INTRODUCTION

The Trajectory of German Philosophy After Kant, and the "Difference" Between Fichte and Schelling

> The most obvious symptoms of an epoch-making system are the misunderstandings and the awkward conduct of its adversaries.
>
> —G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*[1]

Although Hegel doubtless had Reinhold's new interest in philosophical realism or perhaps Schleiermacher's psychological interpretation of religious truth in mind as the "awkward symptoms of the age" and its dichotomizing reception of Kant's legacy when he penned these words, they can stand as the epitome of the relations between Fichte and Schelling in the years leading up to Hegel's first published essay. After 1800, Fichte and Schelling each viewed the letters and publications of his "collaborator" with suspicion. Periods of trust and encouragement alternated with spasms of mistrust and outbreaks of accusations of personal betrayal and intellectual short-sightedness. Only one who with Hegel fervently believed in the "power of the negative" could be edified at the sight of titanic strife between powerful intellects who so deftly perceived the divisive issues of the times and addressed their solution with such insight and breadth of knowledge, but who persistently failed to identify the common position they were publicly seen to represent and complained instead of a single, massive "difference" that separated them. Neither Hegel's essay nor any single utterance by Fichte or Schelling exactly pins down the difference between them or underscores the underlying common position that it presumes. That work is left to the reader and her detective instincts. The editors and translators wish to let the texts speak for themselves, and by "texts" they mean both the letters exchanged between the principals from 1800 to 1802 and the published works from those years, which they exchanged in hopes of resolving the "difference."

We think the letters and published works have roughly equal standing, for when the former turn to philosophical topics they generally focus on very broad issues of philosophical presuppositions, certainty, and methodology left over after their various and intricately argued versions of "the system" had been sent to their respective publishers. The letters are placed first to provide an introduction to the texts that follow, not because they have explanatory priority or because the cultural and biographical situations they reference illuminate the "difference" better than the published works. Similarly, the comments in the pages that follow are offered to point out a possible reading of the legacy of German philosophy after Kant, but they will not open up a royal road through the by-ways of the history of philosophy nor will they suggest that what the principals and their contemporaries saw as the one difference was the one that will necessarily stand today as the central philosophical issue. In particular, we are agnostic on Hegelian presuppositions that outcomes are better than prior conditions or that one can make an easy separation between *reflection*—or the work of *intellect*—and *reason* or *intellectual intuition*. No philosophical distinction can be univocally deployed, and if quantum indeterminacies arise in physics, one can hardly expect unambiguous meanings in social discourse, much less philosophy.

The Legacy of Kant

> [T]he metaphysics of nature as well as morals, but above all the *preparatory* (propaedeutic) critique of reason that dares to fly with its own wings, alone constitutes that which we call philosophy in a genuine sense. This relates everything to wisdom, but through the path of science, the only one which, once cleared, is never overgrown and leads to error.
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> —Immanuel Kant, Architectonic of Pure Reason, *Critique of Pure Reason* A850/B878[2]

By the early 1790s the bulk of Kant's great systematic writings had appeared, including the three *Critiques* and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science,* but it was not widely recognized that the critical philosophy formed a comprehensive system instead of multiple preliminary sketches for a future system. Kant had given the *Critique of Pure Reason* a partial rewrite that distanced his position from idealism, furthered its claims to have definitively reconciled rationalism and empiricism, and announced that theoretical philosophy had been given a "scientific" foundation by a Copernican reversal of perspective.[3] The enduring achievement of the *First Critique* was to insist that philosophy must settle questions of foundations and methodology before it embarked on comprehensive explanation—that *quid facti?* could not be settled without *quid juris?*[4] If Kant thought his contribution had ended metaphysics or the

attempt to think the supersensible, he did not foresee how the subjective or Copernican turn coupled with methodological introspection could produce the encyclopedic adventures in world-description that would flow from the pens of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel in the coming decades. The *Critique of Practical Reason* sliced through the theoretical knot of freedom and determinism, declared the primacy of practical reason in the phenomenon of conscience, and put the would-be objects of metaphysical speculation within the reach of hope or "rational religion." The *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* provided a theoretical framework for empirical physics, postulating matter as filling space, compounded of opposite forces, supporting phenomenal properties such as mass and density. Both of these works could be viewed as tidy solutions to pesky but rather regional problems, as could the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment's* limited justification for cognitive overreach by the artist and the empirical scientist of theoretical bent. Yet something of the sweep of Kant's analysis and the grandeur of his philosophical nomenclature—are not the famous "transcendental deductions" the consummate Rube Goldberg inventions?—seemed to inflate his philosophical results beyond his personal intentions, and the wind which soon filled the sails of the good ship *Transcendental Idealism* carried it swiftly out of safe empirical harbor into uncharted oceans of "Speculation."[5] And despite the popular message conveyed by the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* that the transcendental critique had slain the dragon of dogmatism, Kant's own tidiness in crafting distinctions may have paved the way for the resurrection of robustly nonempirical philosophy in the succeeding decades, for he closes the *First Critique* by insisting on the distinction between a "propaedeutical" or preparatory function of *critique* and the full systematic investigation of the reach of reason in nature and morals that could legitimately be called *metaphysics.*[6] A plausible, although none too tidy, reading of the state of "Transcendental Philosophy" at the beginning of the nineteenth century could view Kant as having definitely established the *propaedeutic* to an experiential metaphysics, while Fichte and Schelling were hard at work attempting to expand and consolidate the foundations of the metaphysics of morals and metaphysics of nature that Kant had left behind. In this broad sense, Schelling and Fichte believed they were collaborators on a shared "scientific" enterprise; even when they had misgivings about each other, they were still eager to have the public perceive them as united under the banner of Transcendental Philosophy— as if it were genuinely the "perennial philosophy" engendered by modernity, and not just an isolated contribution.

Whatever Kant himself said about the future of philosophy, his texts seem to point to quite different, although equally fertile, territories of development once philosophy had torn itself away from the delusory project of trying to make definite theoretical pronouncements about the supposedly ultimate anthropological, psychological, and moral frameworks of human life.[7] Reinhold

laid hold of the territory of epistemology (and later on, logic) in his attempt to create a positive "Kantian" system that was in some sense empirically based or "objective." After a brief initial flirtation with Reinhold's foundationalism, Fichte staked out the moral domain as his field of endeavor and sought to enlarge the phenomenon of conscience—on the model of Kant's categorical imperative—into a model of world-embodied consciousness as such, closer to what we would today call "phenomenology" than other forms of contemporary philosophy. Schelling, schooled in Plato's *Timaeus* as well as Kantian critique, sought to expand Kant's fragmentary account of matter as impenetrability-in-space to a holistic account of the physical sciences, one based more on the emerging chemistry and biology of the new century than on Kant's Newtonian materialism. And Hegel would take up Kant's systematic leftovers—religion, social philosophy, economics, politics, and history—and fashion them into an account of human reality so bold and sweeping that it dropped the labels "transcendental" or "critical" and proclaimed itself absolute or objective idealism. But this suggestion considerably oversimplifies the matter, for Kant's heirs did not parcel up the master's domain and each set to work on his own claimed turf; each contended he was the sole inheritor of the whole estate and laid claim to transcendental philosophy from his own point of the compass. Our "history of philosophy"—an art invented by Reinhold, Schelling, and Hegel— tries to make sense of the tussle in a linear fashion, but neither chronological order nor the metaphor of spaces divided into different regions or by different directions quite succeeds in making clear sense of German philosophy from 1790 to 1820.[8] Furthermore, although we must be content today to view philosophy as an autonomous although peripheral stage of human endeavor, the German-speaking lands of the early nineteenth century were guided by "public intellectuals" who were comfortable moving in multiple disciplines that we think widely disparate—religion and politics, philosophy and art, creative art and literary criticism, and even poetry and empirical science.

The End of Modernity: "Open Sky" or System?

> [Even] after the labors of Kant and Reinhold, philosophy is still not a science. [Schulze's] *Aenesidemus* has shaken my own system to its very foundations, and since one cannot very well live under the open sky, I was forced to construct a new system.
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> —J. G. Fichte, draft of a letter to J. F. Flatt, late 1793[9]

In many ways, the end of the eighteenth century in Europe was as disquieting and unnerving as it was filled with promise. Neither Kant's high-flown transcendental arguments for a legislative role for intellect in human cognition nor Reinhold's ordinary-language attempt to make the same point through an analysis of

representation that hovered somewhere between psychology and epistemology could counter the power of willful doubt. The old order was crumbing, the authority of established powers, political and ecclesiastical, was undercut, and a new spirit of experimentalism—neither as open or candid as Goethe's Werther nor as certain and self-assertive as the never-aging Faust of that drama's second part—took over the literary and scientific worlds. The world of knowledge was expanding, although not yet beyond the capacities of singular intellects of encyclopedic reach and genuine diversity; musicians became astronomers, poets became ministers of state, and newly minted scientific disciplines were captained by entrepreneurs working in carriage houses rather than universities. Although the cultivated celebrated the cult of "genius," the mob was at work in the street below—-or the country just over the border—and the world of learning was just waking to the subterranean movements of social groups, of economic activity and international trade, and of political organization and conflict. Fichte's words echo the resolve of one who has no choice but to rebuild in just the place the earthquake has brought down the house. System, although perhaps claustrophobic or leaky (as Kierkegaard and Heidegger reminded us[10]) is at least shelter against the open sky of uncertainty and lack of direction. Whether one can find eternal foundations is a chancy prospect once one has been forced to give in to Galileo and admit that the earth moves.

The inflated rhetoric of one of Kant's "deductions"—or of those constructed with such ingenuity by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel in his footsteps—hides the absence of an interlocutor or the background murmur of the skeptic who finds talk of postulating unseen but necessary conditions for the possibility of experience every bit as obtuse as the flat-footed assertions of vulgar realists and idealists who claim they see "things" or "sensations." Underneath the interminable deductions are dodgy starting-points and perplexing methodologies secured by uneasy comparisons to cognitive domains that we ordinarily think actually "work" such as mathematics or geometry. These scientific pretenders have put themselves in dignified dress and walk about in public as "synthetic method," or "intellectual intuition," or "dialectic"—but Heidegger tartly reminds us the apt riposte of the anti-systematic Friedrich Schlegel to the concept of a fundamental "dialectic of identity and difference": "A definition which is not funny is not worthwhile."[11] And if our professional philosophers are not often so loose as to find each others' starting points and methodologies a matter of humor, they do pointedly ignore each others' detailed arguments and go for the quick: to question whether the foundation or premises are clear and persuasive, or as the geometers say *are evident,* whether the argument in general is transparent or mere subterfuge, and hence whether the claimed result or *quod erat demonstrandum* actually follows. Whereas most academic philosophers were and are fairly confident that they can either charm or stupefy in the lecture hall, those who conduct their business in private correspondence are both more honest and direct. So

just as the wise reader will find it unprofitable to doze by the fire with the author of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and will go to the *Objections and Replies* for some fresh air, the reader of the vast systems of the German idealists will turn to comments of public critics to get a handle on her authors, or, in our case, to the letters Fichte and Schelling exchanged in their "growth years," where packed between tidbits of business and gossip—and some overwrought accusations and histrionics—one can find some earnest attempts to probe and uncover foundations and (un)certainties.

Just as Socratic *elenchus* and Platonic dialectic had as their social background the aggressive confrontations of that singular Greek invention, the law court, one might argue that the one-into-many, I-into-not-I, identity-into-difference, and I-into-We gymnastics of the new *dialectic* practiced by Kant's successors had as much to do with the plurality of social voices and the social conflicts unleashed by Enlightenment and Revolution as with the self-undermining ratiocination that Kant diagnosed as the conduct of empty concepts loosed from the controls of sensible intuition. Before the political "old order" dissolved in the tumultuous events in France that began with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in 1789, the voices of enlightened social critics such as Hume and Adam Smith, Voltaire and Diderot, and Lessing and Herder had attacked the power of ancient institutions and entrenched beliefs and had begun to show that complex systems of human reason and sensibility, social organization and individual initiative, deployed over a spectrum of development that was both natural and historical, underpinned the emergence of "bourgeois man." But the old order did not spontaneously combust or disintegrate into the chaos of the Parisian mob or the frenzied bloodbath of "public safety" officials, at least in German lands where some sense of sanctity, order, and history combined with "enlightened policy" and a penchant for learning kept the most progressive minds occupied in the corridors of power—seminaries, courts, and universities. Battles were fought, of course, but largely with the pen and not the sword.

The Quarrel Between Philosophy and *Poesie*

> Unending free activity arises in us through free renunciation of the absolute—the only possible absolute that can be given us and that we only find through our inability to attain and know an absolute.
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> —Novalis, *Fichte Studies* #566[12]

One can frame the disagreements of Fichte and Schelling in the context of four notable debates or "culture-war" skirmishes that irrupted in German lands late in the eighteenth century, and that pitted literary giants, the so-called classicists

and romantics, against philosophers. The first two surround the "rehabilitation" of Spinoza, although perhaps the "re-" is a misnomer because even in the free-thinking low countries of the seventeenth century, Spinoza could not teach in any public way nor have visible disciples in the academy. The conversations on Spinoza between the Enlightenment dramatist, historian, critic, and advocate of religious tolerance Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the younger anti-Kantian polemicist and novelist Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi that occurred in July 1780 touched off a thirty-year firestorm of pamphlets, tracts, and denunciations that generally are referred to as the "Pantheism Controversy." Whether Lessing was engaging in sly humor or being quite sincere in confessing to Jacobi that he was a Spinozist—read "atheist," "determinist," "nihilist"—Jacobi was unambiguous in his response, which was to jump off the cliff of rationalism in hope that a *salto mortale* into the "I know not what" of faith (*Glaube)* would save him from the murky *hen kai pan* of Lessing and later the Jena romantics. The literary fracas between Jacobi and Lessing's posthumous defender, Moses Mendelssohn, guaranteed that the very words "Spinoza," "pantheism," and "faith" provoked immediate reaction for decades to come, visible everywhere from Goethe's *Faust* to the *Correspondence* between Fichte and Schelling, and even to Hegel's *Faith and Knowledge.*[13] Lessing and Jacobi's conversations triggered a deep confrontation between skeptical and traditional voices in the "enlightened" world. The second contest was a repercussion of the first: By the 1790s, suddenly Spinoza was fashionable, even touted as the only logically consistent dogmatist, whether or not one wanted to stand with him. Everyone wanted to find some sort of "synthesis" of Spinozistic pantheism or determinism with whatever seemed to still work of the old humanism—the *Poesie* of the romantics, the voluntarism of the transcendental idealists, and the belief in religious inspiration among orthodox theologians. Whether these elements can be mixed without provoking inconsistency, laughter, or "dialectic," everyone wanted to try his hand at it. Kant's posthumous notes from quite late in his life suggest that even he dabbled with Spinozism. At one point he comments that Spinozism, with its "seeing all things in God," is quite like transcendental idealism in wanting to adumbrate a system of all possible objects of experience under one principle; at another Kant calls Spinoza, Schelling, and Lichtenberg (a follower of Fichte and a *Naturphilosoph*) the "past, present, and future of transcendental philosophy."[14] Fichte's letters to Schelling bristle with accusations of him being "soft on Spinozism." Fichte had been offended at the young Schelling's suggestion (in the 1775 *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*) that one could view Spinozism and Critical Philosophy as equally valid philosophies. For Fichte, one's decision between the two will be led by one's interest: If one is interested in *things* one will opt for Spinozism, if in becoming a free agent, for Criticism.[15] At one point in the *Correspondence,* Schelling recalls an apparently damning line from Fichte's 1794

Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre where the author suggests that the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is "Spinozism made systematic," except that every I is itself the one substance.[16]

The latter two debates are more about means than ends, for everyone in Germany more or less agreed that Kant was on target with a morality of conscience or obligation rather than results, and that the synoptic view of reality promoted by the natural sciences could and should be reconciled with an updated humanism that integrated the private conscience of the individual and the social power of communities, economic association and small- and large-scale political entities. Friedrich Schiller and Fichte took different routes to a naturalistic morality of conscience, the former suggesting an aesthetic-psychological attunement of reason and sensibility as a tool for mass moral education, the latter dramatically bringing the Categorical Imperative from the philosophers' Olympus down to the marketplace in a social philosophy that made the Other both the limit of my will and the remote source of the objectivity of all my perceptions. Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1793–1795) tempered the rigor of Kant's uncompromising demands centered on universality, the dignity of the moral agent, and a projected social order that secured both freedom and dignity with the anthropological concerns about moral pedagogy and behavioral reinforcement; the empty play of opposed faculties that Kant had nodded to in his analysis of aesthetic creativity had a positive social function—education into a lively and motivating sense of human equality, free from the ambiguity of Kant's term *autonomy*. What was essentially creative in Schiller's reading of Kant was to use the *Third Critique* as a tool for reading Kant's moral philosophy. Fichte's philosophy is more centrally concerned with the moral order as envisioned by Kant himself, where the appearance of an other will opposite mine both limits my agency and provides the "push back" that shows up in cognition as the feeling of necessity (or "reality") correlated with perception and in a natural order of "things" constructed from perceptions. That the other is the "limit of my will" is an idea that goes back to Moses Maimonides[17]; that both "my" will and that of putative others arises only in an intersubjective framework is a strikingly modern idea, especially because Fichte makes the *willing* that I am and the *constraint* of the other the primitive entities of his transcendental philosophy, much the way we commonly project biological, social, and primitive moral constraints as the basis of our neo-Darwinian anthropological explanations. The core of the social order and the legal framework that cements it is the shared intuition that "I must limit my freedom by the possibility of the freedom of the other."[18]

A final disagreement concerns the different directions that the romantic writers and literary critics of Jena and the post-Kantian idealists took in fashioning an account of the realms of nature and freedom, and of the tension between

the role of the individual and the influence of the social whole in critically regulating human conduct. Although both Fichte and Schelling shared certain enthusiasms and especially political beliefs with the Jena romantics, there was a mutual distrust among them, based in part on the competition for public forums for their views. A good deal of the *Fichte-Schelling Correspondence* in 1800 and early in 1801 recounts intrigues around the founding and editorship of a "common front" journal that would generally advance the cause of transcendental philosophy and specifically review recent contributions in science, art, and letters that harmonized (or failed to harmonize) with the Kantian spirit. Beyond this competition for access to the educated public, the philosophers and literary spirits of Jena took decidedly different approaches to locating the source of human freedom, Fichte and Schelling in general looking to the tensions and movements of the social whole, while the poets, critics, and theologians of the Romantic Circle started and ended with the human individual.

G. F. P. Hardenberg ("Novalis"), for example, had a complicated relationship to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre.* His earnest study of the 1794 *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* propelled him, in the name of freedom, to a radically free-form, antisystematic form of philosophizing. Breaking with Fichte pointedly in the matter of form, Novalis advocated a micro-philosophy that encapsulated the whole of phenomenal reality—which Fichte had tried to catalog and laboriously "deduce—in the singular poetic insight. "An authentic philosophical system must systematize freedom and unendingness, or, to express it more strikingly, it must systematize systemlessness," he writes in 1795–1796.[19] Working on a complex theory of signs where an individual item or "trace" can function now as a subject, now as an object, Novalis attempts to capture the self-sundering, self-objectifying, and ultimately self-recognizing creativity of the Fichtean I as a play in which there is no privileged position: "Being, being-I, being free and oscillating are all synonyms—one expression refers to the others—it is simply the matter of a single fact."[20]

At the time that concerns us, Schelling was most influenced by Ludwig Tieck of all the Jena romantics, and it is probable that through Tieck and Novalis he became acquainted with the theosophical dramas of Jakob Böhme that would figure so prominently in his speculations on God, freedom, and the nature of evil that occupied his thought from 1809 to 1815. Through Böhme, Tieck introduced the idea of religious conversion, organic unity with nature, and the practice of highly idiosyncratic creativity or *Poesie* to the Jena circle.[21] The retrieval of "old and curious things," medieval religion included, was a mark of Tieck's influence. *Poesie* was infinitely flexible in form, capable of retrieval of the past and prophetic flights to a utopian future. Its practitioners were not constrained, as were their philosophical fellow-travelers, to account for the world *as it is*, hence their unconventional, if not anarchic practices,

launched under the banner of the harmony of truth, beauty, and freedom. In romantic hands, fiction freed itself from verisimilitude and became prized as a world-transforming power.

Friedrich Schlegel was probably the most philosophically erudite author of the Romantic Circle. Between 1796 and 1801 he attended Fichte's lectures and undertook lengthy studies of Kant, Herder, Fichte, and Spinoza. His philosophy is as nonfoundationalist and antisystematic as that of Hardenberg and its mode of expression even more striking. He championed an ideal of art as "formed chaos," and prized wit, irony, and narratives incapable of definite interpretation as the ways to open up an infinity of perspectives. Schlegel's idea of romantic "form" was universal and all-embracing, committed to mixing genres and overturning fixed convention. Like Novalis, his reaction to Fichte's endless and tightly wrought deductions involved the deliberate antithesis, the embrace of the fragment, which "like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog."[22] Schlegel's idea of philosophical system—quite unlike Fichte's 1794 three ground-principles or the flexible mixed method of the 1796/1799 *nova methodo* lectures where intellectual intuition, hypothesis, deduction, and bridging synthesis are all deployed to bring one as near as possible to the whole truth[23]—was blatantly circular, and open to using not only alternative proofs but alternative concepts. Essentially agreeing with Novalis that "Everywhere we seek the unconditioned [*das Unbedingte*], but find only things [*Dinge*]," Schlegel finds in the romantic work of art a complete universe, an exercise of creativity that, freed from the external reference of classical canons or conventional realism, provides its own criterion and that erases the boundary between the work of art and criticism.[24] Most importantly for our concerns, Schlegel hoped to produce a synthesis of Fichte's philosophy of freedom with Spinoza's naturalism, a hope shared by Schelling at least in the years 1799 to 1801.[25]

"Atheism" and the Turn Toward Philosophical Religion

> True atheism, genuine unbelief and godlessness, consists in pettifogging over the consequences of one's actions, of refusing to hearken to the voice of one's own conscience. . . . The living and efficaciously acting moral order is itself God. We require no other God, nor can we grasp any other.
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> —J. G. Fichte, *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World* (1798)[26]

If these words had not forced Fichte to resign his professorship in Jena and depart for Berlin in June 1799, we would not have the remarkable series of letters that passed between Fichte and Schelling in the succeeding two years.

In effect, Fichte had fired himself from the tolerant University of Jena rather than receive a "slap on the wrist" reprimand from the Weimar Court over his publication of a blatantly atheistic article by F. K. Forberg in his *Philosophical Journal* entitled "On the Development of the Concept of Religion," which he prefaced with his own essay that was rather tame by Enlightenment standards and not far removed from the spirit, if not the letter, of Kant's moral religion. Academic freedom was well-respected at Jena, although the Weimar Court had technically acceded to the demands of the Saxony Court, which in response to the complaints of an outraged parent, had ordered all copies of the offending essays seized and destroyed and threatened to withdraw all its students from Jena. With characteristic overreaction, Fichte had announced beforehand that he would resign if censured, and so he removed himself from the hotbed of transcendental idealism that Jena had become in the 1790s to a life of relative obscurity in Berlin. Weimar issued its pro-forma rescript with an acceptance of Fichte's resignation appended.[27]

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Fichte's claim in 1798 that we can grasp no God other a living and effective moral order, but as his thinking unfolds from 1799 to 1802, much more ontological weight accrues to this entity or force that comes to be viewed as the ground of what humans experience as consciousness, nature, and the intersubjective nest of right, obligation, and moral demand. In *The Vocation of Man* (1800) Fichte begins to speak of "faith" (*Glaube*), the situation where the actual world is seen as ringed by and determined through the immediate consciousness of a preorientation of our freedom and power toward a rational end, the future perfection of humanity. "We act not because we know, but we know because we are called upon to act."[28] The finite I is fundamentally *will* or deed, its own act, and causal chains of consequences extend from it not only in the world of appearance but in an invisible or intelligible order. One can only think of a harmonization of such agents in an "absolute will," whose function is to be the bond of the spiritual world and enable will to act upon will. Whether this "absolute will" is really another will or just an abstract aspect of my will in double appearance as the voice of conscience commanding me to respect the Other and my pure obedience to the command, it is clear that Fichte's absolute will is a "moral God" as figured in this popular work. The Infinite Will is itself the moral order.[29]

The unity-and-community of willing that Fichte sketches in 1800 looks quite a bit like Leibniz's kaleidoscope of monads refracting and apparently interacting with one another on the ground of a prime monad or cosmic actor-presenter. Fichte struggles to give a properly philosophical account of this "intelligible world" over the next two years. His letters to Schelling repeatedly turn to the promise that the elaboration of the intelligible realm will clarify all obscurities in the *Wissenschaftslehre,* or to talk of a "final synthesis." Schelling confesses he cannot follow this new "doctrine of religion" and so can do no

more than suspend judgment on the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its current incomplete form.[30] But Fichte sporadically persisted in his attempts to think through this ultimate ground in theoretical terms as the ground of consciousness. In one letter to Schelling, he notes there is a huge difference between embedding a system in a "fundamental reflex" (*Grundreflex*) and trying to ground a system on "reflection."[31] He does not there explain what the difference is, but in the 1800 *New Version of the Wissenschaftslehre,* he provides several hints: the *Grundreflex* is what Kant called the "I think" that necessarily accompanies all definite acts of consciousness, or the omnipresent activity that precedes all consciousness as its necessary condition. It is also called the self-determining intuition prior to the I's determined consciousness that displays itself in finite states of consciousness and actions, or the "pure reflex" that is prior to the subject.[32] The "Historical Narrative" of the early pages of this manuscript refers back to concepts like the "self-reversion" of the 1794 *Foundations* and the "agility" and "intellectual intuition" of the *nova methodo* lectures given from 1796 to 1799.[33]

The *New Version* is a fragmentary manuscript, and to illuminate it one must turn to an even stranger manuscript, the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801–1802. Here Fichte's late-found philosophical theism reaches it apogee in the idea of an absolute being, related to the absolute knowing that the *Wissenschaftslehre* reconstructs by a "hiatus" or chasm"; *inside* absolute knowing, being is indeed related to knowing, but this relation is grounded in the absolute or *being* itself, not in knowing.[34] In one passage, the "*Grundreflex"* seems to be given a clear and unambiguous meaning, but one that associates it with "absolute being" rather than the consciousness-associated descriptors of "agility" or "self-reversion" or Kant's ever-self-present "I think":

> Lastly, what was the ground of this idea of a closed system of mutually determined intelligences, determined in the pure thought of reason-intuition and the perception-thought derived from it? It was absolute being itself, which conditions knowing—and is hence an absolute mutual penetration of the two. The deepest root of all knowing is the unattainable union of *pure* thought and the thought of the perception that we have described. This [union] equals the moral law, the most sublime case of all intuition, since it comprehends intelligence as its own absolute real-ground. This union is absolutely not a matter of this or that kind of knowing, but absolute knowing, simply as such.[35]

Although he initially mocked Fichte's theistic turn,[36] Schelling soon enough found it easy to turn from talk of an absolute identity that is the ground of all

quantitative difference among appearances (an "indifference" or neither-nor of all possible predicates and states) back to the name "God," whose philosophical meaning Kant had glossed as the compendium of all possible predicates.[37] Prompted by the naturalist and mathematician Carl Eschenmayer, who argued that identity-philosophy provided not a steep ascent to the absolute, but a highway to a base-camp from which any further journey must be undertaken not by philosophy but by faith,[38] Schelling begins to call the "absolute" God in his 1804 *Philosophy and Religion,* and to make moves to clarify his rather imprecise and "personal" idea of *intellectual intuition*: Intellectual intuition is not: (a) a perception of inner sense that finite understanding turns into a concept, (b) a compendium of all possible predicates, their universal disjunction, or (c) the common element in all predicates, a private, psychological event.[39] Schelling provides a more precise positive discussion in the 1804 lectures on *The System of Philosophy in General.* It involves a five-step argument that starts from three theses put forward in the 1801 *Presentation of My System:*

1. Knowing involves identity of knower and known,
2. Reason transcends subjectivity or personality,
3. Reason's sole rule is the law of identity,

and adds two new theses:

4. God is the content of reason's self-recognizing self-affirmation, and
5. This self-affirmation involves insight into the impossibility of nihilism and so answers Leibniz's fundamental question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"[40]

Thus understood, intellectual intuition delivers an impersonal and atemporal background of reason free of subjectivity; it supplies only modal necessity, not the kind of knowledge mediated by perception that can result in existential propositions. Whether at this high altitude of discussion there is any convergence between Fichte's *Grundreflex* and Schelling's intellectual intuition—or whether the one is inevitably still "idealistic" and the other "realistic"—is something that cannot be decided here. It seems a contest between a claimed *omnipresent* intuition "I think" that accompanies every concrete state of mind and an unavoidable horizon of thinking that must always pronounce "There must be something rather than nothing." Put into propositions, each formula delivers a distorted version of a fundamental experience, a completely global horizon of consciousness, or an identically infinite horizon of being.

"The Difference" Between Fichte and Schelling, 1800–1802

> One cannot proceed from a *being* . . . , but one has to proceed from a *seeing*.
>
> —Letter 19, Fichte in Berlin to Schelling in Jena, May 31 to August 7, 1801

The *Correspondence* that this volume presents as an introduction to a handful of crucial works of both philosophers in the pertinent years is full of the chaos of life, as well as earnestness of thought. We bypass the matters of personalities and publishers,[41] and head straight for the most problematic issue: Although both parties contend there is but *one difference* that separates them, each phrases it differently or sidesteps the issue and instead discusses minor difficulties that present themselves at the moment, perhaps in what the other party said in the last letter.

By way of introduction to the letters, we can list three candidates for "the difference" that are relatively distinct as long as we treat them abstractly. In any given patch of the discussion, they may be intermingled or interwoven. It is natural in cataloging the shortcomings of an adversary, or a friend who has brought disappointment, to move from one offense to the other, and this is typically the way the episodes of "pure" philosophizing in the letters unfold.

The Status of Being in Transcendental Idealism

Fichte took up the Kantian heritage in a doubly idealistic way, adopting not only the general methodology of transcendental explanation but taking the Kantian analysis of moral obligation as the key clue for deciphering the nature of consciousness. Unlike most of modern philosophy up to Reinhold, the primitive data for Fichtean phenomenology are not "representation" and the subject that has the representation; instead, there is a single situation in which the self-activity of an agent finds itself limited, strives to push back one and every boundary, and comes to a satisfaction at once limited and extensive in an intersubjective context of recognition and realization shared by many finite subjects. Representation floats on a dynamic surface of interactions that morph into the biological and psychological phenomena of embodied consciousness—feelings, strivings, drives—and only on top of that interactive basis can "objects" and "perceptions" be established. The 1794 *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre,* a provisional student handout that was liable to be misread in several important ways, needed to be read backwards to reveal this doubly idealist perspective: there are no things as such, no presentations either, no stationary states of being, and no beings.

Schelling's early essays moved in the more conventional framework of Kantian epistemology, with subjects and objects, representations and entities, categories and intuitions treated in a conventional or reified manner. Schelling's chief argument for the subjectivity of the absolute, as he imagined it early on, was the impossibility of an infinite entity being an object or having thing-like existence. Hence, although both Fichte's and Schelling's philosophical ambitions were of similarly wide or systematic scope, from the very first Fichte's path was to fashion the *Wissenschaftslehre* from within, from self-activity and self-intuition, while Schelling worked on a vast fresco deployed over an external assemblage of objects, fundamentally alien even though artistry could transform them into a temple of spirit. This preference for thought over live intuition, for being or being-determined over self-determination endlessly irritated Fichte, although Schelling on his part did not react well to numerous hints, direct, indirect, and some even delivered by way of written comments to third parties, that he "didn't get it."[42]

The heart of the face-off over the priority of intuition or being in transcendental philosophy comes fairly late in the exchange, after Fichte has read and commented on Schelling's *Presentation of My System of Philosophy.* Commenting on Schelling's new standpoint, Fichte maintains that the new system has being or an absolute real ground as its principle, even if that principle is given the lofty name "reason." Philosophy, he argues, must proceed from a *seeing,* not a *being.* If it starts from anything other than a living intuition of self-activity ("intellectual intuition"), it is simply realism, a greater or lesser sketch of Spinozism, and is quite unable to account for freedom or spontaneous activity and the consciousness that derives from it.[43] Schelling's reply suggests there is no privileged access to an underlying realm of activity or spontaneous self-reversion in consciousness; Fichte simply starts from the surface phenomena of apparent freedom and deduces his way to an ultimate real ground, but the procedure is arbitrary and invented, much like Kant's concoction of moral philosophy between the bookend postulates of freedom and God. Schelling proceeds to undiplomatically poke fun at the *Vocation of Man* for locating the real ground wholly beyond the realm of knowing, in *faith.* He suggests that as early as the 1795 *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* he has, perhaps inarticulately and "sentimentally," pointed beyond idealism to a reconciling element, being, which truly comprehends both itself and its other.[44] The *Letters* had been an early flashpoint between the two philosophers; in reply to Schelling's contention that one can arbitrary choose to be a realist or idealist, and that both constructions may have useful purchase, Fichte argued in the 1797 *First Introduction* that one's character will dictate the choice of one's philosophy, and that only a person too slack to be interested in freedom will opt for a world-picture that makes him a thing among things. "The kind of philosophy one chooses thus depends on

the person one is. For a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; instead it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it."[45]

The Role of Nature in Freedom

As soon as Schelling began to develop a philosophy of nature under the aegis of transcendental philosophy in 1797, Fichte became uneasy. When he studied the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism,* he was troubled both by the way that work granted explanatory priority to nature rather than consciousness, and way nature seemed to be viewed *alongside* consciousness as an independent domain. Following Kant's concept of matter as the impenetrable occupation of space based on the interaction of one activity with another, Schelling constructs a model of nature developed from graduated levels of dynamic action and interaction. Fichte finds this contrary to the method of transcendental idealism, where intelligence arises not from brute interactions of unintelligent forces, but, as in moral agency, from *self-limitation.*[46] He writes to Schelling that transcendental philosophy cannot grant an independent status to nature—or to consciousness either. It must instead *fictionally* construct both from the same real-ideal activity of the I. Nature can appear to *Wissenschaftslehre* only as something found, finished, perfected—operating according to the laws of intelligence because it has been abstracted from intelligence and nurtured as a fictional construct.[47] One could infer that whatever activity and development are found in nature come from the artistry inherent in science.

Schelling response gives notice to Fichte that his anxieties are *not* misplaced. Rather than acknowledge that *Wissenschaftslehre* and philosophy are coextensive, Schelling regards the former as a propaedeutic to the latter. Philosophy arises only when the philosopher abstracts from the subjectivity that posited the subject-object in an ideal or psychological mode and proceeded to examine the human faculties of mind; the abstraction evidently threshes the activity found in *Wissenschaftslehre* from its personal hull and enables the philosopher to work with the "pure" subject-object, the principle of theoretical or natural philosophy. Only as a result of observing and describing the self-construction of reality in nature-philosophy can the philosopher, in a separate-but-equal transcendental science, launch into the construction of consciousness on the basis of organic and animate nature. Schelling points in his introduction to the genetically organized *System of Transcendental Idealism* proper as the place where he signaled the equiprimordial status of transcendental and natural philosophies and cut himself loose from the "mere logic" of Fichte's construction.[48] The essential structure of identity-philosophy, which Schelling will unveil in the spring of the next year, is in place: Philosophy is a tripartite but organic whole, introduced by a logic

or abstract metaphysics of identity, and fleshed out by two complementary real-philosophies, those of nature and of consciousness.

Fichte's first reply is a letter he left unsent.[49] His displeasure is quite evident. The best that philosophy of nature can do to *explain* nature is to analogically import the vitality of consciousness into nature; that may produce a heuristic account *for* the actor-observer, but it nowhere touches anything outside of finite consciousness. Although in this sense, nature can be explained from consciousness, the reverse will never occur. Consciousness is *sui generis,* and any attempt to back away from this lands one in the muddled Spinozism of Schlegel and Schleiermacher, or the even more muddled realism of Reinhold and Bardili.[50] Fichte penned and sent a quieter response that simply noted that Schelling's philosophy of nature does not follow from the principles of transcendental idealism, as previously understood, but would require an expansion of those principles. The "transcendental philosophy of the intelligible" that he soon hoped to write, would provide such an expansion.[51] The unsent draft supplies more detail on how this *might* happen: Previous versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* brought to light the nature of *finite* consciousness, the awareness of an apparently external reality sandwiched between activity that manifests as feeling and the command of conscience. A theory of the intelligible world would expand the account to the *noumenal order,* and Fichte seems to give hope to the idea that nature could be given a philosophical account on the basis of this noumenal activity, which he also calls "God."[52]

In the 1800 *New Version of the Wissenschaftslehre* there is mention of the author's intent to oppose Schelling's *separate* philosophy of nature, but aside from the general line of argumentation, that object-consciousness—hence object-oriented presentation or activity— necessarily presupposes an immediate self-consciousness that is prereflexive and cannot itself be an object of consciousness, no clear line of argument against Schelling's view of nature is formulated.[53] In the preface to his 1801 *Presentation of My System,* Schelling made clear that he had always presented philosophy of nature *alongside* transcendental philosophy, not as subordinate to it or derived from anything less than the "absolute identity" or "indifference" of the natural and the transcendental that the new system asserts. Although in letters to Fichte he contends that conscious intelligence is just a higher potency of activity in nature, and hence in some sense emergent from natural organization,[54] *My System* concludes its Spinozistic deduction of absolute identity and the framework of nature with the promise to first *purify* activity in organic nature until the account arrives at the absolute indifference-point, and from there construct a separate wholly *positive* account of the three levels that displayed themselves *negatively* in inorganic and animate nature. It is not quite clear whether at this point in his philosophical development, Schelling thinks that consciousness exists *alongside* nature or as *part* of nature

or as *emergent* within nature.[55] It is clear, however, that none of these versions of "naturalism" are acceptable to Fichte.

Although Fichte's reading notes of *Schelling's* new system do not often refer to nature, the 1801–1802 *Wissenschaftslehre* demonstrates a positive attempt on Fichte's part to refute what he takes to be the strongest form of Schelling's naturalism—the *emergent* or *developmental* view that consciousness rests on, presumes, and in some sense is dependent on its organic basis in nature. One can perhaps *think of* consciousness as originating in some primordial freedom, he argues, but one cannot *perceive* that it *has* originated in that way; there is no necessity accompanying the thought, and so no objectivity lending weight to the hypothesis.[56] Nature *need be* conceived as no more than an interworking of mechanical drives, a play of nonlocal forces universally permeating the whole of being and thus coercing it uniformly in every point; conscious agency, however, presupposes individual points of agency and efficacy, hence the capacity for novelty and *starting anew* that we call "freedom." Nature is uniform and homeostatic, whereas the social order is differentiated and sometimes erratic, hence a field of singular actions performed by plural agents. Nature is the domain of the all-alike, whereas the ethical order is a harmonization of unique individuals.[57] Fichte at one point offers a definite contrast between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and what he calls the "new Spinozism": "Knowing is supposed to come about as a necessary consequence of nature, a higher power of nature—taking the term in a sense that extends all the way to empirical being. But this contradicts the inner nature of knowing, which is to be absolute origination, a coming into being from the essence of freedom, not of being."[58]

Philosophical Methodology: Transcendental or Absolute Idealism?

Although Fichte and Schelling seem almost viscerally focused on rejecting each other's approach to explaining nature and freedom (as universal and singular modes of activity), a subtler difference between the two concerns the question of philosophical methodology, or in their jargon, "intellectual intuition" and "philosophical construction." Each tries to convince the other that his efforts have a credible and solid Kantian basis—Schelling refers to the *Third Critique*'s discussion of reason's demand for unconditioned necessary, Fichte to the *First Critique*'s picture of knowing as a synthesis of concepts and intuitions. Fichte clarifies his more recent thoughts about methodology in the *Announcement* for the *New Version of the Wissenschaftslehre* as an active but systematic knowing, a *mathesis* proceeding in something like geometrical "evidence," whose every element is an intuition.[59] Indeed, Fichte had previously rejected the idea that a "thought" is anything other than an arrested intuition, a single frame snipped from the cinematic flow of the I's essentially self-reverting activity or *agility.*[60]

Schelling seems to have a slightly more conceptual approach, even when he uses the same term, "intellectual intuition," for his version of reason-intuition is a convergence of ultimate opposites—knower and known, subject and object, universality and particularity—which merge in an ultimately self-actualizing idea, something like the old metaphysical idea of the ontological proof of God's existence, but this time done from God's stance, not from the outside, and resulting in something more dynamic and illuminating than "certainty" about an outside entity's existence.[61] Although he does not use Fichte's language of freedom and act to speak of reason and its work, what Schelling does say of it presumes a contemplative activity in the reader that ultimately sparks into the experience of the convergence of knower and known. The first nine theorems of the 1801 *Presentation of My System* are extraordinarily difficult in that they wall the reader round with ultimate abstractions—"reason," "identity," "the absolute"—which demand sacrifice of reflection, subjectivity, and personal point of view if they are to be conceived at all. It is perhaps with some justification that Fichte complains of this systematic starting-point that it lacks all evidence unless one assumes things smuggled in from the *Wissenschaftslehre.*[62] One can imagine his agitated state of mind when he writes of the whole attempt: "*Polyphemus without an eye*."[63]

From his side, Schelling seems to have no detailed knowledge of the starting-point and methodology of Fichte's *second* Jena system, delivered in the *nova methodo* lectures of 1796/1799 and put before the public in but a few scant pages published in 1797[64]; he seems to take the 1794 *Foundations* as the definitive, not the initial, form of Fichte's system. Fichte's "intellectual intuition" involves grasping that the I that is *self-conscious* when it is conscious of *something* is immediately and indubitably conscious of itself. This is Kant's "*I think*" that accompanies all representations, and it is the transcendental ground of all representations, all object-consciousness. It is transcendental, not empirical; were it empirical, one would have an endless regress of new states that grasped the *last* state of consciousness, but never self-consciousness. When one responds to the command, "think yourself," one has self-consciousness, and the reason that is so is because, first, one *does* the I, and second, one interrupts the previous flow of states of consciousness with the novelty of the response to the command. Fichte's argument is not about Cartesian certainty or claimed self-access; it is about activity, spontaneity, and agility intuited in immediate self-consciousness. Descartes' meditative claims were first-order and his "I think" is empirical; Fichte's intellectual intuition, as he tries to clarify in a very difficult letter to Schelling, is second-order, and although immediate, it is more fundamental, one might say ever present, than any empirical state of mind or object-cognition.[65] On this basis, Fichte can say that Schelling is correct in talking about the identity of knowing and being on a relative, that

is, first-order or empirical, level. But such a correct grasp of relative truth is just half-truth and will not provide the systematic foundation for transcendental idealism that they both seek.

It is curious that Fichte writes to Schelling on these methodological matters with such assurance, or that the writings of 1797 lay out such an impeccably simple path to intellectual intuition and the I that performs it. When one turns to the fragmentary sketches of the 1800 *New Version of the Wissenschaftslehre,* one sees a writer tormented by doubts about whether he can communicate what he thinks, or even whether he can steadily and clearly think what he intermittently thinks. Schelling never lacks self-assurance, but the round-about way he expounds intellectual intuition and its object (i.e., the indifference absolute that is the neither-nor of all possible predicates) leaves him open to Fichte's charge that his method is wholly conceptual, nothing other than reflection or discursive intellect seeking to heal the rift in reflection itself and so unable to get beyond a purely conceptual formula: the *neither–nor* of knowing and being, or subject and object, and so on.

Schelling's best explanation of intellectual intuition in 1801–1802 is buried in a footnote summary that links the two segments of his essays on methodology that were separated in different issues of his journal. There he says:

> Since reason is challenged to conceive the absolute neither as thought nor as being, but still to think it, a contradiction arises for reflection since it conceives the absolute as *either* a case of thinking *or* one of being. But intellectual intuition enters even into this contradiction and produces the absolute. In this breakthrough lies the luminous point where the absolute is positively intuited.[66]

The passage goes on to explain that although the function of intuition is thus negative within reflection, within philosophical construction it is positive and actually exhibits the absolute as a process of interweaving opposites (*Ineinsbildung*)—an analogy with the work of the imagination guided by aesthetic genius that produces totality in finite form and reconciles opposites in one concrete shape.[67] This sounds more prosaic than Fichte's unearthing of the primordial self-consciousness underneath all acts of consciousness, but note that there is a tacit appeal to subjectivity or personal experience in the word "breakthrough" and a tacit invocation of "genius" that the word *Ineinsbildung* brings with it. But should the philosopher take her stand with the mystic and the artistic creator as part of the ruling elite, or is the call to selfhood and freedom implicit in living in a republic of laws and a community of those bound by morality a more universal and shareable experience? In either case, it seems there must be some empirical analog to anchor transcendental philosophy.