Reconfiguring Identity in Schelling’s Würzburg System

Michael Vater
Marquette University, michael.vater@marquette.edu

Reconfiguring Identity in Schelling’s Würzburg System

Michael Vater (Marquette)

Abstract

I consider the identity-theory of the Würzburg System as part of Schelling’s five-year project to provide a metaphysical foundation for Naturphilosophie that is free of Kantian/Fichtean subjectivism and obeys the key constraint formulated by the German appropriation of Spinoza’s: there can be no "egress from the absolute," i.e., no deduction of the limitations of finitude such as the Wissenschaftslehre provided. The demands of epistemic security (the identity of that which knows and what is known) and ontological simplicity (the impossibility of ontological commitment both to an absolute and to individuals) are met by reworking the theory of the absolute’s ‘cognition’ so that God’s self-affirmation and self-contemplation are identified with the philosopher’s intellectual intuition. In this way, Schelling integrates contents that Spinoza left separate in the first three books of the Ethics and establishes an ontology of power; this grounds a more dynamic version of Naturphilosophie, where Potenzen themselves become ontological actors.

In the first canonical text of the so-called Identity Philosophy, Schelling interrupted his private disputes with Fichte about the extent and direction of transcendental philosophy to reply to a criticism that Eschenmayer had lodged against his Naturphilosophie — that Schelling had been premature in advancing his theory of nature as an independent philosophical science, that it needed to be grounded in a prior and more comprehensive discipline, perhaps something like Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre. From a starting-point that stipulated that reason was toto caelo different than the subject’s limited ratiocinative process (termed, in agreement with Hegel’s vocabulary, reflection) Schelling hastily assembled a logical-mathematical construct based on Spinoza’s metaphy-
sics and used it to preface an elaborate presentation of philosophy of nature; it appeared in the second issue of the second volume of his *Zeitschrift für spekulative Physik*, answering Eschenmayer’s charge in its first issue (cf. AA I,10, 116 f.).

Schelling’s *Darstellung meines Systems* profited from Eschenmayer’s critique in at least two ways: it incorporated the latter’s suggestion that nature and spirit can be viewed as negative and positive quanta of activity and placed on a single mathematical scale, thus facilitating a uniform treatment of inorganic and organic nature, and it made somewhat ambiguous moves towards adopting Baader’s reconstruction of the Kantian theory of matter, with gravity as an independent factor that embraces and unifies repulsive and attractive forces.

What is crucial is that Schelling’s response to Eschenmayer brings the concept of *Indifferenz* to the fore and opens the way to appropriate Spinoza’s two-level ontology, with an ultimate but discursively inac-

---

1 In *Spontaneität = Weltseele oder das höchste Prinzip der Naturphilosophie*, Eschenmayer had opposed the ‘pure empiricism’ of Schelling’s *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* to the purified rationalism of transcendental idealism and had suggested that a natural philosophy, by itself, was incapable of embracing both the inorganic and organic in one theory without making spirit and nature different kinds of activity (cf. Eschenmayer 1801, 244 f.). He suggests that only transcendental philosophy is capable of uniting the lived freedom of spirit and the encoded version of the same (passive lawfulness, as seen in the frameworks both of sensible experience and scientific explications of nature) (cf. Eschenmayer 1801, 235–239). Schelling closes the first issue of the second volume with a reply to Eschenmayer, *Ueber den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie und die richtige Art ihre Probleme aufzulösen*, which concludes in a clarification of their positions – Eschenmayer wants to retain the opposition of nature and spirit found in consciousness while Schelling’s transcendental construction aims to show that the same activities, real and ideal, are found in nature as come to the fore in consciousness. Accordingly, he promises a reworking of the foundation of his system which will demonstrate that an *indifference* of opposite factors, spontaneity and limitation, or ideal and real activity, can theoretically unite factors that a theory of subjectivity leaves sundered (cf. AA I,10, 105 f.).


3 Cf. Eschenmayer 1801, 267–270 and Schelling’s somewhat muddled account of gravity in *Darstellung* where identity or productive force is deemed the *ground of the reality of [the factors] A and B*, hence the first relative totality or the *primum existens* (cf. AA I,10, 147–149). Clearly Schelling has surpassed his earlier allegiance to Kant’s deduction of matter as the filling of space due to the opposition of attractive and repulsive forces. By the time of the Würzburg lectures, with their independent treatment of gravity and magnetism counting as General *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling has come around to a full embrace of Baader’s three-factor theory (cf. SW VI, 254–258).
Reconfiguring Identity in Schelling's Würzburg System

cessible self-founding and self-cognized absolute (Spinoza's *substance*) serving as ontological ground for parallel but mutually exclusive orders of phenomenal elaboration, viz. the subjective and the objective (Spinoza's *attributes*). The key insight of Schelling's new system is that a philosophy adequately assured of its *rational* (not discursive or reflexive) foundation can confer systematic unity for a phenomenal world in which *nature* and *spirit* are manifested everywhere together but remain experientially distinct, in fact irreducible to one another in "feel". It is the disappearing dualism of Spinoza's revision of Descartes' metaphysics that opens the door for Schelling to propose a theory that answered the challenge that Eschenmayer had so sharply crafted: that a pure empiricism suggests a world-order in which nature is its own lawgiver, sufficient unto itself and has unconditioned reality, while rationalism insists that spirit alone is its own lawgiver, self-sufficient in the autarchy and autonomy of its willing, the sole item possessing unqualified reality.⁴

I. Identity as *Indifferenz*, Gleichheit, God's Self-Affirmation, and Copula

Within the five years that saw various public and private exhibitions of what he once called Identity Philosophy, Schelling shifted fluidly from one formula to another for his ultimate systematic principle — ontologically or foundationally called God or the absolute, epistemically deemed the indifference of the subjective and the objective, the identity of identity and identity, self-sameness, the identity of identity and difference, the identity of affirming and what is affirmed, and the copula or bond.⁵

⁴ Cf. Eschenmayer 1801, 244f.
⁵ Of the epistemic or phenomenal descriptors, the first two figure chiefly in the 1801 *Presentation of My System*, the second two in the 1802 essays gathered into the *Further Presentations* and the dialogue Bruno, the fifth in the 1803/04 Würzburg Lectures on the Entire System, and the last in the 1806 essay on the *Relation between the Ideal and Real in Nature*. Schelling begins to call the ontological ground "God" as well as the absolute in the Würzburg lectures, but *Philosophy and Religion* shows him retaining the impersonal or Spinozistic sense of the term in the face of Eschenmayer's attempt to entice him toward some sort of theism — one that would inconsistently place a personal deity before or beyond the absolute perceived in intellectual intuition.
Schelling’s initial presentation of identity-theory selected the term *Indifferenz* to convey what for Spinoza was the unitary ontological ground of conceptually or epistemically distinct orders of attributes, viz. extension and mind or idea, conveyed in nonsubstantive language by Schelling as *the objective* and *the subjective*. Terminologically, it was a complicated, probably unnecessarily complicated, task to convey the notion that every item in a world viewed by reason is an *identity of the subjective and the objective* without conceding the independent existence of subjects and objects, as Cartesian dualism had done. The circumlocution was necessitated by the fact that Schelling wishes to deny the *qualitative* difference of subjectivity and objectivity – which would readily tempt the reader into imagining the independent existence of subjects and objects – while maintaining a vanishing difference between the two, viz. a *quantitative* surplus of objectivity over subjective in instances of subject-objectivity deemed *things* as opposed to a surplus of the subjective over the objective in items commonly deemed *mental* (or cognitive or psychological).

Schelling’s attempt to reciprocally inflect identity with difference in the 1801 *Presentation* was not an improvement on the relative simplicity and clarity of its Spinozistic model, which at least anchored its insistence on ontological unity and epistemic dualism in multiple definitions and axioms. Though Schelling retains the *qualitatively indifferent* but *quantitatively different* descriptors for finite and infinite instances of God’s self-affirmation in the Würzburg lectures, he uses it infrequently. Spinoza’s ungainly insights had been translated to a more pleasant, though misleadingly antique, Platonic terminology in the works of 1802 which spoke of *the Idea* or *the eternal* as a unitary embrace of *the finite* (viz., the material) by *the infinite* (viz., the mental). The Würzburg lectures in fact present a *third wave* of Spinozistic illustration of *Naturphilosophie*, this time employing the explanatory device of referring to the absolute and its instantial orders as the identity of God and its self-affirmation, in which there is again an identity of what affirms and what is affirmed.  

I make three somewhat controversial claims above, that: (1) as Schelling retrospectively claimed, *Identity-Philosophy* was something of a misnomer for a phase or expansion of the basic project of vindicating a primary place for nature in transcendental philosophy, (2) that the Platonism of the *Bruno* and other period essays is a historical garment draped about the logical figure of the absolute as the indifference of the subjective and objective, *the eternal* conveying indifference, which embraces *the infi-
The *Indifferenz* of Schelling's original presentation was neither an anticipation of Hegel's panlogicism nor a quasi-religious claim about an absolute inaccessible to the default version of consciousness which displays phenomena on a grid where the self of consciousness separates itself from what it cognizes, though Schelling sometimes does employ the mystic's talk of *union* and *separation*. Though logically it anticipates later logical developments like the Sheffer stroke or its dual, Peirce's NOR or Quine's arrow, all of them capable of generating the usual logical operators and hence all the numbers of an axiomatized arithmetic (save Gödel's exceptions), Schelling's intent was not to derive phenomena but to show that the dual phenomenal orders of matter and mind had a common ground even though, in the language which Jacobi had introduced, no generation of phenomena from that ground was conceivable: »no egress from the absolute.« Schelling's sole intent in the *Darstellung* is taxonomical: since there is no solid qualitative difference between subjective and objective orders, all phenomena can be represented on a single line, the objective order signified by negative numbers, the subjective by positive gradations, and (though he didn't quite get to articulate this in 1801 except programmatically) the origin or zero potency denoting the *central* entity, the embodied human knower. No items in the phenomenal orders, the one predominantly objective and the other predominantly subjective, are essentially or qualitatively different; the only difference there is within embracing identity is quantitative, vanishing distinctions ultimately founded on comparison of discrete (but homogeneous) quantities.

Schelling's line of thought here was at once too abstract and too subtle. Fichte gave the presentation a careful, annotated reading but nonetheless flatly accused Schelling of introducing difference into the absolute itself — real or qualitative difference, quite a different matter than quantitative surplus or deficit among finite entities. Schelling

---

7 See the note with which the *Darstellung* breaks off (cf. AA I.10, 211n.).
8 Fichte's unpublished notes on Schelling's *Presentation*, when they do not pick at the sufficiency of the proof Schelling provides, either turn on his own difficulties with
Michael Yater

had tried to use the vanishing difference between the opposite directions of the single mathematical line that can be used to represent all real numbers, but only to characterize the phenomenal orders. East and west, negative and positive numbers, material and mental phenomena are >different<, but not the way that Mars and Venus are different; the former are ordinarily different, the latter cardinaly.

By October of 1801 Schelling is starting to employ a more naturalistic and less confusing way to indicate the difference between the identity that characterizes the absolute (and reason), the quantitative indifference which characterizes the universe, and the quantitative difference that marks individuals. The first is termed >the eternal<, the second >the infinite<, and the last >the finite<. In the Bruno and the essays on identity-theory published in the Neue Zeitschrift für speculative Physik, Schelling puts the Spinozism of his theory in Platonic guise, employing terms that are recognizably Spinozistic such as >the eternal< or >the idea< in a manner that looks classical or antique rather than modern. One could argue that Schelling is learning to read Spinoza in a more cunning fashion, putting the core of Spinoza's difficult one understanding indifference in the absolute or the totality and relative or merely quantitative difference in the individual or on the more substantial issue of Schelling's use of the concept of grounding, which is an ontological matter and not just an episteme relation. Cf. Fichte/Schelling 2012, 129-131 / GA II, 5, 498–504.

While Schelling clarified his Presentation in a letter to Fichte on October 3rd, 1801 which said: »This absolute, I claimed in my Presentation, exists under the form of quantitative difference in the individual (this is intuition [...] and of quantitative indifference in the whole (this is thought)« (F. W. J. Schelling to J. G. Fichte, October 3rd, 1801, Fichte/Schelling 2012, 60 f. / AA III, 2, 1, 373), Fichte misquotes this back to him in a reply of October 8th, charging: »I can tell you our point of difference in a few words. – You say, >the absolute [...] as I claimed in my Presentation, exists under the form of quantitative difference.< This is indeed what you assert; and it is precisely because of this that I found your system to be in error« (J. G. Fichte to F. W. J. Schelling, October 8th, 1801, Fichte/Schelling 2012, 66 / AA III, 2, 1, 381 f.). Schelling makes sarcastic mention of the error in his final letter to Fichte on January 25th, 1802 (cf. F. W. J. Schelling to J. G. Fichte, January 25th, 1802, Fichte/Schelling 2012, 74 f. / AA III, 2, 1, 405).

9 »It [the separated state of individuals, M. V.] is indeed inconceivable for the reflective attitude of understanding that ascends from below, that gets caught in insoluble contradictions (Kant's antinomies) with the opposition of the finite (your separation) and the infinite (your unity of all), but not for reason which posits absolute identity, the inseparable union of the finite with the infinite, as the first [principle] and proceeds from the eternal, which is [itself] neither finite nor infinite, but both in equally eternal fashion« (F. W. J. Schelling to J. G. Fichte, October 3rd, 1801, Fichte/Schelling 2012, 62 / AA III, 2, 1, 375 f.).

132
Reconfiguring Identity in Schelling's Würzburg System

substance/two attribute metaphysics in accessible terms and leaving behind earlier "schoolboy" imitations of his Euclidean mode of presentation. The works of 1802 succeed in reading the Ethics' first book in light of the second, i.e., the doctrine of substance (or the absolute) in light of idea and the correspondence between idea and body.\(^\text{10}\)

The second wave of reading Spinoza transcendentally leans more heavily on the distinction of *Wesen* and *Form* than the first had, turning the absolute identity (*Identität*) of the first presentation into the *Gleichheit* (equivalence) of the absolute's being and form, if one expresses it from the bottom up or in terms of form, or the "indifference" of subjectivity and objectivity, if one expresses it from the top down or in terms of substantial being. At any rate, *Gleichheit* replaces *Identität*, with the suggestion that the same being of the absolute is expressed in both the elements of form (Spinoza's orders of attributes), while each individual within those orders remains what it is, an item of nature or a mental item, each one coordinated with its opposite but irreducible to it. Whereas Schelling's first presentation had spoken of the absolute as an identity of identities, the *Bruno* speaks of it as the identity of identity and difference.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^\text{10}\) It is no small tribute to Schelling to note that he succeeds in reading Spinoza in a very creative, properly philosophical style during the years of the identity-theory. Whereas Spinoza had used axiomatic exposition to explain with utter clarity what could be explained, the transitions from one book to another in the Ethics often conceal what cannot be explained, or can only be explained with the introduction of additional definitions, axioms, and lemmas. Individuation or modal differentiation of the orders of attributes, for example, is assumed but not explained by the hiatus between Books I and II. The conatus of a modal entity to persist in being, and its experience of itself as power vis-à-vis other modal entities is inexplicable in terms of mind and body as they are explained in Book II. The reader enters the realm of psychology, emotions and regulation of the emotions (ethics) only consequent on additional suppositions in Book III about the shifting texture of modal chunks of rest-and-motion, i.e., the individual's perception of life as its own, consequently as struggle and limitation of power. That Schelling succeeds in defining the absolute in terms of idea, or the unification of the universal and the particular, in 1802, and as power or self-expression in 1803/04 is a significant advance beyond the literal text of Spinoza — in fact, Schelling's liberation of Spinoza from the materialism and mechanism which he always saw infected his mentor's philosophy.

\(^\text{11}\) Cf. AA I,10, 122: »Die absolute Identität ist also nur als die Identität einer Identität, und dieß ist die vom Seyn selbst unzertrennliche Form ihres Seyns« and SW IV, 239: »Denn was sich absolut und unendlich entgegen ist, kann auch nur unendlich vereinigt seyn. Was aber unendlich vereinigt ist, kann in nichts und niemals sich trennen; was also niemals und in nichts getrennt und schlechthin zusammengefügt ist, ist eben da-
Another innovation of what I call Schelling’s second wave of transcendentalizing Spinoza is that the system’s >individuals< are no longer the items of perception, but genera or meta-individuals, ideas that perfectly equate and integrate universality and particularity. These perfect individuals are deemed >ideas<: they are really functional systems. Among them are accounted our stellar center and its surrounding planets, among which the earth is also accounted a living system, an entity composed both of natural kinds and individuals (cf. SW IV, 277–280). Though Schelling’s language is highly romantic, one can say that he achieved a precocious understanding of ecology, with at least the living surface of the planet being realistically conceived as a system of sub-systems, some of them organic, many not. Our problem is not with the quaintness of Schelling’s semi-mythic depiction or the planet or some dreamy Gaia hypothesis. It is instead a bottom-up problem of the unforeseen, perhaps calamitous, interaction of systems not well understood by our sciences, and even less so by our economists, industrialists and political leaders.

The identity-theory of the Würzburg Entire System is obviously a return to a close reading of Spinoza’s text, with the march of theorems quite like that of the 1801 Presentation. Since I will examine the text in greater detail below, it will be sufficient now to remark three rather obvious things:

- Unlike the first presentation, considerations of philosophical methodology (intellectual intuition) are integrated into the system’s doctrinal advance.
- The sometimes cryptic axiomatized nature of the first presentation is replaced by a more expansive and explicitly argumentative exposition.

---

12 See Schelling’s first remarks on philosophical construction or intuition of the idea in intellectual intuition in the fourth essay of the further presentations of the new system that appeared in the second issue of the first volume of the Neue Zeitschrift für speculative Physik in 1802 (cf. SW IV, 392–395).
The self-cognitive (though non-subjective) aspect of the absolute’s form is explained in terms of self-affirmation or contemplation, the identity of what affirms and what is affirmed.

It is the last item, I believe, that allows Schelling to turn identity-philosophy from a purely logical or epistemic enterprise into a power ontology. This motivates a revision of Naturphilosophie that turns the potencies from mere classification into something more like ontological actors or actants, with the human now explicitly poised on top of the pyramid of nature as the zero-potency, or sole point of connection between nature and spirit. As the being which dwells in centro – capable of organic self-reversion in brain-structure and herself made the locus of affirmation in her linguistic capacity – the human is poised to become the field of ontological and spiritual revelation that Schelling’s later philosophies depict.

In the final phase of its brief and protean life, the identity-theory of the 1806 Relation between the Real and Ideal in Nature describes the absolute as a living copula or bond (Band) between the disparate items philosophy usually distinguishes – idea and actuality, ideality and reality, infinity and finitude. Schelling incorporates the language from the 1803/04 system describing the absolute’s form as self-affirmation, and even speaks of self-willing and absolute willing as formal characteristics. Just as Schelling is plainly anticipating the dynamic reworking of the system that the 1809 freedom essay is based on – which he calls his first completely determinate treatment of the ideal part of philosophy – this essay, like the other three we have reviewed, articulates a theory of identity as a foundation for Naturphilosophie, not as an in-

\[13\] Cf. SW VI, 437–442, 477, 487–491 – passages which suggest that the living earth can be understood as being, in a new sense of center, the central point of the physical cosmos, that the human exists in the center of the natural system, and that the true micro-deity, the prototype for all being, is the human being. Both the human species and as the individual human organism are referred to as »der Mensch gewordene Gott« (SW VI, 491) and as the capacity to exist in centro is located in the human brain and the capacity for language (Sprache) it houses or facilitates.

\[14\] I follow Iain Hamilton Grant’s translation of the term, who notes in a yet unpublished translation that there is both a logical and a physical connotation to das Band.

\[15\] »Das Absolute ist aber nicht allein ein Wollen seiner selbst, sondern ein Wollen auf unendliche Weise, also in allen Formen, Graden und Potenzen von Realität.

Der Abdruck dieses ewigen und unendlichen sich-selber-Wollens ist die Welt« (SW II, 362).
dependent discipline (cf. SW VII, 333 f.). It is with good reason, then, that Schelling in the Munich lectures says that his earlier thought was focused totally on nature (cf. SW X, 107).

II. The Würzburg System: Contemplation, Intellectual Intuition, Self-Affirmation

The Würzburg System is as extensive, well-argued, and comprehensively explained as the 1801 Presentation was cryptic, concise, and lacking in an explanation of its methodology. In its overlapping discussions of the cognitive aspect of the absolute as self-contemplation, intellectual intuition of epistemic unity, and self-affirmation, Schelling makes clear that his absolute is an epistemic assumption — the unitary convergence of knower and known — meant to secure the possibility of truth, not a postulation of some transcendent substance, nor a projection of personhood beyond the limits of finite cognition and agency. The absolute can be said to know itself in all instances of true cognition, to affirm itself in all expressions of finite appearances (whether subjective or objective). It is the absolute eye, not Fichte's absolute I. But for all that, it is not a subject; even less it is an object. The 1801 Presentation expressed this insight enigmatically in saying that absolute cognition is the positing of endless instances of finite subject-objectivity; now this same insight is expressed more poetically as the momentary creation of shadow-entities cast by the lightning of divine cognition falling on the non-being of particularity.17

16»Schon die Alten sagen: Gott ist ganz Auge, d.h. er ist ganz Sehendes und ganz Gesehenes; sein Sehen ist auch sein Seyn und sein Seyn sein Sehen« (SW VI, 198).
17 Cf. AA I,10, 124: »§.21. Die absolute Identität kann nicht unendlich sich selbst erkennen, ohne sich als Subject und Object unendlich zu setzen« and SW VI, 197, where the being of appearances is explained as the reflection of divine power in the powerlessness of the particular. Schelling offered a more persuasive informal understanding of the first statement in a long explanation appended to §30 (cf. AA I,10, 128–130) arguing that appearances appear only insofar as the absolute is.
1. Contemplation

The reader of the earlier system needed to be conversant both with Spinoza and Euclid’s *Elements* in order to knowledgeably read it, that is, to see that without explicit verbal anchoring in either multiple definitions or axioms, the system’s opening move, which enigmatically defined reason as the indifference of subjectivity and objectivity and then moved on to informal discussion of what reason is, how it thinks and what it demands – in contrast from what ordinary human subjects do when they believe they know – would be highly perplexing unless the reader already possessed the capacity for philosophical reflection and could, by herself, reach the system’s principle (cf. AA I,10, 116–119). The experience of reading the *Presentation of My System* is like being transported up and elsewhere in an enclosed elevator; one knows what the ground floor was like, but has no inkling of the destination. Terms such as *identity*, *reason*, *A = A*, and *unconditioned cognition* do not have much purchase, at least at first. Like a perplexed student, the reader needs to be told to sit down and think things through. Schelling finally has the kindness to say this in the 1803/04 lectures, when he defines intellectual intuition as a knowledge that is at once immediate, contemplative, and generates conviction through a necessity that is *free* rather than coercive.

The key word here is *contemplative*: intuition that is immediate and truly *sees* generally follows *for us* upon discursive ratiocination or a thorough investigation because our modes of cognition are infected by privation or mixed with non-being. For the absolute or God, however, the simultaneous positing of appearance and the abolition of the so-called objectivity of appearance as *mere appearance* is self-intuition or direct contemplation. In a passage that is at once beautiful and perplexing, Schelling makes God all eye, the coincidence of beholding and

---

18 The first seven theorems end with a comment that the preceding propositions proved nothing, since reason is unconditional.

19 »So wie denn auch umgekehrt aus dem Wesen einer contemplativen, einer unmittelbar anschauenden Erkenntnis der Vernunft gefolgt werden kann, daß der Gegenstand einer solchen nur das Absolute seyn könne, und nichts außerdem. – Wenn wir z. B. die intellektuelle Anschauung der sinnlichen entgegengesetzt, uns diese als eine jederzeit gezwungene und gebundene bestimmen, in welcher wir uns genöthigt fühlen, so wird dagegen die intellektuelle Anschauung notwendig eine absolut-freie seyn« (SW VI, 153 f.).
what is beheld, of contemplation and what is contemplated; the alterity of the reflecting medium or »mirror,« what is for us the finitude or opacity of appearances, falls away.20

2. Intellectual Intuition and God's Self-Affirmation

Roughly the first twenty-three theorems or thirty-five pages of the lecture manuscript are given over to an intertwined discussion of intellectual intuition (the absolute's formal aspect) and affirmation or the identity of God's self-affirmation and what is affirmed (cf. SW VI, 137–173). If Schelling had not published Philosophy and Religion in the same year, with its rejection of Eschenmayer's suggestions that transcendental philosophy can and needs be supplemented by an independent theistic philosophy of religion which would reassert the Kantian postulates of God, immortality of soul, and freedom of the will to support belief in a universal or objective moral world-order, one might take Schelling's language here of >God< and God's >self-affirmation< as verging on traditional theism. But >God< as little indicates an individual (albeit supreme) entity endowed with understanding and will (in the ordinary personal sense of those terms) as does >the absolute<; Schelling is still a transcendental Spinozist, and >nature< – as natura naturans, to be sure – can still be intersubstituted with >God<. Schelling was adequately clear in earlier writings on identity-metaphysics that when one speaks of the absolute's form, one is referring to what Spinoza called the orders of attributes inherent in substance, or to a global correspondence of being and cognition, prior to there being any modes of particular entities that instantiate the two and hence appear as finite mind-and-bodies or subject-objects. God or nature is and does everything, though there is no particular agent, no intention, no subjectivity, and no specific willing. It is through the disappearing reality or pseudo-objectivity of appearances that the divine intuition is a self-intuition or self-contemplation.21

20 K. F. A. Schelling rightly says in the introduction to SW VI that the »infinite cognition« or absolute self-cognition of 1801 is expressed in the Würzburg System as »infinite affirmation« (SW VI, VII; my translation).
21 Schelling expresses the correlation between the absolute's self-contemplation and the vanishing entity of appearances in a manner at once striking and utterly simple: one views oneself in the mirror, or the mirror disappears as object of vision in seeing oneself.
Only in the perspective of the limited finite perceiver is there any limited subject or object, or doer and deed. Schelling’s enduring quarrel with Fichte is that the latter insisted, on perfectly correct Kantian grounds, that however broad and unqualified the assumptions we must make in order to explain experience, experience itself cannot exhibit anything other than finite entities and that philosophy can henceforth no longer tolerate any flights to a substantive personal absolute. Subjectivism means that human intellect can explain only what humans experience, and that merely in piecemeal fashion. Schelling’s rejection of subjectivism leads him to embrace a Naturphilosophie which is neither an encyclopedia of scientific discoveries nor an isolated meditation on the methodology of experiment and verification, but a metaphysical proof that »considered in and of itself, nothing is finite,« based on the way interdependent nature comports itself and everywhere surpasses limited shapes and operations. Schelling did not jest when he told Fichte in the Correspondence that the direction of his thinking was tangential to the enclosed circle of the Wissenschaftslehre – in a space that was Euclidean and not expected to curve back upon itself.

»Wie das Auge, indem es sich selbst im Widerschein, z. B. im Spiegel, erblickt, sich selbst setzt, sich selbst anschaut, nur inwiefern es das Reflektirende – den Spiegel – als nichts für sich setzt, und wie es gleichsam Ein Akt des Auges ist, wodurch es sich selbst setzt, sich selbst sieht, und das Reflektirende nicht sieht, es nicht setzt: so setzt oder schaut das All sich selbst, indem es das Besondere nicht-setzt, nicht-schaut; beides ist Ein Akt in ihm; das Nichtsetzen des Besonderen ist ein Schauen, ein Setzen seiner selbst, und dieErklärung vom höchsten Geheimniss der Philosophie, wie nämlich die ewige Substanz oder Gott durch das Besondere oder die Erscheinung nicht modifirt ist, sondern nur sich selbst schaut und selbst ist als die Eine unendliche Substanz« (SW VI, 197f.). When viewed through reason, appearances disappear.

22 Schelling contrasts the simultaneous limitation and incessant self-reference of subjectivism with the open horizon of rationality grounded in reason or epistemic self-coincidence in SW VI, 142f. »Gäbe es nicht in unserem Geiste selbst eine Erkenntnis, die von aller Subjektivität völlig unabhängig und nicht mehr ein Erkennen des Subjekts als Subjekts, sondern ein Erkennen dessen, was allein überhaupt auch ist, und allein erkannt werden kann, des schlechthin Einen, so müßten wir in der That auf alle absolute Philosophie Verzicht thun, wir wären ewig mit unserem Denken und Wissen eingeschlossen in die Spähre der Subjektivität« (SW VI, 143).

23 »Nichts ist an sich betrachtet endlich« (SW VI, 161).

3. Privation, Power, and Finitude

The ontological status of the individual or a finite instance of subject-objectivity had posed a problem for Schelling since the earlier days of the Naturphilosophie augmented by identity-theory. The 1801 Presentation of My System seemed undecided about whether individuals or potencies exist as tranches of the universe or independent items, whether the basis of their being is finitude – the serial determination of one individual by another within the flow of phenomenal determination – or their not so apparent intrinsic infinitude, the ability to display the universe as a whole in some determinate, hence somewhat distorted, form. Then too, there is the question whether it is the relative difference that individuals display as various ratios of differentiated subjectivity and objectivity that makes them finite (i.e., less than infinite) or whether the way they exist as matter and fill space as their first function or activity is the origin of their finitude. While Schelling is able to furnish some explanation for apparent »subjects« and »objects«, he finds it difficult to explain why appearances appear although the absolute simply is. Naturphilosophie had already taught him that nature as dynamic process or matter in metamorphosis is an ongoing process of reintegrating difference, or incorporating individuality into totality. But no simple explanation is at hand for why difference haunts appearances, when logic plainly points out the priority and timeless being of identity – especially since Schelling wants to stand with Spinoza against the tide of epistemological reduction and psychologism that had infected modern philosophy and imprisoned Kant and Fichte in a sorry and semi-skeptical subjectivism. 25

By 1802 Schelling began to earnestly train his eye on the problem of individuation. Logically considered, the formal or cognitive side of the

25 Viewed through the lens of the problem of finitude or individual, the first identity-theory seems a thin construct, concocted from elements of logic, mathematics, and various assumptions and theorems borrowed from Spinoza. Its allegiance to the letter of Spinoza, especially the inability to explain modality or account for finitude except through infinite regress of causal determination among modal individuals, is both its strength and its weakness. One cannot have ontological commitment both to an absolute and to individuals. The strength of the subsequent attempts to paint Spinoza in transcendental colors is that they are more successful in producing a paradoxical account: if one sees the absolute, finites disappear. If one keeps one’s gaze on the finite, the absolute cannot appear. Evidently being and thinking are not covered in Velcro, as Parmenides thought.
absolute must be an interweaving or identification of universality and particularity. It is easy to attach a name to the product of such activity; compounded of thought and intuition or concept and sensation; it is idea or an absolute particular. One can even stipulate that philosophy’s business is to generate an order of ideas, as has been the dream of logicians and mathematicians since Plato. Relating these to the impoverished items of experience is difficult, however, where sensory richness and conceptual content seem to ever flee each other and the work of intelligence is reduced to the caveman level of pointing and naming. The best that Schelling can do to account for finitude in the Bruno is to talk of the finites’ self-sundering from the absolute or a wilful separation from the absolute. The origin of separation, or the transition from being undistorted subject-objectivity, into finite existence as subject-and-object is explained here with a move that is at once a gesture back to Kantian phenomenalism (time as the form of sensible intuition) and an anticipation of the more psychological/moral account which Philosophy and Religion offers of the fall of the finite from the absolute into selfhood — Schelling’s negative reflection of Fichte’s teaching that I is its own deed (cf. SW VI, 37–44).

In the Würzburg Entire System, Schelling does not speak of the relation of the finite and the absolute as a fall or withdrawal from God until §315 of the philosophy of spirit where he is considering ethics in the perspective of religion. There he speaks of the presence of the finite in the absolute as a simultaneous fall and reconciliation, a timeless ontological state which religion expresses mythically in terms

26 See Schelling’s first treatment of philosophical construction, where idea is contrasted to self-separated particularity (cf. SW IV, 405 f.).
27 The Bruno argues that it is the inclusion of finitude within the absolute, as ingredient in the ideas, that distinguishes the absolute’s being and form; the individual is ideally separate as subsisting in the idea (cf. SW IV, 258 f.) but is really launched into separate existence by positing time — distinctions of past, present, and future, depending on modal relations of actuality, necessity, and possibility which it posits among the community of ideal particulars — for itself (cf. SW IV, 284 f.).
28 Schelling’s rich discussion of the origin of the finite from the absolute in Philosophy and Religion, with its clear teaching that there can be no continuity between the absolute and the finite phenomena, no production, no emanation, no causation (but only nonbeing, and the misuse of freedom to make space for nonbeing or evil), is crucial establishing the continuity of Schelling’s philosophical speculation — from his first musings on the Timaeus, to his rejection of Kantian/Fichtean subjectivism, to the philosophy of freedom elaborated beginning in 1809.
of time and separate actors within human history. But in the final thirty-five pages of the identity-theory of that work, Schelling uses a Platonic theory of nonbeing – the alternate and equivalent formula to the mythic language of a ‘fall’ in Philosophy and Religion – to give as much of an account of the finite in its separate existence as can be given and to integrate his earlier more abstruse account of qualitative indi-
fERENCE in the absolute, accompanied by quantitative difference in the finite with Spinoza’s account of the interdetermination of finites as an endless ‘passing of the buck’: one finite is determined by a prior, which in turn is determined by a prior, ... and so on – into infinite regress.

The finite as finite both is and pertains to the absolute – and is not and in its separation pertains to nonbeing; it is the latter aspect that is signified by older terminology of >being posited with quantitative difference<. Says Schelling:

Everything particular which as such is posited as quantitative difference (since there is no particularity by means of qualitative difference) is there-
by directly as such also posited as relative negation vis-à-vis the totality. It is precisely this being and relative nonbeing of the particular within the totality that is the core of its entire finitude. (SW VI, 181; my translation)

Traditional philosophical talk of being and nonbeing seems rather bland, abstract, and lifeless. But since the formal, cognitive or self-con-
templative aspect of the absolute is affirmation, or identity of that which affirms and what is affirmed – there is a dynamic aspect both to being or being-posited and to nonbeing or negation. Though Schelling reaches back through St. Augustine’s discussion of evil to the Neopla-
tonic notion of evil as privation in introducing his discussion of finitude and individuation, the privation or relative nonbeing discussed here is purely passive, lack of being or power (Nichtseyn, Nicht-Wesen) and not the antithetical or dynamic negativity (das nicht seyn Sollende) discussed in the Philosophy of Revelation (cf. SW VI, 198–200, 213 f. and SW XIII, 236 f.).

Still there is relative power or potency even in the nonbeing of the

29 »Dies ist das größte Geheimniss des Universums, daß das Endliche als Endliches dem Unendlichen gleich werden kann und soll; Gott gibt die Idee der Dinge, die in ihm sind, dahin in die Endlichkeit, damit sie als selbständige, als die, die ein Leben in sich haben, durch ewige Versöhnung ewig in Gott seyen. Die Endlichkeit im eignen Seyn der Dinge ist ein Abfall von Gott, aber ein Abfall, der unmittelbar zur Versöhnung wird. Diese Versöhnung ist nicht zeitlich in Gott, sie ist ohne Zeit« (SW VI, 566).
finite in its individual guise. It is not a counterpart or real opposite to the absolute and its being; there can be but one absolute, one substance, one being that is self-sufficient and real in itself. As part of God’s affirmation, specifically, of what is affirmed, it has being of a sort though it pertains to nonbeing, i.e., it is the community or totality of beings expressed defectively – or without power.\(^{30}\) As such it has the status of a reflection or counter-image, the mirror in which divine cognition cognizes the divine by simultaneously looking-through and overlooking the mirror. The being of appearances is to be reflection or mirage: an image to be seen and deciphered in its deceptiveness.\(^{31}\) These passages suggest a rich framework for interpreting the Naturphilosophie that follows upon this opening section of identity-theory. It suggests that nature is the display of the dynamic or expressive nature of appearances, that the functions displayed in matter, gravity, light, organism and all specific elaborations of their interactions and metamorphoses have more to do with the undoing of particularity than with establishing the permanence of its operations – a progressive non-posting of that which is only accidentally or relatively posited.\(^{32}\)

Bibliography


Fichte, Johann Gottlieb/Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph 2012: The Philosoph­ical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling. Selected Texts and Correspondence

\(^{30}\) »Das concrete Ding als concretes ist bloßes Nichtseyn, heißt so viel als: dasjenige an ihm, was es zu einem Concreten macht, ist bloßes Nichtseyn (bloße Ohnmacht), nichts Reelles, nichts an-sich; es ist eben daher auch nicht an sich Concretes. Nun ist es aber die unendliche Affirmation Gottes, und zwar in ihrer Unendlichkeit, d.h. die Position des All als All, und demnach auch das All selbst ist es, wodurch das Besondere in seiner Besonderheit, als Nichtseyn gesetzt wird« (SW VI, 197).

\(^{31}\) »Da es nun die absolute Position des All, d.h. es das All selbst ist, wodurch das Besondere als bloßes Nichtseyn gesetzt wird, so ist dieses Nichtseyn als Nichtseyn, und eben dadurch, daß es Nichtseyn ist, Ausdruck des All, das All in ihm erkennbar, nicht unmittelbar, aber mittelbar, d.h. durch Reflex, durch Widerschein: – und hiermit ist denn zuerst die ganze Bedeutung der Erscheinung ausgesprochen« (SW VI, 197).

\(^{32}\) Cf. Vater 2015.
Michael Vater


Vater, Michael 2015: »In and of itself, nothing is finite‹: Schelling's Nature- or So-Called Identity-Philosophy. « In: Kant, Fichte, and the Legacy of Transcendental Idealism, ed. by Halla Kim/Steven Hoeltzel. Lanham, MD (forthcoming).