Schelling and graphocentrism

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One project of philosophical research which would likely prove of little profit is a history of philosophy the epochs of which are the greatest philosophical jokes. Although philosophers have always said innumerable funny things, notable sources of humor have been few and far between: Socrates, though not Plato, Nietzsche, though not Zarathustra, and more recently perhaps Bernard Williams or Jacques Derrida. The most a scholar can usually hope for is a clever barb punctuating pages of deathly earnestness. Such is the case with Hegel: although occasionally possessed of a biting wit, his sense of humor was hardly world-historical. Modernity, although many other things, simply isn't very funny. Schelling, however, had the good fortune to be the victim of Hegel's greatest jest. An "Absolute" such as Schelling's, Hegel says, would be the night in which all cows are black.\(^1\)

Modernity, I've said, isn't very funny, but it does afford excursions. In this paper I would like to sponsor a journey to this Schellingian night, along the path of post-Kantian idealism. By sponsoring such a journey I am acknowledging that Hegel's joke is in fact apt: the Schellingian Absolute is obscuring darkness. But I will try to argue that in making the journey we might

become enlightened to a few bovine ruminations. All the same, Schelling is guilty of the rather poor inference that *night* rather than sunlight is the optimal environment for viewing what appear as shadows on the wall of the cave. There seems to be a sense in which he found light deceptive unless casting shade; or, to be only somewhat more specific for now, I want to attribute to Schelling both an 'original insight' and a fundamental misdirection, which, some writers to the contrary, is more of an eccentric second cousin than a matriarch on the postmodern family tree.

Before embarking I should say that I will be restricting my discussion to the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*. There is one very good pragmatic reason for such a restriction: Schelling was nothing if not prodigious, and keeping tabs on every 'system' he produced between, say, 1797 and 1809 would be impossible here. The restriction to the 1800 *System* in particular allows us, more than with any other work, to situate Schelling within the context of German Idealism. Not only does examining Schelling as idealist place us at the conjunction of some interesting dichotomies -- modernity and romanticism, reflection and speculation, reason and Schwärmerei -- it allows us some insight into the critical project which Schelling transformed. Though when he was bad he was awful, Schelling could be quite interesting as a critical philosopher; furthermore, his understandings and misunderstandings of the critical project seem to interweave with understandings and misunderstandings of postmodernism.

The beginning of Schelling's philosophical career is his years in Jena, where he spent time both as student and devotee of Fichte, and as patron of Hegel; in fact these periods overlapped. During his early years at Jena, Schelling adopted through Fichte, with great
abandon, the Kantian 'critical project' then the sensation of German intellectual life. Fichte's
distinction between the 'letter' and 'spirit' of Kantianism enabled a variety of critical projects to
be undertaken: in common was the attempt to give an account of our capacities for producing
knowledge before proceeding to knowledge-claims, or in such a way as to determine the status
of our various knowledge-claims. This task was to be performed by providing transcendental
conditions of subjectivity: what the knowing subject must necessarily perform or be capable of
in order to be conscious at all -- conditions for the possibility of experience. Fichte's particularly
abstract approach to the transcendental problem was admired by Schelling. Not only are
Schelling's early writings either Fichtean in character, or about Fichte's work, but even in the
System of Transcendental Idealism Schelling incorporates Fichtean arguments and mentions the
Wissenschaftslehre. And, we learn from the letter of a contemporary, Schelling spent his early
years in Jena (where he arrived in part through Fichte's efforts) as the "town-crier of the I."\footnote{Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, ed. and transl. Daniel Breazeale, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 29n66.}

Schelling's particular engagement with the transcendental project quickly diverged from
Fichte's, however. Schelling found something unsatisfying, or incomplete, about the mere
attempt to account for what capacities are demanded of us in order to experience the natural
world. The more fundamental question, which Schelling found compelling, was what are the
conditions for the conditions of the possibility of experience? It may seem here as if Schelling is
playing the role of the annoying child who persists in asking "why?" to infinity. But Schelling is
less interested in generating an infinite regress than in inquiring as to how the cognitive faculties
such as Kant and Fichte describe are empirically realized, or how they are actual. The best way
of looking at Schelling's question is, I think, as one of justification: what legitimates the transcendental ascription of various faculties when it is not clear how, or whether, anyone performs them. This formulation would be too weak, however: Schelling is not interested in justification so much as what does actually occur, or how it is that material beings are subjects.

As one commentator has remarked, Schelling's question is: "how does one explain the origin of transcendental subjectivity itself?" In a way, this misses what Kant called the "formal" character of transcendental idealism: Kant is not concerned with what persons in the world actually do, he wants to give a normative account of what faculties and activities in general would be required for any "I that thinks" whatsoever (or at least those with sensible intuition). Schelling's project might then seem dangerously close to psychologism: no more than formal logic is a matter of how persons are thinking when they are thinking logically, no more than that should transcendental philosophy be a matter of what persons are doing when they are thinking categorically. In order to preserve his project as a legitimate philosophical inquiry, Schelling needs to find a way to supplement "formal" idealism such as to show that it needed to be supplemented, and in such a manner as to avoid the merely empirical accumulation of facts about persons thinking.

By and large Schelling succeeds in demarcating for himself a space for legitimate inquiry. The question he points to is I think this one: What is the meaning of Kant's, or Fichte's requirements? Given that we are not simply transcendental subjects, or pure egos, but always, 


\[4\]Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik . . ., 375.
inevitably, embodied beings situated in particular spaces, occupying particular moments, how is it that these requirements are realized, or how is that they relate to any actual subjects? Kant, for example, speaks of "the mind" throughout the First Critique without ever informing us much about what that might be, beyond his telling us that we can't know what it might be. The inexplicable connection between transcendental subject and empirical subject is at least problematic; it could also undermine the transcendental account if no subject can ever be correctly described as acting in the manner which a formal idealism suggests. Even a purely formal account risks irrelevance if it characterizes activities which are completely distinct from the activities of real subjects.

It may be helpful to consider the example of the Kantian formal characterization of the mind which became the target of one of later Idealism's primary criticisms. Kant's sharp distinction between understanding and sensibility, and the parallel distinctions between concept and intuition, and spontaneity and receptivity, were immediately criticized. Not that Fichte, Schelling, or Hegel wanted to eliminate or deny the distinction: rather, they wanted to point out

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5Schelling thinks that he has a deduction which shows that all subjects must be embodied: System of Transcendental Idealism, transl. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 128 or System des transzendentalen Idealismus (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1992), p. 167. Such a strong claim is unnecessary, however, and likely unwarranted. (All future references to the System will be given parenthetically in the text, with the page number of the Virginia edition followed by a slash and the page number of the Meiner edition.)


the 'theory-laden' character of all receptivity, that there is no element of experience which is not in some way mediated by something like a 'paradigm,' or a 'conceptual scheme.' Here I don't want to engage in debate over the proper way to express the claim that there is no purely receptive element to experience, that all experience is at least in part the product of some sort of cognitive mediation or active construing; for present purposes it is enough to claim that Kant has not justified the radical split between understanding and intuition. Hegel, as he was fond of doing, claimed that distinction broke down on purely internal grounds in Kant's philosophy: he claims that the distinction between content and determination breaks down where Kant's idealism comes in, i.e., where Kant wants to distinguish his noumenal skepticism from external-world skepticism. The Schellingean question is much simpler: from what standpoint is Kant permitted that distinction? It seems like a factual distinction which Kant is making -- that the mind is in fact divided up into reason, understanding, and sensibility -- and that his normative account depends on his mind being structured in this way.

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*I* do not wish to engage in any debate here over the various proposed accounts of the mediation, other than to claim that none of the three are necessarily committed to a conceptual scheme" account in Davidson's sense of the phrase. Cf. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); the phrase "theory-laden" is from N.R. Hanson, Patterns of Discovery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); the term "paradigm" is from T.S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); general discussions of the relevant issues are contained in Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. VI.5 and VII.1, and in John McDowell, Mind and World (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

I want to clarify that, for Schelling, it is not a matter of legitimating a particular account of the mind. Not only is Schelling concerned with that question, but, more importantly, he also wants to develop a more refined account of who we are, what our faculties, capacities, and miscellaneous particularities in fact are: Kant's normative picture misses the point if it makes demands of beings radically different from ourselves. Not that Kant, or the would-be formal idealist, has to make his normative account subservient to the empirical failings of particular subjects; but even from a normative standpoint it would seem perverse to demand of subjects that which they are constitutionally incapable of performing. The matter remains a normative one, but one which better accounts for the specific character of human subjectivity. It is not hard to see how these considerations are significant in moral philosophy: the operative concept of a person clearly restricts the extent and character of moral obligation, as well as what can be considered as valuable. The same significance accompanies the move away from formalism in transcendental idealism: sharpening the characterization of human subjectivity not only clarifies the relation between the world impinging on our senses and a mind which generates representations, but also clarifies something about our senses and minds, our desires and volitions, our 'feelings' and our capacities for reason.

Hegel, I said, developed this point through his reading of Kant in Glauben und Wissen. Schelling's approach, however, following the tenor of the time, was meta-critical.\(^\text{10}\) he did not so

much argue directly against Kantian formalism as begin his inquiry at a prior level. The concern with particular arguments was not so great as the concern to figure out what sort of a system is adequate for philosophical knowledge; the proper systematic form for philosophical theorizing should ideally leave nothing ungrounded, and show the mutually-supporting relationship of the various claims. Thus we have Schelling's claim that "even idealism has no theoretical basis" (3/6); presenting a transcendental account of subjectivity involves presuppositions which are themselves ungrounded. To remedy this defect Schelling proposes "to enlarge transcendental idealism into what it really should be," a system whose proof is "not merely in general, but in actual fact" (1/4).

One way of understanding what this proposal means is to consider it as an expression of the structure of subjectivity problem. If the major idealist point is that the world of experience must be to some extent constructed by the subject, that seems to leave open the precise manner in which it is to be constructed. The problem is that this seems to relativize adequate justification, or legitimate claims, to what the precise character of subjectivity is: the danger is that an idealist account would justify its claims given its account of subjectivity, but then not be able to privilege any particular account of subjectivity as normative. This is Schelling's complaint regarding Kant: Kant's transcendental idealism would be valid if the account of subjectivity which Kant presupposed were justified, but it is not. The problem with Fichte is in some sense the opposite: Fichte avoids presupposing any particular form of subjectivity, but then

fails to ground any particular form as well. Fichte often concedes that dogmatism is perfectly consistent and irrefutable; he of course adds "contemptible," but denies the ability to refute dogmatism. According to Schelling's diagnosis of the failure he attributes to Fichte, this failure stems precisely from Fichte not taking account of the material conditions of subjectivity, the necessarily situated character of all thinking. Taking this into account would add some sort of concrete determination to the character of subjectivity while still avoiding any ungrounded presuppositions. Grounding transcendental idealism in "actual fact" removes the indeterminacy which accompanies an overly abstract account, without in any way vitiating that account.

Schelling's idea, then, is that some fact-of-the-matter about our situatedness in the world, or about our particular situation, can justify a more broadly conceived transcendental project in addition to resolving foundational issues. This broader project will produce an explanation not only of the embodied character of mind, but also of the em-minded character of nature. The former explanatory demand, the one which Schelling brings as a novelty to idealism, is perhaps the easier to understand: it consists in what I have discussed above, the very earthy character of our subjectivity, or more generally that there seems to be nothing unnatural about our cognitive faculties. The opposite point is the more typically idealist one: nature appears as suited to our cognitive faculties. We can consider this through the 'Copernican revolution' of the First Critique, in which objective knowledge is seen as necessarily referring to our subjective

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12}}} \text{\footnotesize{The Science of Knowledge, transl. Peter Heath and John Lachs, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 12, 16 (=Wissenschaftslehre 430, 434).}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13}}} \text{\footnotesize{"For in this work it will become apparent, that the same powers of intuition which reside in the self can also be exhibited up to a certain point in nature"(3/5f).}}\]
capacities; or, if we take into account the Critique of Teleological Judgment as well, the
demands placed upon nature become yet stronger. There the claim is that, for there to be a
nature at all, we must demand some sort of purposive coherence in our experience. In any case,
whether the demand is spontaneity, a good will, or teleology, there is some sort of cognitive
demand upon nature, or cognitive constituent of what nature is.

The resulting solution, which supplements and completes Fichte's idealism, will make
material sense of our spiritual demands on nature and spiritual sense of our material demands on
mind (7/11f). Schelling is not quite a reductionist, or an eliminativist, but he does want to find
an explanatory level which, finally, settles all disputes between the two realms: a language in
which there is no free play between the physical basis of reasons and the rational character of
nature.14 Since for Schelling "the two fundamental classes of all beings are the class of subjects
and that of objects,"15 resolving the tensions between mental and natural perspectives also
resolves the meta-critical problem; a philosophical system which manages to account for mind
and nature without a bias toward either may be "completely void of presuppositions;”16 by
managing to "presuppose no phenomena as given"(191/248) while still grounding accounts of

14 Similar issues reoccur in contemporary debates: e.g., Thomas Nagel, The View from
Nowhere, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); concern over the relation between
reasons, and beliefs and motivating states, in Jonathan Dancy, Moral Reasons, (New York:
Blackwell, 1993); Jürgen Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, transl. William Mark

15 Alan White, Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom, (New Haven: Yale

16 Werner Marx, The Philosophy of F.W.J. Schelling: History, System, Freedom,
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 35; cf. (74/97)
subjecivity and nature a philosophical system would be completed. This, then, is the
Schellingean Absolute: an originary unity, "the true ground of identity between objective and
subjective,"(203/270) the undetermined whole which serves to justify philosophical (or simply
'scientific') accounts. Somehow an appeal to the "supreme absolute reality, which never itself
becomes objective, but is the cause [Ursache] of everything that is so"(224/290) will clarify an
unbiased picture of the whole. The aim is to incorporate everything while presuming nothing;
only this satisfies Schelling's systematicity concern. This is the Schellingean Absolute.

Schelling's project, then, at least in 1800, is to approach the Absolute from the subjective
side; Fichtean idealism is supplemented with deduction in actual fact. One might achieve the
same result by starting with nature and adding idealism -- "... since the two opposites are
mutually necessary to each other, the result of the operation is bound to be the same, whichever
point we set out from"(7/11) -- but the current strategy is that of proceeding from the subjective
as primary and absolute, and having the objective arise from this"(STI 7/12). Schelling thus
begins with the transcendental task: "to explain how knowledge as such is possible"(10/18); a
system of transcendental idealism will "state the general result of the Wissenschaftslehre"(34/47)

\[^{17}\text{Cf. Alan White, Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom, (New Haven: }
\text{Yale University Press, 1983), p. 8: "The philosopher's account of the whole cannot begin with a}
\text{part of the whole; it must rather begin with the source or ground of all that is within the whole; it}
\text{must begin with the absolute." A more cynical expression of a similar idea belongs to Paul}
\text{Valéry: "I don't feel comfortable inside philosophy. We agree it is unavoidable, and no word may}
\text{be uttered without some tribute being rendered to it. How could this be prevented, since it is}
\text{itself unable to vouch for what it is?"; cited in Jacques Bouveresse, "Philosophy from an}
and then proceed to deduce some sort of absolute ground.\textsuperscript{18}

Fichte's idealism, although it occasionally receives some unfamiliar formulations, is generally summarized faithfully: "Since self-consciousness is conceivable \textit{only} as an \textit{act}, it cannot be explained by reference to something that makes conceivable only a passivity"(37/51). One can hear the strains of Fichte's positings and Tathandlungen, or for that matter Kantian unifying-a-manifold. Here, at any rate, Schelling remains close to his idealist colleagues. The point is familiar: knowledge, although about the world, is in part constituted by our own construings, the active relations we assume regarding whatever evidence there is. Evidence radically underdetermines theory -- to put it simply, what goes out is more than what comes in -- so knowledge, or even consciousness, must be considered as the subject determining a sensory manifold rather than \textit{being determined} as part of a causal chain.

Further, since Schelling is always careful to formulate it as a matter of \textit{self}-consciousness, we can recognize a continuation of the \textit{apperception} problem. Something about the self-conscious character of all conscious experience, in particular about what is required of the subject in order to unify representations and actively situate herself in relation to them, by being constitutive of experience is constitutive of objective knowledge. What we contribute to the shortfall of evidence is determined by the self-relating character of experience. Schelling is very fond of this move from self to world. "\textit{Primary knowledge} [erste Wissen] is for us the knowledge of ourselves, or self-consciousness"(16/25); all else depends on this "highest principle": "If the self is originally infinite activity, it is therefore also the ground -- and inner

principle, of all reality (36/50).

At this point, then, one might expect a transcendental deduction of something or another -- whatever it is *der Ich* requires for self-consciousness. Nothing quite so complex appears, however; no doubt this is in part because Schelling, 24 when he finished writing the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, was in too much of a hurry to run through all the details. But just as significant in his failure to provide an analysis of the self-relating character of experience was the terminology that he, and later Hegel, adopted: that of *identity*. What Schelling means by self-consciousness is much broader than the possibility of attaching "I think" to all my representations; rather, it is "the identity of knower and known."¹⁹

By the odd language of identity Schelling wants to mark off what contributions we make to the substance of our knowledge-claims: what, of our own cognitive activities, is identical to some element of what we are claiming.²⁰ He seems to think that incorporating all this under the rubric of self-consciousness bestows a special epistemic reliability on his claims: in a very Cartesian way, we have particularly secure knowledge of what is merely self-relational.²¹ That much is at least understandable, but there are oddities which remain. First, how does he think he can get so much out of self-consciousness: "But now undoubtedly that which determines everything in my knowledge is the knowledge of myself"(18/26)? Second, what motivates identity-talk rather than category- or simply standard predicate-talk?

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¹⁹ v., e.g., (24f/34ff).

²⁰ Cf. (9/14): "the object as such vanishes into the act of knowing."

I want to argue that the simplified language which Schelling uses to talk about subjectivity follows directly from his meta-critical stance. He attempts to employ the most minimal discourse possible as part of his effort to avoid what Kant does not avoid: presupposing a particular form of subjectivity. Partly, no doubt, out of satisfaction with his very succinct, concrete phrasing, but mostly wanting to out-critical Kant -- wanting to avoid ungrounded or unexplained claims -- Schelling refuses to break down 'the mind' into various faculties, various activities, and various components of knowing. With no lack of self-assurance, however, he divides things up into what's knower, what's known, and what's both. By the methodological point mentioned above, furthermore, the choice of self-consciousness as the setting-out point is as good as any other. The originary, unmediated unity which grounds our discourse is neither knower nor known, presenter nor presented; to conceive of it in that way is to conceptualize it, to mediate it, to divide it in such a way as it is not in itself divided. But one can of course conceptualize it as nature, or, if one is doing transcendental philosophy, as mind. In which latter case self-consciousness is brought under scrutiny, or, perhaps more appropriately, the self-conscious-y way of determining the absolute indeterminate.

The odd consequences of Schelling's meta-critical stance accumulate still. In order to make sense of the identity talk, there has to be some means of specifying them in their equivalence. The meta-critical stance prevents this specification from being dependent on any particular form of subjectivity. And the move from Kantian formal idealism -- the general explanation of the a priori conditions for possible experience -- to a material idealism such as Schelling's demands some sort of concrete unit of content with which to make sense of self-consciousness as it is actually instantiated. What all this comes down to is that the
transcendental philosopher has to witness self-consciousness, as intuitions which he himself produces in "free imitation" or "free repetition" of the productive activities which have already occurred (48f/65f).

Normally "the self consists in a steady passage from one presentation to the next"(48/65); the transcendental philosopher, however, through an act of "absolute interruption" ceases the progress of ordinary consciousness and generates a "second series" which imitates the original productive activities of the self(48/65). Rather than carrying out a formal reconstruction of normal experience, the Schellingean philosopher seems to be the virtuoso of spiritual exercises which "make the world vanish before our eyes"(14/21). In the place of the real world there is philosophical re-production, the creation of intuitions by which, if they successfully imitate the productive acts of "the original genesis of consciousness"(49/66), "a true and complete philosophy is engendered"(49/66). One might wonder how this perfect mimesis can be attained, or if attained verified. But, for Schelling, this is simply a matter of becoming aware of the

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22 The Schellingean transcendental philosopher is inevitably, emphatically (referred to as) male.


24 Alan White, Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 59, interprets Schelling as appealing to the world of experience in order to verify the second series. But producing the same results does not necessarily guarantee identical processes; and, since in practice only epochs can be philosophically re-produced, not the entire world of experience, this means would never be available. And "the transcendental philosopher . . . will make only the subjective the immediate object of his cognition"(9/14). "Imitation"(227/293) might also be a satisfactory principle of art in the event White were right.
necessary steps in creating a world of experience: there is only one possible course for doing so, locked on pain of contradiction in a "primordial consistency"(60/80), so after the absolute interruption "nothing else can arise for me . . . save what comes about for me originally and beyond all time"(48/65). In principle, you could deduce every single empirical datum by this procedure; unfortunately, since consciousness has been producing for a long time, such a deduction would take too long, "so philosophy can enumerate only those actions which constitute epochs, as it were, in the history of self-consciousness"(50/67). Apparently the second series runs at the same pace as the first, otherwise the appearance of every drop of ink on this page would be subject to a transcendental deduction of some sort. But in any case, the task would not merely show that the drops of ink are necessary conditions for possible experience, but to recreate in intuition the productive acts whereby they are created. "Our whole philosophy," Schelling says, "proceeds from the standpoint of intuition"(95/125).

Changing the subject-matter of transcendental philosophy from formal analysis to intuitional re-production has some interesting consequences. For one, "Self-consciousness . . . casts its light ahead only, not behind"(18/27), so the philosopher is caught forever simulating, but never quite capturing, an irretrievable past. The far more striking consequence of demanding that the workings of self-consciousness be represented as intuitional objects of

25This of course makes Schelling's employment of necessity rather stronger than, say, Kant's: whereas for Kant there is nothing self-contradictory about unconceptualized experience, it is simply impossible, for Schelling it is a logical contradiction for the world to be any other way than it is.
experience, however, is that, then, "the workings of reason are themselves preconscious." Real, thoroughgoing self-consciousness becomes impossible because the self, always engaging in cognitive activities, is not aware of its guidance of those activities as it directs them. Philosophy is always trying to recuperate what is unattainable, evanescent. Consider it by means of an example: in going to open the door you try to catch yourself resolving to turn the knob, to pull it toward you; but still, this doesn't work, because you fail to catch yourself catching yourself opening the door. Another way of looking at it is that Kantian spontaneity and apperception are not themselves objects of consciousness, so, for Schelling, they must be something wholly different, something unconscious. We cannot comprehend the operations of even our own cognitive powers; "We refer . . . to that original activity which, since it is the condition of all limitation of consciousness, does not itself come to consciousness" (47/64). We are left with an "eternal unknown" (209/270) in acting, which explains our activity but is itself inexplicable.

The "free imitation," in turns out, is an imitation of divine creation, and our "intrinsic finitude" (59/78) restrains us from ever matching the demands of complete knowledge, of full self-consciousness. Thus we come to the Schellingean Absolute: the "absolute identity" (4/7) which resolves all tension between subject and object, "the absolute indeterminate" (36/50) which is the source of all determination, a "higher power" or a "primordial force" (73/96), the


27 v. (54/72).
"pre-established harmony"(11/17) which regulates all our discursive practices without participating in any of them. It is the "absolute limit to knowledge"(16/24), precisely where explanation comes to an end. But precisely by virtue of fulfilling this role it is not itself susceptible to rational consideration. The Absolute is the inarticulable, incomprehensible whole, which disappears from view upon segmentation, the reality which passes beyond our limited cognitive powers; at best we receive intimations of it through artistic production -- both from witnessing the artist absorbed in production, and from witnessing the subjectivity made objective in the harmonious result. So, despite the fact that the Absolute represents the explanatory level which resolves all claims, in formulations which sound suspiciously close in invoking audible silence, the Absolute "cannot be understood in terms of its relation to something else,"28 or it "cannot be deduced by unfolding reflective relationships."29

By way of approach to Schelling's system, I would like to recall two particular elements, and inquire as to how Schelling could find them so congenial. The first is his meta-critical position, his attempt to construct a presuppositionless philosophical system. The second is his having oriented his entire philosophy from the standpoint of intuition: "the whole sequence of the transcendental philosopher is based merely upon a continual raising of self-intuition to increasingly higher powers . . . "(233/301). How does Schelling reconcile his desire to


"presuppose no phenomena as given"(191/248) with his complete reliance on a notion of unmediated content?

I think the answer to this question is precisely because he sees it as "unmediated" content he sees intuitions as the answer to his meta-critical demands. We need to retrace our steps. Kant, we might recall, combined two tendencies. From the empiricist side he derived intuitions as the criteria for meaningful discourse; claims about the world are pre-critical nonsense if they aren't backed by intuitions, and what these claims mean is substantiated by their intuitional content. From the rationalist side Kant was able to build up positive claims about the necessary structure of consciousness. This convergence still left Kant with a radical split between intuitions and concepts, which became the subject of criticism from later idealism. Schelling clearly doesn't like the concept/intuition split. But this division, and the parallel distinctions, are precisely what generate the critical aspect of Kant's philosophy: by specifying the structure of subjectivity, Kant is able to make the demand that our capacities for knowing are explained before moving on to a priori claims. The question for us now, then, is whether or not Schelling is able to problematize the concept/intuition split without sinking back into dogmatic metaphysics; i.e., by breaking down the Kantian fixed points, does Schelling lose the capability to explain the knowledge-claims that he wants to make. The answer, I think, is clearly yes.

Schelling deals with the problem of conceptual schemes by simply getting rid of concepts: "concepts are mere shadows of reality"(73/96). Concepts are mere cogs, parts in the machine that is "ordinary thinking"; "transcendental thinking suspends this mechanism," and "the transcendental mode of apprehension glimpses the intuited through the act of intuiting"(9/15). Schelling's goal is sneak past the mediating, distorting concepts, and recover a
world of pure, unmediated glimpses of reality. For him, the claim is that "there is no common archetype"(164/214) is a metaphysical claim with a pre-critical reliance on content; and that claim is not that there is no common archetype, but that what you thought was the common archetype, stuff, is really just the product of finite intelligences participating in the divine intelligence. You thought there was stuff, but really there's just mind: "For the individuals, these other intelligences are, as it were, so many indestructible mirrors of the objective world. The world, though it is posited solely through the self, is independent of me, since it resides for me in the intuition of other intelligences; their common world is the archetype, whose agreement with my own presentations is the sole criterion of truth"(174/226).

One indication of Schelling's failure to digest critical philosophy is his frequent claim that "all knowledge reduces to certain primordial prejudices"(10/15); or, alternately, that we are "fettered in knowledge"(35/49), or that "reality must be blotted out"(46/63) for conceptualized experience, or that "duplicity"(31/43) is a condition for knowing. Kant, for example, could never say anything like this: conceptualized experience, though founded on our activity, is no prejudice. It is exactly what it means for this to be a world of experience, for there to be a subject of truth-claims at all. Prior to conceptual determination there is no representational content; there is nothing of epistemic status lying about in the world, waiting to be discovered. By claiming that we, in representing the world at all, are prejudiced, Schelling is positing some unblemished level of content that the world maintains of its own accord, independent of any discursive practices, and then keeps to itself. Contrast the Kantian sublime: a definitive failure, albeit a pleasantly painful one, to comprehend the whole. Kant does not then claim that the experience of the sublime undermines all of our truth claims. But Schelling does want to say
that only the inconceivable, indeterminate, unattainable whole is true or real.

It is difficult to understand how Schelling can still be connected to transcendental idealism given that he failed to recognize, or chose to ignore, the constitutive role of human cognitive activity in constructing a world of experience. This failure does explain, however, why Schelling pays so little attention to the structure of self-consciousness: what for Kant required two deductions is for Schelling "the first and simplest exercise"(233/301) of a three-act sequence, actually preceding that of sensation. Self-consciousness is more of a tabula rasa that an active intellect. This the explains why transcendental philosophy is "a type of knowing utterly different from ordinary knowledge"(27/38). Whereas for Kant a priori cognitions are necessary constituents of any possible experience, for Schelling "... a priori concepts do not make an appearance in every consciousness, and do not figure always and necessarily in any"(150/195). They are something exceptional, requiring "a gift"(14/21) more akin to divine inspiration than to mundane understanding to produce. This gift, in fact, is something "many people actually lack"(28/39): if you can't see it, it's your misfortune.

This brings Schelling so far away from Kant's and Fichte's idealism, it's hard to see what tenuous connection remains. What exactly does Schelling mean when he says, quite accurately, that "transcendental philosophy has to explain how knowledge as such is possible"(10/15)? The answer is that transcendental philosophy shows "how a primordial being can transform itself into knowledge"(57/76), i.e., how something which isn't thinking at all gradually accumulates the

30 What is more, they are all reducible to types of intuitions: cf. (136/178), (140/182) inter alia.
intuitions which resemble the familiar world. It is transforming *itself* into knowledge, since "it is utterly inconceivable how any affection from without can transform itself into a presentation or into knowledge"(37/75). This seems to be Schelling's appropriation of transcendentalism: everything comes from within. But his version of idealist activity remains distant from Kantian apperception or Fichtean positing. For in a sense, the active relation, the active *construing*, is absent: "the invisible resistance I encounter in such an object compels me to a decision"(173/225). What is still active for Schelling is "the primordial mechanism of intuition itself . . . that is, a genuine *construction* of objects"(3/6); "the intelligence," quite literally, "produces the world out of itself"(159/206). As it so happens, it does so constrained by an "unknown necessity"(169/220), but it does so out of itself all the same. Thus when he claims that "concept and object . . . are one and the same"(135/175), he really means that they are one and the same; the advantage of transcendental philosophy, claims Schelling, is that only by its accounting for *everything* as the successive limitation of a primordial being can the conformity of object and concept be explained. Rather than the Kantian project of explaining just in what our claims about the 'external world' consist, Schelling wants to make metaphysical claims about the lack of an external world.

Schelling's transcendental idealism made "actual," then, is something like a T.V. movie: a highly improbable course of events presented as actually having occurred, with only slight alterations for dramatic effect. Not that the story is terribly dramatic: the self strains toward the predetermined harmony already fully present at the beginning, and is doomed to failure. What is remarkable about such a narrative, however, is that it banishes the Kantian *quid juris* into oblivion. There is no normative force to Schelling's account; it is simply what does in fact
occur. Schelling, in fact, seems positively allergic to norms at times. His account of freedom is not autonomy but "lawlessness" (208/269), he reduces "rules" to "sensory intuitions" (143/186) -- i.e., to pictures of rules -- and his rendition of Kant's categorical imperative is "thou shalt will only what all intelligences are able to will" (188/243f), more of a least common denominator than a rigorous moral principle. Sometimes it seems as if Schelling wishes to be the Hume of the "mystery of being."  

Schelling, who wishes to presuppose nothing, both presupposes too much and too little. He presupposes too little in terms of human subjectivity: self-consciousness gets such an indeterminate rendering, I believe, because Schelling wanted to avoid begging any questions. But he presupposes far too much in terms of the significance of the "original unity" and the original break from unity, the "absolute synthesis" (46/62, 112/147, 207/268). Somehow the very first act of the primordial mind "contains -- united and condensed -- an infinity of actions" (50/67) -- all the actions which occur in subsequent human history. And somehow the specific content of this one act is determined by relation to the absolute identity which is prior to subjectivity and is indeterminable. The question is: how can what cannot be accessed, conceived, articulated or appealed to demand of us the very specific way in which we conceive the world; how can it solve the structure of subjectivity problem? Schelling seems to have a metaphysical realist picture in mind, of a world semantically rich but humanly unavailable; this


32Cf. Grondin's discussion of Schelling's later "empirical apriorism" ("The A Priori from Kant to Schelling," *Idealistic Studies* (1989), p. 215f); this also relates to Schelling's destruction of the *quid juris* question.
leaves him thinking that the best way to describe the world is to stand apart from it and leave everything untouched. The problem is then that he is not representing anything, or nothing but the totality as an empty totality, the night in which all cows are black. The world on its own makes no claims: letting it speak for itself will not present an authentic picture, simply an empty one.\(^\text{33}\) Schelling seems to think that the tensions between mind and world, or between the physical basis of mind and the rational character of nature, demand an explanatory level which settles all disputes between the two realms: that there would be something unreal about the lack of a single solution. Schelling realizes that this unifying explanatory level is nowhere to be found, but then draws the wrong conclusion: that it is present, only inaccessible to us. This Schelling presumes from the start, and it undermines his entire system.

Calling Schelling’s Absolute the night in which all cows are black is not a claim that the world in its physicality is unreal, or that there is nothing beyond thoughts which 'grasp being' or are 'totalizing,' leaving no surplus. After all, even Kant did have a sublime, and even a subconscious\(^\text{34}\): there is a surfeit in our experience beyond what is concepted and articulated. But the Absolute, as Absolute, is completely inert: the mere being of things does not serve as the "ground of reality"(58/77) until we employ it as ground, until we understand it in some particular way. Tagging the incomprehensible whole with the label "Absolute," or "original identity" does

\(^{33}\) Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), p. 2f: "If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described."

not leave the world in its unconceptualized richness so much as conceive of it as night.

Schelling, in sum, wanted to include something of our concreteness, something of our finitude, in his account of subjectivity. This strikes me as a positive development past Kant and Fichte; but, in the end, Schelling mystified and tried to make ontological hay out if it. No doubt there is an "absolutely contingent" (236/304), something we experience fundamentally exterior to complete lucidation; but this transcendent, ineffable something demands neither metaphysics nor "an aspiration toward a 'sort of knowledge' that cannot be grasped by thought." It is simply not knowledge, it is something else, but not something which non-conceptually intimates a higher reality. There is no reason to think of it as representational at all. Schelling thus errs in claiming that "art constitutes the ideal of science" (237/294). It seems that Schelling finds the only appropriate way of glorifying finitude is to annihilate it as finitude: by transforming it into the "universal organon of philosophy" (12/19). It would be wiser, philosophically and ultimately politically, to leave both finitude and philosophy intact. There will still be the fundamentally exterior: Greek verb paradigms will not transfer peacably into my memory the first time I read them; my fingers will strike the keyboard without my explicit direction; there is still the

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36 Cf. Grondin, who attributes to Schelling the "nullity of finitude" (213), and, five pages later but with no awareness of paradox, "the radicalization of finitude" (218): "The A Priori from Kant to Schelling," Idealistic Studies (1989).

37 Cf. Alan White, Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 28: "Philosophy must teach us that we are infinite or absolute as well as finite, and that our finite concerns . . . are trivial when viewed from the level of the absolute."
sensibility of the hand, clutching my shoulder, which is absent; and there is even the sensibility of contemplating the million fragile surfaces which dissolve just in front of the canvas of a Rothko painting. Arguing against Schelling is simply not to mystify this experience, or to posit it as an epistemic standard. The question is whether our experience of art is something primal, something utterly primitive and basic; or whether it is situated, complex, refined and intensely personal -- whether our reaction to a Rilke poem is continuous with the social, intellectual, and emotional lives in which we direct ourselves with as much autonomy as we can summon. The "absolute contingent" is only meaningful if it is construed as meaningful; even if not completely lucidated then still assigned a specific relationship to the complex of activities which more easily fall under our comprehension – and if not consciously assigned a relationship, then still presupposing the self-directed sophistication which makes it something of value. To put it another way, arguing against Schelling is not necessarily the claim that there is no sex, only seduction; only that even sex is a mediated, constructed, construed extension of our more mundane activities.

In conclusion, I want to consider a recent tendency to view Schelling as an ancestor of recent attempts to problematize 'the subject,' or rain on 'reason's' parade. No doubt there is something

\[38\] The pre-critical version of this argument against Schelling comes from the pseudo-Longinus, in justifying the appropriateness of writing a 'technical' discourse on the sublime: "Though nature is on the whole a law unto herself in matters of emotion and elevation, she is not a random force and does not work altogether without method"(2.2). See also section 2.3. (transl. D.A. Russell, in Ancient Literary Criticism, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).
to this, and certainly Schelling did argue for the radical finitude of human reason. But there is
still something to be considered regarding how it is that we interpret the finitude of reason. One
commentator, Jean Grondin, makes the following proposal: "One can discern in Schelling's
critique of negative philosophy a thoroughgoing critique of rational metaphysics or what one
today calls logocentrism." What one should say about this claim is that it is completely absurd.
First of all, Schelling is doing rational metaphysics: he just postulates a "dark, unknown
force"(222) as a rational demand. Regarding logocentrism, I would say that there is no
philosophy which more faithfully adheres to an ideal of presence, or which more ambitiously
proceeds through the canonical texts in the history of the metaphysics of presence. Not only
does he invoke the "holy of holies"(231/299), but he often repeats a trope which, in the
*Phaedrus*, was at least presented as a myth: "it is no mere hypothesis that beyond the world of
light there shines with a radiance unknown to us a world which no longer falls within the sphere
of our intuition"(125/164). And repeatedly we hear what the ideal is for both art and philosophy:
"All of the magic which surrounds organic nature, for example, and which can first be entirely
penetrated only by aid of transcendental idealism . . ."(215/278); "the unfathomable depth which
the true artist, though he labors with the greatest diligence, involuntarily imparts to his work, and
which neither he nor anyone else is wholly able to penetrate"(224/290).

So why do commentators such as Grondin find Schelling's philosophy so appealing?
This passage, I think, contains the answer: "The felt, or the sensed, is in fact again only the self
itself"(55/74). Although the *ideal* remains, consistant with logocentric discourse, penetrating the

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unfathomable depth, it turns out that in practice there is only touching oneself. Schelling's 'Reason' is as totalizing as anyone's; only he finds inevitable failure. This, apparently, is appealing, again, not to those who would like to radicalize finitude, but to those who would like situate our own finitude relative to the infinite. Manfred Frank claims that "dichotomy was not always evident." But this is no excuse for calling failed logocentrism a critique of it.

Thus I would like to propose an alternative title to describe Schelling's position. The ideal is always presence -- what Schelling tells us of, he has witnessed; but ultimately he does not hear anything but the voice within his own head. We also learn that philosophy is a "constant producing" (13/20), an infinite producing about what, in being absent, is present: "So it is with every true work of art, in that every one of them is capable of being expounded ad infinitum, as though it contained an infinity of purposes . . . " (225/290). And we have learned that Schelling fabricates a pre-critical notion of content: he fails to explain how the events he describes could be so meaningful, and thus generates rich content out of empty happenings. All these I associate with writerly arts: the simulation of presence, infinite production, conjuring of the real.

Thus I suggest graphocentrism as the new name for Schelling's position. The term is quite apt, given Schelling's model of unfulfilled penetration: graphein is not only to write and to paint, but to scratch the surface, to scrape, to abrade. The graphos is the stylus with which one

\[\text{\footnotesize 40n Schelling's Critique of Hegel and the Beginning of Marxian Dialectics,}\] \textit{Idealistic Studies} (1989), p. 254: more precisely he has in mind the dichotomy between "antiliberal romanticism" and "anticapitalistic socialism"; I leave aside entirely the Sandelian consideration of whether or not liberalism, their common enemy, requires an insufficient acknowledgement of finitude, and the question of whether socialism is the proper orientation; for present purposes I merely extract from Frank's argument that romantic Absolute-worshippers and scientific socialists at one time found themselves bedfellows.
incises the surface of the wax tablet. And the \textit{kentron} is the compass point which pricks the center, in order to draft the circle which intimates the perfection of the world beyond. Schelling, one must remember, is not the critique of logocentrism, but frustration at its failure. Schelling is graphocentrism.