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## Identity as the Provocation and Crisis for Theory: [Re]Introducing F. W. J. Schelling

If we postulate a God whom we are to imagine as a living, personal being, we are forced to consider Him altogether human; we must assume that His life bears the strictest analogy to that of the human being, and that alongside the eternal Being there prevails in Him an eternal becoming; in short, [we must assume] that He has everything in common with man *except for man's dependency* . . .

Schelling (7,432)

God is not debased to the level of man, but on the contrary, man is experienced in what drives him beyond himself in terms of those necessities by which he is established as that other. The "normal man" of all ages will never recognize what it is to be that other because it means to him the absolute disruption of existence. Man—that other—he alone must be the one through whom the God can reveal himself at all, if he reveals himself.

Heidegger

Within the itinerary of German post-Kantian philosophy, which has traditionally elicited very mixed responses within its small Anglo-Saxon audience, Schelling still seems the most problematic philosophical figure to place. Unlike Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, Schelling appears to offer neither the distinctive *Propedeutic* or "groundwork" of Kant's critical philosophy, nor is he known as the author of one ground-breaking book, such as Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Instead, his seemingly discontinuous intellectual profile and his emphatically mystical and speculative overtones, beginning, perhaps, as early as his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, have prompted an earlier generation of his readers to dismiss him as being largely of transitional significance, a mediator between the early, critical Idealism of Kant and Fichte and the highly distinctive, systematic qualities of Hegel's thought. Such a functional approach has also prompted the division of Schelling's

philosophy into a series of successive stages, with the logic of such a division often straddling the fence between the embarrassment of philosophical irresolution and a slightly more redeeming assessment of Schelling as the "Protean" thinker whose "phases" bear a complementary relation to one another.<sup>1</sup> Already a reaffirmation of the anagogical narrative of German philosophy "From Kant to Hegel," such a reading of Schelling receives additional corroboration by a secondary, binary opposition in Schelling's career; for Schelling's intellectual biography can also be broken down into that of the young, brilliant, and highly visible figurehead of post-Kantian Idealism whose works were published vigorously between 1794 and 1809 and the later Schelling, brooding over private misfortune and a seemingly elusive "melancholy" of Being, who virtually ceased to publish after 1809. This silence, it is true, coincides almost precisely with the widespread recognition of Hegel's intellectual powers on publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. However, as Martin Heidegger suggests, Schelling's virtually uninterrupted silence subsequent to the publication of his 1809 essay *On the Essence of Human Freedom*, "means neither a resting on his previous achievements nor an extinction of the power of thought. If the shaping of his actual work was never completed, this was due to the manner of questioning which Schelling grew into after his treatise on freedom."<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, then, we face a traditional reading of Schelling as a mere "link" in the genealogy of German Idealism, maintained by the cognate historical narratives of Wilhelm Windelband, Nikolai Hartman, Richard Kroner, and Emil Fackenheim, among others; this is a reading in which Schelling's philosophical shortcomings are explained as a temperamental issue, with readers pointing to the well-known impatient, nervous, and somewhat formalistic gestures of a thinker who seems continuously in pursuit of an adequate conception of philosophy itself.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, beginning with Walter Schulz's and Horst Fuhrmans's work, the last three decades have largely witnessed the replacement of this often complacent and indifferent portrayal of Schelling with far more subtle and incisive interpretations of his work.<sup>4</sup> Yet even here the reassessment of Schelling's work as internally cohesive still follows the cues of his earlier detractors, thus continuing to be organized by modes of inquiry common to intellectual biography. Accordingly even Xavier Tilliette's magisterial two-volume study of Schelling receives its organizational cues from Schelling's personality and his philosophical development, thereby preempting any inquiry into the arguably more significant question of what issue Schelling's ostensibly erratic intellect might have been pursuing, an issue as apparently fascinating as it remained elusive.

In short, how are we to rephrase the overriding question or concern to which Schelling's philosophy seeks to respond without once again fragmenting his thought into distinct and disparate phases? How, that is, can we pose the question concerning the "subject" of Schelling's philosophy without once

again being alternatively distracted by, or oblivious of, the highly variegated diction and the kaleidoscopic array of intellectual motifs in Schelling's oeuvre? Although the scope of the following remarks will not be sufficiently wide to do justice to all the issues that any reassessment of Schelling's philosophical significance will necessarily imply, I do hope to identify this "subject" at least in a preliminary and twofold way.

First, the subject of Schelling's philosophy is, to some extent, the philosophy of the subject bequeathed to him by Kant and Fichte; it is their critical Idealism from which, must earlier than is often assumed, Schelling seeks to disengage himself to recover a more encompassing conception of *Being*. Preliminarily speaking, then, we can state that Schelling's philosophy does not desire to *determine, name, and totalize a principled presence and origin*, such as would reiterate the idiom of Kant's and Fichte's transcendentalism by seeking to systematize Being under the aegis of a *self-present individuality*. There is, fundamentally, no subjectivity in Schelling that would correspond to Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception," to Fichte's "primordial act" of self-positing, or for that matter, to Hegel's reflexive determination of "spirit" (*Geist*) as the cumulative integration of subject-positions within the "absolute concept."

However, to grasp Schelling's fundamentally different philosophical orientation in *positive terms*—with the eventual end of defining its appeal to audiences then and its relevance to audiences now—requires that we first retrace his sustained, incisive, and relentless critique of transcendental models of subjectivity (and the anthropomorphic Idealisms sponsored by it) in his earlier years (1794–1800). Precisely this *critique* of a self-present, autonomous, and totalized philosophical subjectivity (which Schelling persistently challenges in the writings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte) has proven to be a pivotal factor in the (re)formation of twentieth century philosophy as "Theory" particularly in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, among others.

Schelling's critique meanwhile, is but the opening gambit in a philosophical career and a corresponding trajectory of writings and lectures that eventually leads us to an entirely different approach to philosophy. If we conceive of philosophy in a highly general sense, as a discourse aimed "determining" and "grounding" the principle of discursive *authority* per se, then the difference of Schelling's approach manifests itself specifically in that one notion on which all of philosophy comes to rely: *identity*. It is here, that Schelling's appeal to extraordinarily diverse audiences—both during his own, later years and within today's highly diverse network of critical languages—is to be found. Indeed, although it could be argued that the current complexity of discourses in contemporary theory and the rapidity with which issues are defined, recontextualized, and superseded bears conspicuous resemblance to Schelling's purportedly erratic philosophical profile, some concept of "identity"

seems to endure as a term that, if not always theoretically scrutinized, nevertheless continues to assert the "value" of whichever theoretical concept it has been made to espouse.

Schelling's likely appeal to religious studies, to debates in continental philosophy, or to contemporary critiques of the subject (a field of seemingly inexhaustible fertility), rests most likely with his radically speculative critique of a principled model of subjectivity as a fetish, so to speak, that proves inherently incompatible with theoretical rigor.<sup>5</sup> Alternately, the diverse sociopolitical critical discourses concerned with "identity" (a concept frequently applied with haste or colonized by facile oppositions, e.g., essentialism vs. constructivism) might benefit from Schelling's theoretical probing of identity as *the one* paradigm that enables us to *think* difference while, at the same time and for the same reason, its sole purpose lies once again strictly in thinking *difference* (and not in establishing itself as an autonomous form of closure to the practice of philosophy/theory, e.g., as a "principle," "foundation," "origin"). Here identity proves central to the multiple critical discourses and post-Freudian debates on gender theory and "sexual identity," as well as on questions of racial and ethnic identity and the often concomitant inquiries into the constitution of cultural or historical identity of modern collectives.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in the often strained exchanges between continental and analytic schools of language-philosophy, it is once again the concept of "identity" that turns out to define the debates, such as in Jacques Derrida's and John Searle's "improbable" dispute regarding the work of John L. Austin, specifically the question of "semantic identity." Here the dispute converged on the principal question of whether it is a self-present subjectivity (an "intentionality") or an agency already prestructured by ultimately intractable and inherently citational ("iterable") discursive contexts and practices that accounts for or renders impossible the semantic self-identity ("meaning") of verbal utterances.<sup>7</sup>

On the face of it, Schelling may seem an unlikely figure to advance our thinking in such fields, given the ostensibly speculative, ontotheological orientation of his later writings. And yet, it may be worthwhile reconsidering the relative proximity of Schelling's speculative (and, after 1809, overtly mystical) conception of theory and the often hypnotic power that "theory" continues to exercise within the humanities at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> For both Schelling's reconception of theory and the contemporary discursive profile of theory obtain their force and thrust from a paradigmatic critique of the subjectivity that, for Fichte, was to be thought as (genea)logically "determinable" and as occupying an ontological rather than pragmatic position. Schelling's speculative and mystical conceptions of identity, however, define a unique moment in what we call theory because for the first time subjectivity

is no longer a self-transparent origin or (as Hegel still maintains) a telos; instead, it is thought ("speculatively," to be sure) as a *symptom* in a process whose "quantitative differences" obey no fixed, metahistorical hierarchy of values. Any shifts in this process—though they may be constantly suggestive of a not-yet-revealed identity (much like the notion of the Messianic in the early Walter Benjamin)—continue to resist, and thus controvert the very possibility of, *authoritative theorization*. Notwithstanding their often conspicuous affinities, Schelling and Hegel appear irreconcilably opposed on precisely the question of how to "ground" the practice of theory itself or, rather, whether such a grounding is possible at all.<sup>9</sup>

The "subject" of Schelling's philosophy may thus be characterized as a rethinking of philosophy once the latter has encountered the unreliability of the subject and—in a reflexive doubling back on that recognition itself—has come face to face, so to speak, with the crisis of its own, discursive authority. The subject, as the traditional, ethically motivated agent of rationality and reflexivity, and thus as the origin and telos of philosophical cognition, can nevertheless reflect philosophically on this crisis of its own position. Schelling's philosophy, I propose, seeks to rethink the traditional inventory of philosophical motifs (logic, ethics, aesthetics, history, religion, mythology) from a position that no longer posits the subject as an origin or end but as an indispensable conceptual illusion or, at most, as a "medium" that in contradistinction from "nothingness" (*Nichts*), Schelling refers to as the "non-Being" (*Nicht-Seyendes*)—an absence which he interprets as the determining ground for a speculative turn in philosophy. Such, then, are the ways in which philosophy becomes theory, a slow and sustained attempt (as Nietzsche was to comment later) "to assassinate the traditional concept of soul . . . which is, to assassinate the fundamental premise of the Christian doctrine"; such an ambition, even where it hides its ultimate agenda from itself, inexorably leads to the self-erosion of any philosophical, extradiscursive authority, a consequence obviously welcomed by Nietzsche.<sup>10</sup> To state, as Schelling did in 1800, that "history and theory are totally opposed" (3,589), is also, if only by implication, to deny the practice of theory any genealogical, narratable or representable authority.

However, Schelling's philosophy not only *builds on* the collapse of an autonomous, philosophical subjectivity by merely referring, every now and then, to the limitations inherent in traditional theories of self-consciousness and reflection (a fact that is relatively well known and can hardly escape any serious reader of his texts). Far beyond incidental misgivings, Schelling's critique of the subject *actively structures* his entire philosophical thinking as an absent principle (or, perhaps, as the absence of *principium* from philosophy). As early as in his 1797 *Treatise*, Schelling can be seen stressing the processual nature of "construction" and the primacy of "postulates" over principles, thus

insisting on the irremediable priority of “practice” over “accountability” in all of philosophy. Speculative reflection, for Schelling, thus can at most reveal how the transcendent or absolute might bear “an analogy with us” (7,425); hence the failure of a critical theory of the subject compels Schelling, after 1801, to reflect on the metaphysical implications of this impasse itself. In pondering what purpose the phenomenon of an irreducibly deficient subjectivity might serve, Schelling not only recognizes the *metaphysical* “ground” that critical theories of the subject at once seek to elide and, in the moment of crisis, reinstate; he also begins to think that the staging of finitude in its various powers (inorganic and organic nature or the various qualities of subjective self-presence) implies, at an ultimate remove, a corresponding failure of autonomy on the part of God or the Absolute itself. Reaffirming a striking analogy between God and the realm of finite being (*Seyendes*), Schelling comes to understand metaphysics as an inherently heteronomous practice, one whose “ground” can be found only in a relatively independent and finite differential play of “being” (*Seyendes*). That is, to think God is to imply a *twofold beginning* that continues to manifest itself in the endless play (albeit within a restricted economy) of the difference between “ground” and “existence,” *Being* and *being*, unity and plurality. This development of a mystical, profoundly arational notion of the traditional philosophical reflection constitutes both the dominant and most “modern” aspect of Schelling’s philosophy of identity and freedom between 1801 and 1811.

The following remarks thus pursue an argument about the “subject” of Schelling’s thought in a sequence of three steps. First, we need to reconsider the conditions of the crisis that vitiated Kant’s and Fichte’s paradigmatic constructs of subjectivity; for nowhere does the crisis of theory coincide as apparently with the crisis of the subject as in their discourse, and no other philosopher can be said to have shaped Schelling’s thinking as intensely and consequentially as Kant and Fichte between 1794 and 1800. Second, it is necessary to understand how subjectivity—rather than serving as a ground for an inquiry into the subjective conditions of possibility for the experience of Being—emerges as the salient symptom of a “metaphysical affliction” that a detotalized critical subject can neither definitively understand nor afford to dismiss as a merely incidental, idiosyncratic, and quasi-religious faith. Rather, the inherently finite and therefore heteronomous disposition of finite being and knowledge foreshadows a mystic dependency of the absolute, God, or of Reason on the otherness, the relative nonbeing, and on difference in general. The crisis of the anthropocentric model of subjectivity in Kant and Fichte thus is offered as the central piece of speculative evidence for the thesis that the self-presence of subjectivity (finite or transcendent) equally resists being posited or being negated as an ontological, autonomous, and principled “truth.” Moreover, as my closing remarks wish to suggest, Schelling’s thinking

in the essays presented in this book evinces that any discussion of the concept of identity inevitably brings into play a set of metaphysically charged paradigms about the nature of difference, relations, and an indelible desire that underlies all theories of unity, regardless of whether they are proposed in the fields of epistemology, metaphysics, politics, culture, or history.<sup>11</sup>