was a general theory of semiotics (or “schematism”). Schelling found symbolism or schematism at work in all artistic domains: formative, plastic, and literary arts; in this he differed from August Schlegel, who thought the medium of language necessary for the highest arts. On the side of content, Schelling's originality lay in his identification of the content of fine art with that of religion, with Greek mythology serving as the world-historical center of gravity for both art and religion. Rather than preferring classical to Romantic art, or the reverse, Schelling argued for a necessary unity of objective and subjective modes of symbolic communication. Modern art—Romantic, Christian, optimistic, embodying the poetics (and politics) of freedom—is meaningful only in contrast to the structured form and necessity embodied in classic art and pre-Christian religions. In his critical remarks on specific works, Schelling generally followed Schiller's in the formative and plastic arts and August Schlegel's in the literary arts, but he defined himself as a systematic philosopher, not a practicing critic. Whatever the thematic thread that shaped his total systematic view—identity philosophy (1800–1806), or philosophy of history (1809–1815), or philosophy of God (1821–1846)—he always viewed philosophy of art as one specialized but culturally accessible form of philosophical metatheory.

In his early years (1794–1800), Schelling worked alongside Johann Gottlieb Fichte to develop a self-standing philosophical system based on Kant's critical writings. Fichte brought Kant's three forms of reason—intellect, will, and judgment—under the umbrella of practical reason. The I is in essence act or self-deed. Affected by a vanishing but irremovable not-I, the I's act is intelligence. Expressed within the natural and social worlds, it becomes the various forms of will: biological drive, emotive striving, arbitrary choice, submission to social and moral laws. The watchword of Fichte's Kantianism was the “primacy of praxis.” It left a deep imprint on Goethe's *Faust*, on Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry, and on the critical theories of the Schlegel brothers.

While Schelling supported the program of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* as the logical ground for any transcendental philosophy, his early essays of 1794–1800 search for an alternate real ground for systematic philosophy. The 1797 *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* supplements Fichte's account of consciousness with a philosophy of nature inspired by Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations for Natural Philosophy*. Schelling argued that the same opposed activities that transcendental philosophy postulates to explain the “I think” of consciousness also explain the ladder of natural phenomena, from matter up to the animated body that is the platform of consciousness. Just as the I is “constructed” (i.e., explained) as

a dynamic interplay of two activities, one unbounded, another limiting, so matter's basic property of filling space is explained as a dynamic balance between expansive and contractive forces.

A second attempt to systematize Kant's philosophy is found in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Following the clue of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity*, Schelling makes aesthetics the region that unites theoretical and practical philosophy, not the passive experience of viewer, auditor, or reader, but the peculiar productive activity of the artist: "aesthetic intuition." In Kant's language, an intuition of  $x$  is both my representation of  $x$  and the production of the  $x$  represented. In producing the work of art, the "intuitive" creator performs a knowing-as-doing that is more fundamental than the nonproductive knowing and the noncognitive production that differentiate "knowing" and "doing" in other phenomenal contexts. Also, conscious and unconscious productivity, the forces constructive of the natural and social worlds, merge here in the artist's psyche as the interplay of conscious and unconscious intention. In the very independence of the finished work of art from the material and psychological sources of its production is proof that the artist produces more than she literally knows.

How can artistic production ground a philosophical system or serve as the capstone for a series of other philosophical inquiries? Schelling argued that because the artist's activity—aesthetic intuition—taps into the primary divided energy that first produces an objective world for the I and then ceaselessly conquers its objectivity by the I's knowledge and action, it is not a case of ordinary activity but a laying bare of foundations. What kinship can there be between the ground of being and the artist's activity?

In the 1800 *System*, Schelling utilized a vocabulary given currency by Kant and Fichte for naming the ultimate active ground of being. Kant had defined sensible intuition in opposition to a hypothetical intellectual intuition where, for example, God knowing  $y$  would also mean God realizes  $y$  or causes it to exist; Kant first noted in 1770 that artists seem to have some faculty analogous to this conceptually defined divine creativity. Fichte had used the term to designate the immediate certainty of agency involved in self-consciousness, the *doing* involved in the thinking of "I think." Schelling now uses *intellectual intuition* to indicate at the start of the system a pure (thus empirically unavailable) act of spontaneity that transcendental philosophy must postulate to explain self-consciousness: the analytical  $I = I$  that mutates into the synthetic  $I = \sim I$ . The philosopher imitates this primal act by a freely undertaken conscious exercise—mediated by language, hence by imagination and by time, the primary schematism. The philosophical narrative that results is a "construction of consciousness"; in it the original synthesis of the I, which would be both conceptually clear and empirically there if the philosopher *had* the (merely) postulated intellectual intuition, is unpacked into epochs of the "history" of understanding and will. Schelling is clear that this "history of consciousness" is just an explanatory device; his work as a philosopher is primarily imaginative in Kant's sense: it translates the all-at-once of the I's self-constituting act (the fundamental synthesis that cannot be understood) into a series of acts that are at once objective and subjective (and that explain each other, at least minimally, in their succession). These acts form a "pragmatic history" of consciousness—not an empirical history, but a heuristic construction that shows how the features of self-consciousness and of objective nature nest inside the original synthetic act like Chinese boxes.

Despite the brilliance of these initial moves, Schelling was unable to close the story of the unfolding consciousness with a return to original identity. The inability rested on a logical prohibition. Because transcendental philosophy aimed at establishing the conditions for the possibility of experience, what

explains and what is to be explained must be of different orders, one hypothetical, the other empirical. If the transcendental philosopher posits spontaneous self-realizing activity as the nonempirical explanatory element, and meanwhile uses analysis of that activity to explain the structure of both natural and social phenomenal worlds, he must in the end bring forward some empirical *explanandum* that is obviously a case of spontaneous self-realizing activity. If the tie-down to experience is lacking, there is no explanation, and a metaphysical fantasy has been perpetrated. Schelling was able to argue to the case of spontaneously self-realizing activity (“aesthetic intuition”) only from the ambiguous status of the work of art once it is detached from the process of its production. Because a work—say, Goethe's *Faust*—has different meanings to various actors, directors, and critics, Schelling maintained that the work carried an unanalyzable multitude of meanings, and that the artist, consciously and unconsciously, endowed the play with all these meanings. He thus thought that the work displayed the existence of the infinite (at least the indefinitely multiple) in the finite and that, therefore, the artist's aesthetic intuition was an empirical case of the postulated intellectual intuition, everywhere informing but factually missing in the philosopher's activity. Schelling thus surmised that aesthetic intuition was the phenomenal analogue of the (empirically absent) intellectual intuition claimed by the philosopher.

Although the transcendental stance of Schelling's early philosophy and the prominence he accorded aesthetic intuition in the 1800 *System* were not permanent features of his philosophy, they captured the political, moral, and religious yearning of the Romantic poets and literary critics who were first Fichte's, then Schelling's, fellows at the University of Jena. These features of Schelling's thought found their way into Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and from there into English Romantic literature and American Transcendental philosophy. That Coleridge assembled its twelfth chapter on productive imagination from various early texts of Schelling occasioned the charges and countercharges about plagiarism that have followed that author and his editors.

Schelling's preference for aesthetic intuition over discursive reasoning as the philosopher's tool in the 1800 *System* threatened to dissolve philosophy itself into literary theory (or *Poesie* as it was then called). In 1801, Schelling pulled back from this radical aestheticism and, in a third phase of philosophical innovation, announced an absolute system, which he casually called “Identity Philosophy.” In *Presentation of My System of Philosophy, (Darstellung meines System der Philosophie, 1927)* Schelling claimed that the philosopher not merely presupposes but possesses intellectual intuition, the synoptic faculty that Kant called “pure reason.” If the philosopher distances himself from what is arbitrary and subjective in his thought the way the artist distances himself from his personality, he can move in and with reason and so with purely logical means construct a theory of the absolute. The philosopher posits a logical domain of pure identity on the basis of concrete identities seen within the items of experience. Because these identities are combinatory, fashioned from differences, their mode of being is identity-indifference; their conceptualization demands not a logic of bare identity but one that integrates universals and particulars, concepts and intuitions. These integrative structures motivate the philosopher's postulation of a ground of explanation whose logic is not that of abstract identity as opposed to difference, but of *indifference* or the identity of opposites. This absolute is a transcendental (or heuristic) posit, a noumenal unity of everything that phenomenally manifests itself as connected by difference.

Because this move is made with the necessity and universality of thought, Schelling felt that philosophy had become methodologically self-sufficient and no longer needed to appeal to the artist's aesthetic intuition as an empirical correlate of intellectual intuition. The 1802 dialogue *Bruno* demoted the artist to an unconscious collaborator of the philosopher. The artist, it is now said, produces an infinite fund of

meaning in the work of art not by conscious agency, but by an unconscious outworking of a reality contained in the absolute as an “idea.” This idea is the “soul” of the artist, but it comes to expression only partially and in distorted form in the artist's psyche and in the bodily movements that produce the separate artifact. This explains why there is so much bad art that is “personal,” and so little grand art that is universal: most artists have small “souls” or limited empirical personalities. *Bruno* thus demoted artistic creativity from a transcendent to a robotic activity. What Schelling viewed as the conscious *and* unconscious character of aesthetic intuition in the 1800 *System* is viewed as merely unconscious production in 1802.

In 1802–1803 and 1804–1805, Schelling lectured on *the philosophy of art*. He did not publish these lectures in his lifetime, perhaps because of his dependence on August Wilhelm von Schlegel's Berlin lectures *On Dramatic Art and Literature* (1801–1803) for critical evaluation of particular literary artists and their achievements, for example, of Dante Alighieri's poetry and the plays of Pedro Calderón de la Barca and William Shakespeare. The lectures stand, nonetheless, as Schelling's most important contribution to aesthetic theory. In the general parts of the lectures, the topics of imagination, language, and symbolism are used to present the metaphysics of identity. The treatment of symbolism as a general function of expression stands on its own outside the metaphysical theory and is of interest to contemporary readers because Schelling used language itself as his primary example of a “symbol” or materially expressed meaning.

Once he had subjugated the arts to philosophy as inferior domains of cognition, as he had in 1802, Schelling could approach *philosophy* of art as a suitable vehicle for presenting metaphysics. If one can mix—as the later Schelling frequently did—abstract talk of “the absolute” with talk of the object of religion, the fine arts are the place where “God-talk” and metaphysics overlap. Not only are the contents of the highest visual and literary forms of fine art religious, but all the arts come to be in activities of expression or *informing*—*Einbildung*, as in *Einbildungskraft*, imagination. The absolute, or “God” in the language of these lectures, has an autopoetic or imaginative form of being; its essence is to express or affirm itself, to translate its reality from unarticulated identity into a differentiated world of form. As the essential identity of universality and particularity, or ideality and reality, God is the source of the various projections of one factor upon the other that make the phenomenal world a series of images (*Einbildungen*) of the absolute. God's perfect self-affirmation is the identification (*Ineinsbildung*) or equal informing of universality and particularity into perfect particulars or “ideas.”

With these general metaphysical structures in place—God as expressive, informing universality and particularity into ideas in the absolute, and occasioning “reflected” imagings of ideas in the two phenomenal domains of nature and human culture—Schelling is able to generate a philosophical model of the cultural world as detailed and compelling as the model of nature he constructed in the two editions of *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*. The ideal phenomenal universe—which Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel calls “spirit”—is structurally the reflection of reality (or particularity) into ideality (or universality). The root identity (of real and ideal) is expressed in three stages or under three *powers*: on the objective level as knowledge, on the subjective as action, and on the highest level as art, where the two factors are posited as equal. The realm of art is thus the place where ideality is realized in perfect, crystalline form as ideas or perfect particulars and where subjectivity is perfectly manifested in objective shape, as in the bodies the Greeks gave to their gods and goddesses in ancient sculpture. Schelling did not think it was accidental that the most penetrating naive art portrayed ideas as individual gods. Although he was aware of the mythologies of other cultures and keenly interested in the phenomena of

comparative religion, Schelling asserted that the world of the Greek Olympians was the paradigmatic content of all art. The love of all things Greek fostered by German classicism and the unconscious Eurocentrism fostered by Christianity conspired in Schelling to shape the narrow view that art can have only two sorts of contents: the realistic mythology of Greece with its poetics of eternity and the idealistic mythology of Christianity's attempts to display the workings of providence in history.

Schelling's remarks on the formal side of art expanded on the idea of "expression" that ties God to the universe or phenomenal worlds; they also build on August Schlegel's discussions of original language as part of *Naturpoesie*. All art is symbolic in a general sense, because it is at once the purest expression of the absolute's ideality, but in an objectified form, under the guise of pure sensuous objectivity. Language is the basic symbol because it is idea materialized, its first conceptual expression. There are three specialized sorts of symbolism: schematism, where the particular is intended by the universal (as in painting or generally in language); allegory, where the universal is intended by the particular (as in music); and symbolism proper, where universal and particular are one (as in the plastic arts). The subjugation of all fine arts to language and of the metaphysics of art to symbolic expression makes it clear that Schelling assimilated art to cognition, and that his theory could comprehend art only insofar as it served a cognitive or informational function. There is little discussion of the sensuous in his lectures on the *Philosophy of Art* and no hint of the possibilities that later art forms explore of manipulating the sensuous media themselves to produce nonrepresentative content.

Schelling made a final contribution to aesthetic theory in an 1807 essay, "Concerning the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature." This essay repeats themes familiar from the Identity Philosophy, for example, the way good art strikes a balance between naturalism and formalism, exhibited perfectly in the concreteness whereby the "ideas" of mythology and religion are shown in painting and sculpture. New to Schelling's theory as he advanced toward the Philosophy of Freedom of 1809 and thereafter are the ideas that art redeems a nature intrinsically frustrated and sorrowful and that, in artistic creator and spectator alike, the agent that unifies form and matter and that perceives their essence is "spirit" (*Geist*). After 1807, Schelling's interests in the arts and in philosophy of language fade as he gravitates toward philosophy of history and philosophy of religion. The aesthetic vehicle is discarded as the philosopher becomes confident of a historical-anthropological access to God.

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