

The Unconscious Creativity of the spirit: The Absolute in Schelling

by
Martin Jenkins

In his 1794 work *The Science of Knowledge*, J.G. Fichte employed the term ‘the absolute I’ (ich). This was confronted by the Not-I.[1] F.W.J. Schelling (1775-1804) initially embraced but subsequently modified these themes, developing a Nature Philosophy (*Naturphilosophie*) from the Not-I and, in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), a Transcendental Philosophy with the ‘I’.[2] Underpinning both is Absolute Identity, itself beyond human cognition. Nature is objective yet unconscious, the Self, Intelligence is subjective. Yet in all knowing, a concurrence of the two is necessary. The problem ‘is to explain the concurrence’.[3] A very brief account of Schelling’s system of Transcendental Idealism follows.

Absolute Identity

Underpinning everything, is the Absolute, in Absolute Identity with itself. As written, it is neither Subject nor Object nor a duality of both. It can never be an object of human consciousness but, as we shall see, its influences can be discerned in nature, in human activity and in particular, the activity of Art.[4]

Theoretical Philosophy

The human subject becomes aware of itself, of others and the world in that section of *System of Transcendental Idealism* termed ‘System of Practical Philosophy’. Before that is the section ‘System of Theoretical Philosophy’ where Schelling expounds the synthetic application of the Categories. In three ‘epochs’ relating the history of the Intelligence, we see how it is originally an outward, centrifugal and infinite movement until it encounters phenomena.[5] After an encounter, we have a centripetal movement returning into the self. Initially, this occurs with the encounter of sensation. Moving from sensation to productive intuition; a subject-object structure develops between the intelligence and its awareness of intuitions/objects – including itself which, is simultaneously the application of and for the intelligence, the deduction of the Categories. This nascent knowledge is divided into ‘Inner’ and ‘Outward’ realms, Time arising in the former (Self) and Space in the latter (Objects) and both intermediating. So, through Time and Space/ Inner-Outer, we find that Substance occupies space and accidents contingently predicate it in Time. As Time would determine a linear, causal succession of substances alone, the category of reciprocity ensures that a plurality substances co-exist and intermediate with each other. (thus here we see the application and deduction of the Categories of Relation: Substance,

Causality and Interaction. These were the most important categories for Schelling (contra Kant).

In the final epoch of Theoretical Philosophy, we arrive at empirical abstraction. Here, there is a separation within consciousness between specific objects presenting themselves and, consciousness of the activity of thought in knowing said objects. The ‘act’ of knowing is contrasted with the object to be known. The perception of this act of thought, appears within consciousness as conception(s). Conceptions coincide with objects by means of a particular Judgement. Judgements apply to particular objects by means of a ‘rule’; the latter is called the Schema. The Transcendental Abstraction occurs very similarly save it deals with the universal application of the Categories through a Transcendental schema.

Confusingly, despite the use of terminology such as ‘self’ and ‘consciousness’ above, the synthesis described above occurs unconsciously. There is not, as yet, a Self which is consciously aware of itself or, is an object ‘for-itself’. This arises in the subsequent section entitled ‘The System of Practical Philosophy’.

Practical Philosophy

In the aforementioned production of knowledge, Self-awareness by/of the Intelligence itself was not achieved. It is achieved by act of the intelligence upon itself – Absolute abstraction. This is a self-determining act whereby the intelligence becomes objective before itself. The act is identical with ‘Willing’ – a free, self-determining.[6]

This does not occur in splendid isolation. Other intelligences impinge upon the self, inciting it to Will or not Will and importantly, preventing the self from fully expressing its free activity. This negation of free, centrifugal action by the activity and products of other intelligences, gives rise to self-consciousness.[7] In other words, the individual ‘I’ is made aware of itself by means of the social ‘We’. This process of socialisation is a life-long education. It follows that a being in isolation could not have an idea of freedom or, would attain a consciousness of an objective world, including itself.

Willing is confronted by both a natural inclination to self-interest/ happiness and, a moral law of categorical imperative based on free, self-determination. Thus there appears respectively, the intermediation of nature as objective world and freedom as self-determination. Beyond both is the Self which can command ‘Choice’. Despite proffering this solution to the problem, Schelling then introduces the larger problem of how Subjective self-determination can intermediate with a Nature of blind, Natural, causal laws.[8]

For the two are irreconcilable.[9] His solution is that there is a ‘pre-established harmony’ between subjective and objective upon which, after describing the

emergence of National Legal systems and a global ‘Federation of States’, he later elaborates.

Freedom and Necessity

In section III of Part Four ‘System of Practical Philosophy according to the Principles of Transcendental Idealism’, a philosophy of History is proposed.[10] Freedom, left to itself, creates the contingency of chance. The actions of people can create unintended consequences, many of which could be harmful to the species. Yet the concept of History contains the notion of an infinite tendency to progress. So History is not, for Schelling, a series of nebulous contingencies of Freedom alone but also displays a hidden Necessity which safeguards the well-being of the human species. Freedom and Necessity act in union for without a Law of any sort, there cannot be any Freedom. Hence:

“...though my acting surely depends on me, that is, upon my freedom, the consequences of those actions or that which will emerge from them for all mankind, depend not at all on my freedom but rather upon something quite different and, of a higher sort.”[11]

A necessity that stands over humanity and ‘takes a hand’ in the play of its free actions. Attributing this to providence or fate is no explanation – Transcendental Idealism can however, provide one.

When acting consciously in free self-determination, something unconscious simultaneously arises. In the same way as Transcendental synthesis produces and sustains an objective world for intuition, so a second objective factor or moral order arises objectively and historically. This second objective factor in history is an intuition, not of an individual alone – for it is not the individual who acts in history – but rather, of the species. The intuitant, or objective factor of a moral order in history is that which arises from *the human species as a whole*.

Yet there is a contradiction between the free self-determination of individuals and their actions, the latter may be heterogeneous and failing to conform to the objective moral law. Schelling maintains that all the free acts of individuals are synthesised to ensure there is no ‘lawless play of freedom’ but harmonious convergence. The synthesis of free acts is grounded in the ‘higher power’ which, like finite individual human intuitants, is also an intuitant of both universal objectives albeit, infinitely. In other words, actions, as intuited but originating from the free willing of the self, become instantiated as objective. As objective, they are part of Nature.[12] Nature conforms to law. So on the one hand, we have the free willing intelligence, on the other we have intuitions of objects and actions (moral law) as objects, conforming to laws of Nature. In other words, we have Freedom intermediating with Necessity and we have Necessity, intermediating with Freedom.

“Such a pre-established harmony of the objective (or law-governed) and the determinant (or Free) is conceivable only through some higher thing, set over them both and which is neither intelligence or free but which is the common source of both the intelligent and the free”.[13]

Absolute Identity

The ‘higher thing’ is the ground of identity between the absolutely subjective and the absolutely objective, the conscious and the unconscious, intelligence and nature; which part company, cease to be identical, in the free conscious act i.e. when the subject as object becomes an object for itself. Prior to the latter, is the *Absolute Identity*.

“This eternal unknown... though never becoming an object, impresses its identity upon all free actions, is simultaneously the same for all intelligences, the invisible root of which all intelligences are but powers and, the eternal mediator between the self-determining subjective within us, and the objective or intuitant; at once the ground of the lawfulness in freedom and freedom in the lawfulness of the object”.[14]

The Absolute cannot be an object of knowledge, as to be so would entail its division, becoming an object before conscious subjectivity. It is ‘eternally presupposed in action, that is, an object of belief’.[15] It can further be discerned in Art and its products.

Philosophy of Art

The artwork consists of both the unconscious product of nature and the conscious product of freedom. The self is conscious of the production involved but this, is mediated with the unconscious as regard to the end product. Just as with Willing, the Willing self (ideal) can, at one moment be separate from the acting (real) self, when it reflects upon and projects such action. Likewise, the creating self can both be and not be aware of what it is creating.[16] When not aware, i.e. engrossed in the creative process, swept away by inspiration and intoxication – *the blind, purposeless yet purposive unconscious forces of nature are operating*. The artist does not always know how the end product will appear, conscious intention being drowned by the blind drives of creativity. Hence as with the objective actions of the Moral Law as described above, the Necessity of the Absolute is discerned in the harmony of the conscious and unconscious in Artistic creation.

With the product created and the self reflecting upon what it has created; it can discern the union of both the conscious and the unconscious in the Artwork. With such recognition, the Intelligence feels ‘blessed’:

“...in the light of a bounty freely granted by a higher nature, by who’s aid, the impossible has been made possible”. [17]

Again, this ‘higher nature’ is the Absolute:

“This unknown whereby the objective and the conscious activities are here, brought into unexpected harmony, is none other than the Absolute which contains the common ground of the pre-established harmony between the conscious and the unconscious”. [18]

Artists are ‘driven’ to create, sometimes despite themselves. This arises from an irresistible urge in their nature that is animated by the contradiction between conscious and unconscious standing at the root of their being. They are exceptional because they are conduits of the Absolute, as evidenced by the creative process and product. Art then:

“...is the one everlasting revelation which yields that concurrence and the marvel, which... would necessarily have convinced us of the absolute reality of that supreme event.” [19]

Art gives insight to but not knowledge of, the cause of everything that is so: Absolute Identity.

As Terry Pinkard writes: “What Philosophy cannot say, Art can nonetheless show’...” [20]

References

1. J.G. Fichte. *The Science of Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press. 1991.
2. FWJ Schelling. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. University Press of Virginia. 1978.
“ *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*. Cambridge University Press. 1995.

In his *Naturphilosophie*, nature is viewed as an organism characterised by gradations of increasing complexity towards self-consciousness of itself achieved through human consciousness of nature and its natural laws.

3. *System*. Op cite P.5.

4. In a letter to GWF Hegel written in 1795, Schelling proclaims he has become a Spinozist. The I and Not-I of Fichte are, for the Spinozist Schelling, manifestations - Mind and Extension-of an underlying ‘absolute’ reality. Terry Pinkard. *German Philosophy 1760-1860. The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge University Press. 2003. P. 173.

Interestingly, reference is made to a passage in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* where he intimates the existence of an ‘indeterminate concept of a supersensible substrate of appearances’. Was the Kantian *ding-an-sich* the Absolute? P. 191 *ibid*.

5. First Epoch: From Original Sensation to Productive Intuition. Schelling op cite. P. 51.
Second Epoch: From Productive Intuition to Reflection. P. 94.
Third Epoch: From Reflection to Absolute Act of Will. P. 131.

6. *System*. Op cite. P. 159.

7. *Ibid*. P. 172.

8. *Ibid*. P. 192.

9. *ibid*.

10. *ibid*. P. 155.

11. *ibid*. P. 206.

12. Writing of conformity to law in the concept of history, which comes about in the objective factor in acting (moral law), Schelling states: “(for this in fact really does

belong to nature, and thus must obey law just insofar as it is nature; whence it would be wholly useless to wish to derive this objective lawfulness of acting from freedom, since it generates itself quite mechanically and by itself, so to speak.” So the objective actions of the moral law originates from nature, from the Absolute harmonising human actions. This problematises the issue of Free will and action. Ibid. P. 208

13. *ibid.*

14. *ibid.* P. 209.

15. *ibid.* On P. 211, Providence, the Absolute is equated to God.

16. *ibid.* P. 221.

17. *ibid.* P. 221.

18. *ibid.* P. 221.

19. *ibid.* P. 223.

20. Pinkard. *Op cite.* P. 191.

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Email: martinllowarch.jenkins@virgin.net