



k a b i r i

The Official Journal of the

*North American
Schelling Society*

The Ontology and Phenomenology of Striving in Schelling's "History of Self-Consciousness" (1797– 1800)

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Introduction

One of Schelling's first philosophical projects, and perhaps his most influential one for the history of philosophy, was what he called a "history of self-consciousness" —alternately (seemingly equivalently), a "history of the human spirit."¹ Schelling's most direct influence for such a notion was Fichte's so-called "*pragmatic* history of the human spirit,"² and its most direct (and lasting) legacy was the history of Spirit presented by Hegel, particularly in the latter's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Though Schelling's conception of such a history resembles Fichte's own in many ways, the respects in which it differs from it are as subtle as they are important (much as was the case with respect to various other aspects of their respective philosophies of the time). Perhaps the most significant of these differences is that, whereas in Fichte the

¹ Cf. e.g., SW I: 382 / AA I/4: 109 (F.W.J. Schelling, "Treatise Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge (1797)," *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F.W.J. Schelling*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 90) and SW 3: 331 / AA I/9: 25 (F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 2).

² Cf. GA, I/2: 147 (J.G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Dan Breazeale (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 131) and GA, I/2: 365 (J.G. Fichte, *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794–95)*, trans. Dan Breazeale (Oxford University Press, 2021), 302).

“metaphysical” status of the history of the human spirit is highly *ambiguous*, in Schelling’s case the history having such a status appears virtually *incontrovertible*.³

The first goal of the following essay is to elaborate upon this metaphysical aspect, which also requires the postulation of an ontology in Schelling’s thought in the time period in question (1797-1800). Given the Fichtean heritage of this aspect of Schelling’s thought, Fichte will necessarily be part of this discussion, although the aim here is not so much to provide an exhaustive account of differences between Fichte and Schelling as it is to develop some of the metaphysical and ontological implications of Schelling’s history of self-consciousness using Fichte as a basis for comprehension and contrast.

Building upon this metaphysical foundation, the second primary aim of this essay is to develop what are argued to be *phenomenological* implications of Schelling’s “history,” which reveal something like a proto-“existentialist” strain in his early thought: namely, the role of *striving* in Schelling’s account, which is attributable to individual human beings and to nature as a whole (if not to even broader ontological categories). The metaphysical and phenomenological aspects are intertwined, for, as will be shown, the phenomenological insights in question play a role in grounding and developing Schelling’s ontology.

This account is not meant to suggest that Schelling *intended* to provide a phenomenology in these works, let alone an “existentialist” one—and not only for the simple fact that such philosophical categories did not yet exist (with respect to the former, at least in its contemporary form). On the contrary, Schelling saw himself as a proponent of so-called “transcendental” philosophy in a rather orthodox sense, i.e., one he took to be compatible with and an extension of those of Kant’s and Fichte’s, and in many ways he was justified in this view.⁴ Nonetheless, it can be argued that these metaphysical and phenomenological aspects nonetheless *follow* from Schelling’s argumentation.

³ Although the point cannot be developed here, the categories “transcendental philosophy” and “metaphysics” need not (and arguably should not) be treated as mutually exclusive as is often thought; thus, metaphysical elements in either Fichte’s or Schelling’s philosophy do not automatically disqualify them from being “transcendental.”

⁴ This is a very unpopular view in Schelling scholarship. Examples of the dominant view are too numerous to list here; instead, the reader is simply referred to one excellent *critique* (or at least *problematization*) of it: namely, Sebastian Gardner, “Schelling’s Substantive Reinterpretation of the Transcendental Turn: Beyond Method,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 271–92.

The Metaphysics and Ontology of the History of Self-Consciousness

Schelling's Divergence(s) from Fichte: "History" as Hierarchy

One difference between Fichte's and Schelling's notions of a history of Spirit or of self-consciousness can be detected already from the terms introduced above: namely, unlike Schelling, Fichte calls his history "pragmatic." Though there is some debate about what Fichte means by "pragmatic" in this context,⁵ it has at least partly to do with Fichte's conception of transcendental philosophy and its corresponding method, manifested in (or as) his *Wissenschaftslehre*. More specifically, it has something to do with Fichte's insistence that the "history" he recounts there is not *temporal* and is sometimes even said to be *fictional*.

To understand these qualifications, one must have at least a basic grasp of the meaning and goal of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Like all transcendental philosophy, the latter is supposed to describe the "conditions for the possibility of experience," but unlike Kant's version of the same, Fichte considers many (if not all) of those to be *mental actions* – forms of "positing."⁶ In this sense, one could say that it is a *dynamic* rather than *static* account of transcendental conditions; thus Fichte also calls it "genetic" (that is, it is an account of the *origin* of consciousness, although in a "transcendental" rather than "empirical" sense). Fichte further says that the conditions/acts that the *Wissenschaftslehre* recounts are not "temporal" insofar as they are not *sequential*: instead, they are all *mutually co-dependent and/or implicative*, and there is no priority of one condition/act over another (at least temporally, although perhaps also logically).⁷

Fichte likewise maintains that this history relates to temporality and succession only insofar as our philosophical *reconstruction* of it takes place

⁵ On this problem (and Fichte's notion of a "pragmatic history of the human spirit" in general), cf. esp. Daniel Breazeale, "A Pragmatic History of the Human Mind," in *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 70–95 and Luis Felipe Garcia, "A Missing Link between Kant and Fichte: Ernst Platner's Role in the Genesis of Fichte's Genetic Method," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 63, no. 3 (2025): 429–52.

⁶ Although, there is a precedent for this in Kant's notion of mental *syntheses*, particularly those that are called "transcendental."

⁷ Perhaps the clearest and most succinct expression Fichte gives of this method is found in the "First Introduction" to the *Wissenschaftslehre* (cf. GA I/4: 203). J.G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings, 1797–1800*, trans. Dan Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 31.

sequentially and in time.⁸ In other words, it is only because of our “finite” and “discursive” understanding that the history *appears* to us this way—one might even say, perhaps, that it is due to this “weakness” that it appears *as* a history in the first place. In fact, not only does Fichte maintain that the reality the history of self-consciousness describes is not “actually” sequential or even temporal, he even asserts that there is no real *multiplicity* or *diversity* within it at all:

To begin with, idealism only postulates a series of original actions. It does not affirm that such a series actually exists. To do so would be in violation of the system, which asserts merely that the first action cannot exist without a second one, etc. The actions in question thus do not occur separately; for the one action is not supposed to exist without the other. In a single stroke, I exist and the world exists for me. Within the system, however, what is really only one action has to be treated as a series of actions, for this is the only way in which we are able to think about it at all; for we are able to grasp only parts, and indeed, only quite specific parts (GA IV/3: 340).⁹

If all of this is the case, however, then Fichte’s description of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a “history” is peculiar, if not misleading. For the term names a philosophical system *as such* after something that is openly said to *distort* what the system is about—that is, insofar as “history” here indicates a conceptual and temporal fragmentation of the “single stroke” spoken of above. Likewise, the notion of action(s) is an intrinsically metaphysical, if not physical notion. How can such a “history” *aid* our understanding if it presupposes and/or is comprised of opaque fictions?¹⁰

In his reception of Fichte’s ideas, the young Schelling does not wholly evade such difficulties. Though much less frequently and with less emphasis, Schelling also sometimes suggests that his notion of such a history is non-temporal and involves conceptual fragmentation. He repeats Fichte’s claim that what is “real” in this history is a unity—namely, of an “act of self-consciousness” (similar to what Fichte calls a/the “*Tathandlung*”) —and that

⁸ For Dan Breazeale, this is the only sense in which the acts “occur” *at all*: “Such acts thus possess ‘reality’ only within the extraordinary context of philosophical reflection and only for the philosophical observer” (“Pragmatic History,” 88). I present difficulties of this view (even if it is *exegetically* correct) in Marco Dozzi, “The Problem of the Unconscious in Fichte’s Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre,” *Fichte-Studien* Vol. 48: 434–55.

⁹ J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo (1796/99)*, trans. Dan Breazeale (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 102–103.

¹⁰ I discuss this issue as well in Dozzi 2020; similarly, I treat the problem of what is “real” in Fichte in more detail in “What is ‘Real’ in Fichte? Being, Activity, and (In-)Determinacy in the Jena Period,” *Fichte-Studien* 51 (2022), no. 2: 247–65.

the multiplicity it describes is simply a recourse of our finite, discursive understanding.¹¹

Yet Schelling never calls this history “pragmatic,” nor does he say that its contents are “fictional.” In fact, there are strong indications that Schelling thinks that the multiplicity and temporality that are ingredient in a/the philosophical reconstruction of the history of self-consciousness are *not* wholly a product of the weakness of human understanding (after all, Schelling—whose example Hegel will later follow in this regard—generally repudiates such philosophical “excuses”¹²) and instead correspond to or “imitate” a multiplicity of some kind in reality *as such*. In contrast to Fichte’s work (and in this respect again, similar to what Hegel will do), one gets a clear sense in Schelling’s “history” that there is a *linear progression* from less to more sophisticated forms of cognition, whereby each “stage”—or “epoch,” as Schelling says—represents a new *development* that depends on previous changes and thus *asymmetrically* presupposes them. Even if this development is not (or is not *wholly*) *temporal*, such linearity entails that there is a “real” plurality of some kind in the conditions of self-consciousness; furthermore, it is *hierarchical* and in this sense linear, unlike the “circularity” that Fichte emphasizes in his account of transcendental conditions (that is, when Fichte acknowledges a multiplicity in the history of the human spirit at all).

In fact, Schelling even has a way of reconciling this notion of a *real* plurality of conditions with the motif that such plurality arises from “fragmentation”—that is, he proposes a way to describe this fragmentation as *real* and not merely something that occurs in and through philosophical reasoning. This is conveyed in Schelling’s descriptions of the aforementioned progression as an *evolution* or *development* of what is “contained” in a/the primordial or original act of self-consciousness, similar to the Neo-Platonic

¹¹ Cf. e.g., in the *Wissenschaftslehre Treatise* (1797–98), “It is an inevitable plight of philosophy that it must break down into individual moments and acts what, in the human spirit itself, is but one act and one moment It is apparent, then, that this succession of acts—all of which taken together condition consciousness—is not a *sequence*, that is, that one does not presuppose and produce the other, but that all of them together do so in reciprocity” (Schelling, *WLT*, 97–98), and in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), “The self-consciousness we start from is an absolute act (...) in order to discover the full content of this act we are obliged to take it apart and split it up, as it were, into a number of individual acts” (SW 3: 388–89 / AA I/9: 79–80). Schelling, *STI*, 42).

¹² Cf. e.g., these lines from the second “letter” in Schelling’s *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795): “My friend, the fight against dogmatism is waged with weak weapons if criticism rests its whole system merely upon, the state of our *cognitive faculty*, and not upon our genuine essence *Shortcoming, weakness*—are these not accidental limitations admitting of infinite expansion? criticism means to do more than merely deduce the weakness of reason” (SW 1: 291–92 / AA I/3: 56–58). Schelling, “Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism,” in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 161–62.

motif of *reality itself* being a progressive “decompression” of what is “contained” in the One in a unitary manner (although in the latter case this is seen more as a *degradation* than a “development”).¹³ Such a “cosmological” perspective on the history of self-consciousness is also reinforced by the indications Schelling gives that this history is also intertwined with *nature*, which we turn to now.

Temporality and Teleology

It is not surprising that Schelling’s divergence(s) from Fichte with regard to the notion of a history of self-consciousness are also seen in that history’s connection to nature, since this is famously the topic that most divided Fichte and Schelling when they had a falling out in 1800–1802.¹⁴ To be sure, Schelling discusses the notion of a history of self-consciousness primarily in the works that he eventually classifies as “transcendental” philosophy (primarily the 1797–1798 *Wissenschaftslehre Treatise* [henceforth “*WLT*”] and the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* [henceforth “*STI*”]); this “Fichtean” tendency on his part is consistent with the close relation between the notion of self-consciousness and the themes of transcendental philosophy (especially “the I”). Accordingly, it is a challenge to grasp the relation between nature and the history of self-consciousness in Schelling’s philosophy—just as it is a challenge to grasp the relation between nature-philosophy and “transcendental” philosophy in general.¹⁵ It is nonetheless clear that there *is* some relation between the two notions for Schelling, and the following should shed light on this.

The strongest expression of the relation between nature and the history of self-consciousness is Schelling’s claim that *nature itself strives toward* self-consciousness. Here “nature” evidently refers primarily to what is not *human*, as humanity and/or self-consciousness is said to be the “end” of the history of self-consciousness (whereby “end” is to be understood teleologically, but perhaps also temporally). As Schelling writes in the Introduction to the *STI*,

¹³ Strictly speaking, what is said to “develop” or “evolve” in such moments are what Schelling calls “the absolute synthesis” – yet the latter term is itself treated as equivalent to a primordial “act of self-consciousness” (*Tathandlung*), for it is a “synthesis” of the aforementioned multiplicity. Cf. e.g., SW 3: 484–85, 598 / AA I/9: 181–82, 296–97. Schelling, *STI*, 117, 207.

¹⁴ Cf. esp. Michael Vater, Michael and David Wood (editors and translators). *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012.

¹⁵ A penetrating and thorough analysis of this problem is given by Philipp Schwab in “The Fichte Schelling Debate, or: Six Models for Relating Subjectivity and Nature,” in *Nature and Naturalism in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Luca Corti and Johannes Schülein (New York: Routledge, 2022), 122–47.

The dead and unconscious products of nature are merely unsuccessful [*mißlungene*] attempts that it makes to reflect itself. So-called “dead” nature in general is an immature intelligence; consequently, one can already detect an intelligent character in the phenomena of nature which remain unconscious [*noch bewußtlos*].—Nature’s highest goal—to become wholly [an] object to itself—is achieved only through its last and highest reflection, which is none other than the human being; or more generally, it is what we call Reason, by means of which nature completely returns into itself [*zurückkehrt*] and through which it is revealed that nature is originally identical with what we recognize in ourselves as that which is intelligent and conscious (SW 3: 341 / AA I/9: 31).¹⁶

One may be tempted to assume that Schelling is here referring to a *temporal* development from non-organic matter to self-consciousness, given that such a notion has now become commonplace in biological/evolutionary science. While such a view is arguably *compatible* with Schelling’s view, Schelling does not explicitly defend it. Yet even if there is *not* a temporal element of the “history” of self-consciousness in *this* respect (we will see that there is *another* respect in which it seems that it must have at least a temporal *element*), what the above citation shows is that Schelling recognizes a *hierarchy* of some kind in—and perhaps beyond—nature. Corresponding to what was said previously about “stages” or “epochs” in the history of self-consciousness, it is evident that some beings and forms of reality in this hierarchy are more “primitive” than others, i.e., according to the degree to which they are near (or have) self-consciousness. Hence, to the extent that this “history” pertains to conditions of self-consciousness, Schelling cannot in good faith adhere to Fichte’s suggestions that *all* conditions of experience are mutually implicative or codependent—i.e., wholly “circular”—for the “hierarchical” aspect of his ontology entails that there is some form of a *linear progression* in the history of self-consciousness, even if it is “only” logical/metaphysical and not (also) temporal.

The fact that Schelling describes self-consciousness as a *result* also makes it tempting to understand the “history of self-consciousness” as being temporal in nature, or at least as having a temporal element. For the notion of a result is connoted with a time or a moment in which the result *was not yet obtained*. To be sure, Schelling could be using the notion in an atypical way (as he takes himself to be doing with the notion of a “history”), whereby self-consciousness is only a “result” in the sense that it is “grounded” in something

¹⁶ Schelling, *STI*, 6 (translation significantly modified).

more fundamental. However, such a caveat is more difficult to make when one considers that Schelling describes self-consciousness as a *goal that has been achieved*: this suggests that a change has occurred insofar as what did not *originally* possess self-consciousness *now* possesses it. In this limited respect, at least, it seems that we have to accept at least a temporal *element* in Schelling's account.

Yet what (or who) did not have self-consciousness, and in what sense does "our" possession of it amount to an achievement? Given Schelling's claim that "human beings" are the result of *nature's* striving, we would seem to have an answer. Yet we, too, are part of nature in a broader sense of the term—in what sense have *we* "achieved" this, and the rest of nature has not?

The Unity between the Striving of Nature and of Humankind

To answer these questions, it would be helpful to consider what Schelling conveys as the "mechanism" of the history of self-consciousness. The benefit of so doing is especially apparent when we consider that this "mechanism" appears in both Schelling's nature-philosophy and his "transcendental" philosophy; attention to it should give us better insight into how nature and the history of self-consciousness are related, if only indirectly.

Just as he will do in the rest of his career, the young Schelling thinks of reality as being divided up into "potencies." In this period, at least, potencies can be understood as thresholds of *complexity* or moments of *qualitative progression* in the hierarchy of being/consciousness referred to previously; the "highest" of these potencies (at least in what we think of as the "world" or in nature) is human self-consciousness.¹⁷ What dictates the *transition* from one potency to the next is a complex interaction between what Schelling calls *forces* or *strivings*.

Some of the most pertinent details of this dynamic will be given later, but for now it is sufficient to recognize Schelling's view that "higher" potencies are a *product* of the same dynamic of forces or strivings that is also present in "lower" potencies. The "or" in the phrase "forces or strivings" here is important, for it is itself representative (or symptomatic) of the relation (or tension) between nature-philosophy and transcendental philosophy: broadly speaking, one could say that the language of "forces" corresponds to the former and "striving" to the latter. It is tempting to understand "striving" as an *agential potentiation* of what is not intrinsically agential, but this would presuppose a view—contestable for Schelling—in which nature is not "originally" agential. Schelling's more consistent view is that this duplicity—

¹⁷ Cf. e.g., Schelling's claim in Part One of the *STI* that "in its highest potentiality [nature] is again nothing else but self-consciousness" (SW 3: 356 / AA I/9: 46). Schelling, *STI*, 17.

and this applies to the demarcation between nature-philosophy and transcendental philosophy in general—reflects a mere difference in *perspective* on the object of philosophical study.

Thus, for our purposes, it will be provisionally accepted that when Schelling says “the same potencies of intuition which reside in the I can also be exhibited up to a certain limit in nature” (SW 3: 332 / AA I/9: 25),¹⁸ he means “same” in a strong sense: that is, the forces in the I *are* the forces in nature, only considered from another perspective; when speaking of “the I” (or “human beings”), these forces are described/conceived as *strivings*. Again, this does not mean that these strivings are “actually” non-agential forces, only that we can understand nature *without using* the notion of “striving,” even if the “forces” described therein *are* fundamentally “strivings.”

What this entails for “us”—i.e., human beings—is that the primordial forces, and indeed the *agency* that is present in nature, are also “ours”; we *share* in this agency in some way. Naturally, to the extent that we are not *aware* of this agency, it must be *unconscious* to us. Accordingly, just as in other respects, *the depths of “our” unconscious extend to the whole of nature*. What this entails in the context of the notion of a history of self-consciousness is that non-(wholly?)-self-conscious potencies are “within” us in some respect, just as in evolutionary science one speaks of certain mechanisms and structures in human beings being more “primitive” or “ancient” than others. As a result, the hierarchy of being/consciousness is not simply an “external” one that obtains between beings, but an “internal” one within each being itself—a kind of microcosm of the whole. This also suggests that the *goal* of self-consciousness was (or “is”) *ours*, and that our very existence is a testament to the *achievement* of this goal.

We should not, however, think of this history and this result only as something *below* our awareness. For not only do we not experience the *goal* of self-consciousness as having been “ours,” we do not experience self-consciousness itself *as* an “accomplishment” or the result of striving; for “us,” self-consciousness is simply a “given,” a fact of our existence (although, to be sure, it is far from an ordinary fact). Accordingly, it would appear that whatever has this goal and achieves satisfaction in reaching it is something that *transcends* our awareness— not simply (or only) something that lies “beneath” it. Insofar as “nature” is said to revert into itself in the form of humankind (according to the citation given earlier), one could rightly suspect that nature is—or is *also*—the referent of this “higher” agency. Yet the name for this agency could just as well be *Spirit* (*Geist*), which—particularly in the *WLT*—is also said to be the “culmination” of the history of self-consciousness and is often treated as

¹⁸ Schelling, *STI*, 3 (translation modified).

interchangeable with nature (just as is the case with “the I,” at least qua “absolute” or “pure” I).¹⁹

Whether this “higher” agency be called nature, Spirit, or something else, it is evident that we are unable to fully grasp—or better, *experience*—the sense in which it achieves its goal in and through us. To be sure, one can have the insight *that* this goal is achieved in philosophical reflection (as Schelling considers himself to have done, just as Hegel will after him; such realization is associated with notions like “intellectual intuition” and “absolute knowledge”), but this does not amount to a felt *coincidence* of the agency that strives for self-consciousness and the agency that has achieved it. As such, the motif that was first proposed by Fichte, reiterated by Schelling, and then made more famous by Hegel that a philosophical “performance”—or “recollection,” as Schelling will also call it—of the history of self-consciousness consists in the “original” or “observed” I (equivalent perhaps to “nature” or “Spirit”) “coinciding” with the “philosophical” or “observing” I (equivalent to the individual person, the philosopher) at the end of a philosophical “re-enactment” or “recollection”²⁰ is only true in a weak sense, for the philosopher presumably does not *feel* this coincidence of the “observed” and “observing” agent, even if they can conceptually “entertain” it.

In the following section, we will see that there are other ways indicated by Schelling in which the dynamic(s) of forces/strivings continues to live on in human self-consciousness, and that, in a certain respect/context, the aforementioned “failure” can be experienced *as* a failure. This will show that, at least in a certain respect, Schelling conceives of the “history of self-consciousness” not as a *purely* transcendental account of the conditions of experience (which risks being entirely “fictional,” as in Fichte’s account) but as a reflection on the nature of experience as such—a *phenomenological* ontology.

¹⁹ Thus Schelling writes early in the *WTL*, for example, that “All *acts of Spirit* . . . aim at presenting the infinite in the finite. *The goal of all these acts is self-consciousness*, and their history is none other than the history of self-consciousness” (SW 1: 382 / AA I/4: p. 109). Schelling, *WTL*, 90 (emphases added)

²⁰ Schelling’s version of this is given, for example, at the beginning of Part Three in the *STI*: “. . . our enquiry will therefore have to go on until what is posited for us in the I qua object is also posited for us in the I qua subject, that is, until for us the consciousness of our object coincides [*zusammentrifft*] with our own consciousness, and thus until the I itself has for us arrived at the point from which we started” (SW 3: 389 / AA I/9: 89). Schelling, *STI*, 42 (translation modified).

The Phenomenology of Striving in the History of Self-Consciousness

Self-Objectification as “Infinite Becoming”

Although Schelling sometimes indicates that the history of self-consciousness has “ended” insofar as self-consciousness is in fact *present* in the world (at least to the extent that human beings exist), other aspects of his account of this “history”—if not his philosophical principles in general—suggest not only that an “end” to such a history is impossible, but that the very *idea* of such an accomplishment is misguided. This is evident from Schelling’s evident recognition of the peculiar nature of self-consciousness as such, a peculiarity that can be hypothesized to be rooted in phenomenological rather than “strictly” transcendental considerations, although it appears in the guise of the latter.

The *STI* begins with the familiar Fichtean—or even more originally, Reinholdian—demand for a “highest principle of knowledge,” and arguably the most important or prominent of the criteria for such a principle is that it be a kind of *unity* and even *identity*. Yet this “transcendental” demand evidently requires (or at least is aided by) a kind of experiential *confirmation*—and sure enough, Schelling says that we “find” that self-consciousness itself satisfies this demand. But in what sense? What we find in Schelling’s explanation of an (obviously *reflective*) act of self-consciousness shows that this is found to be true in a surprisingly complex sense, and self-consciousness is far from a “simple” unity or identity. He writes:

The fact that, in self-consciousness, the subject and the object of thinking are one, can only become clear to anyone through the act of self-consciousness itself. What is involved here is that *one should simultaneously undertake this act, and in so doing should again reflect upon oneself*. . . . In what follows, it will be constantly presupposed that [the reader has] the ability [1] to intuit himself in this act, [2] to distinguish himself as what is [being] thought from himself as what is thinking, and [3] in this differentiation, to again recognize himself as identical (SW 3: 365 / AA I/9: 55–56).²¹

Readers may recognize the “dialectic” that Schelling describes here by virtue of acquaintance with Hegel, who borrows from Schelling in this regard

²¹ Schelling, *STI*, 24; the lines following the ellipsis are my own translation and diverge substantially from Heath’s.

(although a version of it was originally formulated by Hölderlin).²² This dialectic explains Schelling's designation of self-consciousness as an "original duplicity in identity" (SW 3: 373 / AA I/9: 63, my translation). Yet how can a duplicity *also* be an identity?

Here one may venture a phenomenological explanation of this cryptic passage. In reflecting upon myself *as* a subject of consciousness, a "duality" in my representation necessarily arises: I appear *to* myself, but precisely by virtue of the fact that something *appears* to me—even if that which appears to me is *myself*—a subtle kind of differentiation between "me" (qua "object") and "me" (qua "subject") is made. In other words, I recognize the appearance as *myself*, but simply by virtue of it being an *appearance*—insofar as it is the "object" of my awareness—it is not "me" insofar as I am "purely" or "absolutely" a subject. The latter is what I feel as "*me*," at least in the sense of the "me" that is felt to transcend whatever appears to me as an object of consciousness. This "pure" or "absolute" subject, as Schelling calls it, does not and cannot appear *as such*, for only "objects" appear to consciousness—even if the object that appears is "oneself."

Some form of this logic arguably underlies Schelling's otherwise concomitant description of the I as "*an infinite becoming*" (SW 3: 383 / AA I/9: 74).²³ In a sense, I can "become" but never wholly *be* an object to myself, for if I were *completely* objectified in self-reflection, that which I would recognize would not have anything left of "me"; my complete transformation into an object would amount to me no longer having anything left of being a subject. Conversely (or reciprocally), if the subject did not at least *partially* become an object to itself, it would not—at least on Schelling's model of self-consciousness—be self-conscious in the first place.²⁴

Thus, one can speak of self-consciousness as a kind of *tendency*, a movement *toward* self-objectification rather than a complete accomplishment of it. What we experience as "self-consciousness" in an act of reflection would accordingly be this "tendency," this "partial" fulfillment. This tendency or "becoming" is aptly described as *infinite* precisely insofar as it can never be

²² In *Judgment and Being*, Hölderlin asks: "How can I say 'I' without self-consciousness? But how is self-consciousness possible? By opposing myself to myself, separating myself from myself, but, despite this separation, recognizing myself as what is the same in that which is opposed [to me] [*im entgegengesetzten als dasselbe erkenne*]." Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 4, *Der Tod des Empedokles. Aufsätze*, ed. Friedrich Beißner (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1962), 227, my translation.

²³ Schelling, *STI*, 38.

²⁴ The terms in which this is formulated are partly inspired by similar claims made by Jean-Paul Sartre; cf. e.g., his "Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi," *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 42, no. 3 (April–June 1948): 49–91 (cf. esp. 66–70). "Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge," trans. Marco D. Dozzi. *Sartre Studies International* 29, no. 1 (2023), 22–89 (cf. esp. 43–47).

wholly fulfilled—in fact, even the *idea* of such a “coincidence” is contradictory, as the very *possibility* of this act depends upon the *impossibility* of complete self-objectification; the very *notion* of complete self-objectification is contradictory.

As will be elaborated upon in what follows, we nonetheless strive for such coincidence in spite of this impossibility (that we either do not recognize or do not admit); thus, we strive—or at least some “part” of us strives—for what is ultimately a *contradiction*. And insofar as self-consciousness depends upon, if not is “the positing of a difference where there is none” (as Hegel will later say), it is itself a form of self-*opposition*, if not self-*contradiction*.

Self-Objectification as Infinite, Vicious Cycle

Schelling also provides a more strictly “metaphysical” reason that such self-coincidence is impossible and that self-consciousness should thus be described as “infinite becoming.” Namely, he indicates that the very attempt to coincide with oneself in this way has the *opposite* of its intended effect; that is, rather than allowing for self-coincidence (at least entirely or in every sense), self-objectification causes the subject to be *further* removed from itself. As he says in the *STI* in the section “Derivation of Productive Intuition,” “. . . the I cannot intuit [an infinite] activity as its own activity without distinguishing itself as the subject or substrate of this infinite activity. Yet precisely in this intuiting, a new duplicity arises; a contradiction between finitude and infinitude” (SW 3: 331–32 / AA I/9: 127).²⁵ This dynamic underlies Schelling’s enigmatic claim at the beginning of the “Deduction of the Organic” section in the text that “[the intelligence] seeks itself, but precisely in so doing it flees from itself” (SW 3: 489 / AA I/9: 186).²⁶

This dynamic of striving, failure, and further striving is *infinite*, for it is a *vicious cycle*: the attempt for self-unification generates further division, which generates more desire for self-coincidence, and so on and so forth.²⁷ Of course, such a description shows that this dialectic is not entirely *conscious*; it expresses an unconscious (or perhaps “pre-conscious”) striving. In the life of a single conscious individual, this less-than-conscious striving expresses itself in *ordinary* consciousness—as opposed to self-*reflection*—as the *progression of time*, which is itself conveyed by Schelling as a kind of “dissatisfaction” with the present. Thus, in the *WLT*, for example, Schelling explains that the (evidently human) soul cannot *fully intuit* itself in a single moment—it cannot make its

²⁵ Schelling, *STI*, 76.

²⁶ Schelling, *STI*, 120–21.

²⁷ To be sure, at a “broader” ontological level, there is also a form of linear progress that is enabled by this dialectic: i.e., self-consciousness as such. Yet as will be discussed below, this may not amount to a complete overcoming of or justification for such “failure.”

infinite nature as absolute subject *finite* as an object—so it “pushes forward,” continually regenerating itself through this effort to accomplish what is impossible:

It is as though the soul were striving at each single moment to present something infinite; because it is not capable of this, it necessarily strives beyond each presence [*Gegenwart*] to present the infinite at least *successively*, in *time*.²⁸ The soul, then, continually produces the representation of a universe, even though it is not capable of presenting the latter at any single moment. It would not do this if it did not have a continuous feeling of its being limited [*Beschränktseyns*] and, in connection with that [feeling], if it did not express a necessary striving against it . . . all this reveals an original activity of the soul that strives for nothing so much as for *preserving itself*; from this it follows that the soul contains its continuity and the certainty of its existence *within itself*, [and] hence, that it is an irrepressible and infinitely regenerative activity (SW I: 384 / AA I/5: 111–12).²⁹

This generation of temporality is only a conscious manifestation of a striving that extends to all of nature. As will become clearer below, what arises from nature’s “striving beyond the present” and its inability to present the infinite in a single moment—or in this context, a single *form*—is the multiplicity of *natural forms as such*: not specifically (or at least not only) individual beings or groups thereof, but the logical-organizational structures, “monuments,” or *potencies*, which constitute the classes that make up the hierarchy of being. Taken *individually*, these are a “failure” (“failed efforts,” as Schelling says in the *STI*) from the perspective of the history of self-consciousness insofar as they do not completely achieve self-consciousness; however, at a broader level, they are an occasion for *linear* progress, i.e., the achievement of self-consciousness in and through human beings. A fuller explanation of how this happens is given by Schelling in his account of opposed forces or “strivings”—that is, the “mechanism” of the history of self-consciousness.

The Conflict of Forces/Strivings in Nature and in the I

²⁸ Schelling repeats this motif late in the *STI*, where he credits an inspiration from Leibniz in this regard (SW 3: 487 / AA I/9: 185). Schelling, *STI*, 120. Note that this corresponds to the Neo-Platonic motif of a “decompression” of what is contained in unity mentioned at the outset of the essay, which is even more palpable in the *STI* since what is said to be so “developed” is an “absolute synthesis,” itself the “original” act of self-consciousness.

²⁹ Schelling, *WLT*, 90.

Like Fichte, Schelling tends to convey an act of self-reflection as a *movement inward* or, to use Fichte's language (which Schelling adopts), a *reversion* to or upon oneself (a "*Zurückgehen*" or "*Zurückkehren*"). Nor is the description of self-reflection—and indeed self-consciousness—as “reversion” wholly abstract or metaphorical, at least in some moments and contexts in the work of both Fichte and Schelling. In sections 4 and 5 of Fichte's *Foundation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (henceforth “*FWL*”), Fichte famously (or infamously) posits that self-consciousness arises from a “force” or “striving” in the I that “originally” moves “outward”—he calls it “centrifugal”—and “subsequently” collides with something that at least *seems* external to it (Fichte calls it an “*Anstoß*”), causing that activity to *revert* into the I, resulting in *self-consciousness*, which is thus “centripetal” in nature.³⁰

Schelling uses a similar motif (with some notable modifications) both with respect to the I and to *nature* in his texts from 1797–1800—and while his usage clearly exhibits an influence from Fichte, it has gone nearly (or completely) unnoticed that Schelling had already (albeit very briefly) employed a similar account in his 1795 *Letters on Dogmatism*, evidently written *before* Schelling had read §4–5 of Fichte's *FWL*:

An activity without any *object*, an activity to which there is no resistance, never returns into itself. Only through a return to one's self does *consciousness* arise. Only a *restricted* reality is an *actuality* for us. [-] Where all resistance ceases, there is infinite expansion. But the intensity of our consciousness is in inverse ratio to the extension of our being (SW I: 324–25 / AA I/3: 94).³¹

Moreover, although the only inspiration that Fichte cites for his doctrine in the *FWL* is an unspecific “*Naturlehre*” (GA I/2: 406),³² it is clear in Schelling's case that—unlike for Fichte—the relevance of this doctrine to “*Naturlehre*” is no mere heuristic device, for a form of this dynamic exists in both the I *and* nature; its existence in the former is a “potentiation” of the latter.

Schelling continues to adhere loosely to this “refractive” model of self-consciousness in 1797 to 1800, albeit with some important modifications. One aspect that remains consistent is the idea that self-consciousness is in some sense a *reaction* to its “outward activity” being limited, i.e., the notion that self-awareness arises as a reaction to limitation. Thus he writes in the *WLT*, for

³⁰ Fichte continues to speak of self-consciousness as a kind of self-reversion in later editions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*; most commentators—without any strong justification—take this shared language not to indicate continuity with his conception in the *FWL*.

³¹ Schelling, “Letters,” 185.

³² Dan Breazeale reasonably translates this phrase as “the natural sciences”: cf. J. G. Fichte, *Foundation*, 337.

example: “Only a force returning into itself creates an *interiority* [*ein Inneres*] for itself” (SW I: 379 / AA I/4: 106).³³ It is true that, in Schelling’s case, this limiting factor or element—which, in Fichte’s case, is called a “check” (*Anstoß*)—is something that is *internal* to the I, if not to nature on a wider scale.³⁴ Nonetheless, for Schelling as well as for Fichte, the I *experiences* this limit as something “foreign” to it—it is not *aware* that it posits the limit itself. It must perceive this limit as “other,” for otherwise it would not be a limit for it in the first place, and its activity would not “revert” back into itself—a reversion that, in this “experiential” respect, appears simply to *be* self-consciousness.³⁵

If we think of self-consciousness as equivalent to a reverting, “inward” force that, in turn, is a reaction to limitation of a continuous “outward” activity, we gain insight into why it is a *desire* or a *striving*. In Fichte’s parallel account, self-consciousness almost appears like an accidental “byproduct” of this dynamic: the activity of the I is *interrupted*, and this “surprises” the I, as it were, into becoming aware of itself. For Schelling, on the other hand, the limitation of outward activity provokes not only awareness but a kind of *willed countermeasure*; here the inward activity is not *just* a refracted force, but a desire to *flee* from the limit or object and “return” into itself.³⁶

Of course, the reversion of the I into itself does not wholly *succeed*; at the level of conscious experience, we experience this as the progression of time—in *self-reflection*, as the inability to experience complete self-coincidence through self-objectification. It is not *only* that the very attempt to “see” myself entails self-objectification that makes self-coincidence impossible: for Schelling, that (*phenomeno*-)logical impossibility is correlated with a *metaphysical* impossibility. The “metaphysical” reason that the I does not coincide with itself in its reversion is that the outer force or activity *in turn resists this reversion*; that is, because the latter has infinite efficacy, it continually opposes the attempts of the inward force/striving to flee from it. And it is precisely the

³³ Schelling, *WLT*, 88.

³⁴ Whether or to what extent this is also the case for Fichte is a disputed question—one that is important because of its implications for what is entailed by Fichte’s “idealism.” An excellent analysis of this problem is given by Dan Breazeale in his essay “Anstoß, Abstract Realism, and the Finitude of the I,” in his *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte’s Early Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 156–96.

³⁵ Thus Schelling writes in the *STI*, for example, “To come to consciousness, and to be limited, are one and the same. Only that which is limited for me [*an mir begrenzt ist*], so to speak, comes to consciousness: the limiting activity falls outside all consciousness, just because it is the cause of all limitation. The fact of limitation must appear as independent of me, since I can discern only my own limitedness, never the activity whereby it is posited” (SW 3: 90). Schelling, *STI*, 43–44, translation modified.

³⁶ Thus, shortly after the above citation from the *Letters*, Schelling says that “The I, on finding resistance, is obliged to take a stand against it [*sich ihm entgegensetzen*], that is, to return into self [*in sich selbst zurück zu kehren*]” (SW 1: 324 / AA I/3: 94). Schelling, *Letters*, 185.

“meeting point” of these two opposed forces pulling in opposite directions that manifests as concrete “products” for Schelling: at the level of nature, these are natural forms, whereas at the level of the individual I, it is the continued progression of time.

We thereby obtain a fuller, or at least *alternate* explanation of why the attempt at self-objectification results not only in failure, but in the opposite of its intended goal: the I, or even Spirit/nature as a whole, does not *only* strive to intuit itself (“make itself finite”), for that striving is counteracted by an *opposing* force or striving. It can be difficult to get a sense of this in Schelling’s texts sometimes, for he tends to speak of nature/Spirit/the I as having a *singular* striving, which is generally to be self-conscious. Yet that striving appears to correspond more directly with the centripetal force/striving, which is justifiable insofar as this is the striving that we *experience* (or at least *can* experience) as such. Notice in the following passage from the *WLT*, for example, that Schelling speaks of Spirit as primarily having this goal of “inwardness,” but acknowledges that this tendency has an *opposed* activity (force/striving):

Spirit continually seeks to fill the infinite [*the centrifugal striving* – M.D.], while the opposed activity [*the centripetal striving* – M.D.] enables it to inspect itself in this striving. That is, we will conceive of the soul as an activity that continually strives to extract something finite from the infinite [*here and in what remains, the referent still appears to be the centripetal striving* – M.D.]. It is as though the soul comprised an infinity that it is constrained to present outside itself. This cannot be explained any further, except by referring [again] to the constant striving of Spirit to become *finite* for itself; that is, to become conscious of itself (SW I: 382 / AA I/4: 109).³⁷

The centripetal striving is “constrained to present [infinity] outside itself” precisely because it cannot make itself finite (as alluded to earlier in the explanation of the progression of time); fundamentally, it is an absolute *subject* that cannot wholly become an *object*. It is true that this “failure” also generates a form of “success”: the achievement of self-consciousness *depends* on the outer force/striving. However, it does not do so in the way we *desire*, which is why the outer force/striving is experienced as “foreign” to us, just as are the “products” that, in a sense at least, alienate us farther from this impossible goal.

To be sure, despite this experience of the centrifugal force as “foreign,” it is also “ours” or even *is* “us”—and curiously, this entails that “we”

³⁷ Schelling, *WLT*, 109.

continually *exacerbate* the impossibility of our own self-coincidence (albeit in an unconscious manner). If we take this “holistic” view of the I or Spirit, the dynamic of opposed strivings gives the impression that it is (or rather, *we* are) *ambivalent*: it seeks itself, but it also seeks *not* to be itself. Such ambivalence appears justified insofar as the attempt to be “wholly” itself (to be wholly self-identical, to “coincide” with oneself) would result in its disappearance; thus, the I/Spirit seems to have no means of achieving complete satisfaction, which is not only metaphysically impossible, but *logically* impossible, as well.³⁸

Conclusion: The Harmonizing (and Mysterious) “Third” Agency

Reinforcing the aforementioned “holistic” view of the agent under consideration—whether it be nature, Spirit, or “the I”—Schelling will sometimes speak of a form of agency that is *superior* to and *subordinates* the opposed forces/strivings (like Plato’s chariot analogy in the *Phaedrus*), i.e., something that *regulates* and *wills* this conflict precisely so that there may *be* self-consciousness. Because of the importance of the following passage in the *STI* (Part 3, Section 1), it will be cited in full:

The I of self-consciousness moves in these opposing directions. It consists only in this conflict, or rather, it is itself the conflict of opposing directions. As surely as the I is aware of itself, this conflict must arise and be maintained. The question is *how* it is maintained.

Two opposing directions cancel out and destroy one another; thus, it would seem that their conflict cannot persist. The result would be absolute inactivity, for since the I is nothing but the striving to be self-identical, the sole ground that determines its activity is a persistent contradiction within itself. Yet every contradiction is self-destructive, in and for itself. No contradiction can persist except *through* the striving itself to maintain it or to think it; through this third factor [*dieses Dritte*] itself, a sort of identity comes about, a reciprocal relation of the two opposed elements within it.

The original contradiction in the essence of the I itself cannot be abolished without abolition of the I itself, nor can it endure in and for

³⁸ Sometimes in the *STI*, Schelling suggests that the I seeks *only* self-coincidence, which is described as a “past” state; for example, in the midst of the “Second Epoch” in Part III, he says that “the I originally is a pure and absolute identity, to which it must constantly seek to return [*zurückzukehren*]” (SW 3: 479 / AA I/9: 177). Schelling, *STI*, 113. This would seem to characterize only the “centripetal” of the I; nonetheless, for this to be said of the I “as a whole” is justified in a sense, precisely because the I *experiences* the centrifugal striving as foreign to it and its desires.

itself. It will persist only through the necessity of doing so, that is, through the striving to maintain this contradiction and thereby to bring identity into it (SW 3: 392 / AA I/9: 83–84).³⁹

Here the problem of agency is even greater than before. As we have seen, it is already a challenge to think of “the I of self-consciousness” (as Schelling calls it here) as being *itself* a “conflict of opposing directions,” and Schelling makes that identification explicitly here. Yet now Schelling also introduces a “third factor” (*dieses Dritte*), which in some sense coordinates or even “reconciles” this conflict. Like the aforementioned postulated agency that achieves “satisfaction” in bringing about self-consciousness in the history of Spirit, it seems that this “*Dritte*” must transcend our perspective or conscious experience in some sense, at least in ordinary awareness. “We” do not strive for *contradiction* (at least consciously); at most “we” may be said to strive for *self-identity*—which Schelling notably *identifies* with “the I” in the above passage, another instance in which that term appears to refer to the centripetal striving. Yet it is also true that such “striving” could likewise apply to a “higher” awareness that “sees” the conflict of the I (or nature, for that matter) and that strives “to bring identity into it,” as Schelling says. What this “third,” higher agency “sees” that “we” do not is that such identity *depends* on contradiction—i.e., the “conflict”—which is why it strives to “maintain or to think it.”

The precise identity and nature of this “*Dritte*” remains ambiguous, however. When Schelling briefly uses this motif in his nature-philosophy (unsurprisingly, *not* in order to explain the history of self-consciousness), it is only to illustrate that what “reconciles” a conflict of two *forces* must be (a) Spirit.⁴⁰ As in the “transcendental” philosophy texts, the ambiguity of this term can be seen as an advantage, since it can refer both to an individual human being or to a transindividual reality—hence the ease of identifying “Spirit” with *nature*. Yet the term that best conveys a transindividual scope as well as an association with Spirit *and* nature is Schelling’s short-lived term “world soul” (*Weltseele*).⁴¹

³⁹ Schelling, *STI*, 44 (translation modified). Schelling partly adapts this model from §2 of Fichte’s follow-up essay to the *Foundations*, that is, the *Outline of What is Distinctive of the Wissenschaftslehre with Regard to the Theoretical Power* (1795): cf. GA I/3: 147–48. Fichte, *Foundations*, 384–86; however, Fichte uses it to deduce *matter* rather than self-consciousness. Naturally, Schelling uses it in his nature-philosophy, as well, as will be discussed below.

⁴⁰ Cf. AA I/5: 102 / SW 2: 50–51. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris, and Peter Heath. Cambridge University Press (1988), 37–38.

⁴¹ Though short-lived, the notion was significant enough for Schelling that he dedicated a treatise to it in 1798 (cf. SW 2: 345ff / AA I/6). Sean McGrath similarly identifies Schelling’s notion of a “third” agency (which he calls a “principle”) with the world soul: cf. *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 90.

Although it may be tempting in turn to identify this with *the Absolute* or *God*, Schelling would have a sound reason to avoid making this identification. As argued above, nature is *continuous* with humanity in a profound sense, one that encompasses the aforementioned dynamic of *striving*. Even this “*Dritte*” has a form of striving if it is to be thought of as “seeking” (or at least *having sought*) self-consciousness, a fact that awkwardly suggests a kind of *finitude*, a quality that even Schelling generally dissociates from notions of God or the Absolute.⁴² Furthermore, even if this “meta” agency is in some respect “elevated above” the conflict of opposed forces/strivings, its ‘solution’ still is a “compromise” for it, as it were, for there remains conflict and even contradiction in Spirit *despite* the aforementioned “reconciliation”; this “demiurgical” aspect in its being or notion is difficult to reconcile with an infinite God, but is quite in keeping with the notion of a “world soul,” for example.

Whatever the identity of this “meta” agency may be, Schelling’s use of this motif reinforces the thesis posited at the outset: the goal of achieving self-consciousness, and whatever “satisfaction” might arise in the achievement of that goal in and through the appearance of *human beings* can—indeed must—transcend “our” perspective *qua* conscious individuals. If we accept this, there nonetheless remain (at least) two questions—or rather, problems—that can only be mentioned here as provocations for further thought. One is whether such a teleology of self-consciousness can be justified in light of the existential cost it has for *individuals* (a problem that has come to be associated primarily with Hegel). The other is whether Schelling can justifiably postulate an Absolute or God that transcends any need for “compromise” and sacrifice in such a history—even if such compromise is to come in the form of Nature, Spirit, or a “world soul” that “mediates” between God and humanity.

⁴² Thus, Fichte writes in §5 of the *FWL*: “the very concept of striving already contains finitude, for anything that is not *resisted* is not a striving” (GA I/2: 404). Fichte, *FWL*, 336.