Schelling's Absolute Idealism

October 12, 2021

In these notes I discuss Schelling's "Identity" philosophy, or "absolute idealism". I also discuss his related doctrine concerning intellectual intuition and construction, as well as the prospects and problems raised by his conception of reality in terms of the "absolute".[1]

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1 What is Absolute Idealism? – An Overview

At the beginning of his *Presentation* essay Schelling says that "what idealism or realism might be, or some possible third position compounded from the two, is by no means clear or obvious, but something still to be decided" (4:109). This might make it somewhat difficult to say how (or whether) his view in the essay is "idealist" in nature. But Schelling helpfully goes on to contrast his view with Fichte by saying:

[1] For discussion of these and related issues see (Bowie 1993; Beiser 2002; Bruno 2020; Estes 2010; Franks 2005; Gabriel 2011; Gram 1981; Horstmann 2000; Kabeshkin 2017; Kosch 2006; Limnatis 2008; Nassar 2013; Ostaric 2014; Sedgwick 2000; Steigerwald 2015)

> Fichte, e.g., might have conceived idealism in a completely subjective sense while I, on the other hand, conceived it in an objective one. Fichte might have held an idealism relative to the standpoint of reflection, whereas I situated myself and the principle of idealism at the standpoint of production. To put this contrast in the most intelligible terms, if idealism in the subjective sense said that the I is everything, idealism in the objective sense would be forced to say the reverse: everything is = I. There is no doubt these views are different, although no one will deny that both are idealistic. (4:109)

The distinction Schelling makes here is most clear in terms of a difference in what is subject and what is predicate in an identity statement. In Fichte's "subjective" meaning the I or ego is the subject and the universe is its predicate; in Schelling's "objective" meaning this is reversed. This matters because, in eighteenth-century logic, the subject stands as the *reason* or *ground* for its predicate. Hence Schelling construes the ego as grounded in the totality of nature rather than, as Fichte argued nature being grounded in the subject or ego.[2]

This helps us understand the difference between Fichte's purported "subjective" idealism and Schelling's "absolute" or "objective" idealism. Each is disputing the metaphysical status of reason (in the broadest sense) vis-a-vis nature. Fichte construes nature as the product of reason's activity—nature is constituted by the intellectual acts of pure I or ego. Schelling in contrast construes the ego as the highest expression or "potency" of nature. Reason is "in" nature itself, and the self-conscious subject is its highest or most complex expression.

However, absolute idealism should not be seen as a form of dogmatism. It does not seek to reduce or eliminate the rational or conscious from its conception of nature. It also, and perhaps just as importantly, does not see nature as *metaphysically prior* to or *independent* of reason/self-consciousness. Instead, the self-conscious rational subject and the order of nature are both seen as manifestations of single underlying subject—the absolute, otherwise expressed in terms of the "indifference point" of subject-object identity. The absolute is the *tertium quid* from which rational subjectivity and the order of nature are derived.

2 Understanding Schelling's Oppositions

Schelling often contrasts three sets of concepts:

1. The subjective vs the objective
2. The mental vs the physical

[2] See (Beiser 2002, 555).

3. The ideal vs the real

How should we understand each of these three oppositions? Schelling often aligns the mental, subjective, and ideal on one side and the physical, the objective, and the real on the other. But the terms of each class are not really synonyms for one another.

The first distinction, between subjective and objective, is an *intentional* distinction concerning the structure of conscious experience. The second distinction, between the mental and physical, is an *ontological* distinction between kinds of object that are part of experience. And the third distinction, between the ideal and real, is a *formal* (for lack of a better word) distinction between archetype and ectype.

3 Knowledge of the Absolute (Construction)

For both Schelling and Hegel, knowledge of the absolute relies on our capacity for "intellectual intuition", though in a sense largely different from that of Fichte, and only partially grounded in Kant. I first explicate some of the Kantian background before turning to the positive conception in detail.

3.A The Kantian Background – Seeing the Universal in the Particular

Kant, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, distinguishes between the intuitive intellect of God and the discursive intellect of finite rational beings. There are, for our purposes, two salient features of such intuition. First, it is *amodal*, in the sense that intellectual intuition is of a reality that exists, and for which alethic modal distinctions regarding the possible, contingent, or necessary do not hold.[3]

> It is absolutely necessary for the human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things. The reason for this lies in the subject and the nature of its cognitive faculties. For if two entirely heterogeneous elements were not required for the exercise of these faculties, understanding for concepts and sensible intuition for objects corresponding to them, then there would be no such distinction (between the possible and the actual). That is, if our understanding were intuitive, it would have no objects except what is actual. Concepts (which pertain merely to the possibility of an object) and sensible intuitions (which merely give us something, without thereby allowing us to cognize it as an object) would both disappear. Now, however, all of our

[3] On this point see (Kohl 2015; Stang 2016; Marshall 2018; Brewer 2021).

> distinction between the merely possible and the actual rests on the fact that the former signifies only the position of the representation of a thing with respect to our concept and, in general, our faculty for thinking, while the latter signifies the positing of the thing in itself (apart from this concept). Thus the distinction of possible from actual things is one that is merely subjectively valid for the human understanding, since we can always have something in our thoughts although it does not exist, or represent something as given even though we do not have any concept of it. … I cannot presuppose that in every such being thinking and intuiting, hence the possibility and actuality of things, are two different conditions for the exercise of its cognitive faculties. For an understanding to which this distinction did not apply, all objects that I cognize would **be** (exist), and the possibility of some that did not exist, i.e., their contingency if they did exist, as well as the necessity that is to be distinguished from that, would not enter into the representation of such a being at all. (5:401-3)

Thus the intuitive intellect cognizes only what exists—and there is nothing further *to* cognize, as there are no possibilities or necessities.

A second important feature of intellectual intuition is that its content is comprehended in a different manner from that of discursive cognition

> it may be conceded that we would find no distinction between a natural mechanism and a technique of nature, i.e., a connection to ends in it, if our understanding were not of the sort that must go from the universal to the particular, and the power of judgment can thus cognize no purposiveness in the particular, and hence make no determining judgments, without having a universal law under which it can subsume the particular. But now since the particular, as such, contains something contingent with regard to the universal, but reason nevertheless still requires unity, hence lawfulness, in the connection of particular laws of nature (which lawfulness of the contingent is called purposiveness), and the a priori derivation of the particular laws from the universal, as far as what is contingent in the former is concerned, is impossible through the determination of the concept of the object, thus the concept of the purposiveness of nature in its products is a concept that is necessary for the human power of judgment in regard to nature but does not pertain to the determination of the objects themselves, thus a subjective principle of reason for the power of judgment which, as regulative (not constitutive), is just as necessarily valid for our **human power of judgment** as if it were an objective principle. (5:404)

God's intellect moves from the universal to the particular. Since this intellection is intuitive, one might say that God intuits the universal in or through the particular. In contrast, our discursive intellect must reflect on particulars given in intuition until we generate a concept under which we can subsume the particular in an act of reflecting judgment.

3.B Schelling's Conception of Intellectual Intuition

Schelling characterizes cognition of the absolute as being via intellectual intuition. I first explain central features of such intuition and then talk about its role in what Schelling calls "construction."

3.B.1 Features of Intellectual Intuition

Intellectual intuition is a function of *reason* (FD 4:369), which allows the intuiting subject to "see", or intuit, the universal in the particular in a way that transcends any judgment.

> it [intellectual intuition] is simply the capacity to see the universal in the particular, the infinite in the finite, the two combined into a living unity. The anatomist who dissects a plant or an animal body surely believes he immediately sees the plant or the animal organism, but strictly speaking he sees only the individual thing he designates plant or body. To see the plant in the plant, the organ in the organism, in a word to see the concept or indifference within difference is possible only through intellectual intuition. (FD 4:362)

Intellectual intuition also is such as to be identical with what it intuits.

> We call this cognition intellectual intuition. Intuition, because all intuition is an identification of thought and being {4:369} and because only in intuition as such is reality. … [Cognition of the absolute is] found only in an intuition that absolutely identifies thought and being, which because it formally expresses the absolute also becomes the expression of its essence. We call this intuition intellectual because it is reason-intuition, and because, as cognition, it is absolutely one with the object of knowing. (FD 4:369)

There are five central features of intellectual intuition for Schelling. It is:

1. An activity of reason
2. An immediate relation to a being
3. Non-discursive
4. Act-object identity

5. A conscious relating to both universal and particular in one

Note that this conception of reason is different from Kant's. Reason is no longer a faculty for concepts or inference—that is relegated to the understanding. Reason now intuits the universal in the particular. Thus, as Schelling embraces the possibility of intellectual intuition in human beings, he also reconceives the faculties of rational human beings whereby such intuition is possible.

3.B.2 The Method of Construction

What is the method of construction? Unfortunately, this is left rather unclear by Schelling. On the one hand, he makes a relatively clear critical argument against Kant that philosophy is like mathematics in that it constructs the objects of knowledge. But the notion of "construction" here is not entirely clear. Schelling obviously wants to compare it to Kant's conception of intuiting the universal in the particular, in a sense similar to that discussed by Kant in the passages from the third *Critique* quoted above.

> construction as such is in mathematics and philosophy always the absolute and *real* equalization [*Gleichsetzung*] of universal and particular. The particular in geometry is not the empirical triangle sketched upon a piece of paper, but, according to Kant himself, *the triangle of pure intuition*. Construction has only this triangle of pure intuition in view; the empirical is related accidentally, as an *accidens*, upon which construction does not reflect. *This* particular is however already the particular *presented in the universal* and insofar as it is an idea, or the real universal itself, it has an *essential* unity and not merely a formal unity. (CP 276)

Insofar as construction allows this, and construction is used in philosophy, then "philosophy can be seen as a presentation of the particular in the universal" (CP 275). Unfortunately for Schelling, the conception of construction in mathematics to which he appeals is itself rather obscure. This obscurity is compounded when we move to the extraordinarily abstract level of philosophical construction. This difficulty is further exacerbated by Schelling's insistence that the intellectual intuition required for construction is not itself possible for everyone. He says,

> Perhaps one might ask of it the question that Plato asked of virtue: can it be learned or not, can it be attained through practice, or is it perhaps to be acquired neither through instruction nor through industry, but is inborn in us by nature, or is it lent to humans by a heavenly gift? Clearly it is nothing that can be

> learned. All attempts to teach it, therefore, are entirely useless in rigorously scientific philosophy. (FD 4:361)

Only those gifted with genius will be capable of doing so. Schelling here rejects the concerns of other philosophers (here Fiche is obviously the primary target) concerning the seeming inability of non-philosophers—or "ordinary consciousness"—to do philosophy. In fact, Schelling actively opposed efforts to provide some means of access of the ordinary person to philosophy and recommended, instead, "cutting off sharply any access to philosophy and isolating it on every flank from ordinary knowledge, so that there is no road or path leading from it to philosophy" (FD 4:362). This elitism and disdain for some egress from ordinary to philosophical consciousness will serve as a central plank in Hegel's criticism of Schelling's position.

4 Subject & Object

One of the characteristic features of German Idealism, especially as it develops after Kant, is a conception of "subject-object" identity. What is this and why is it important?

4.A Kant on Subject & Object

Kant says in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "we can cognize of things a priori only what we ourselves have put into them" (Bxviii). In the *Critique* he goes on to argue that the "order and regularity in [appearances] that we call nature" is an order put there by the "nature of our mind" (A125; see also B165).

Kant argues for this position by giving us a characterization of the concept `<object>` in a way such that the concept indicates only what is "internal" to the mind.

> Understanding is, generally speaking, the faculty of cognitions. These consist in the determinate relation of given representations to an object. An object, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united. (B137)

Similarly, in his discussion of causation he says,

> If we investigate what new characteristic is given to our representations by the **relation to an object**, and what is the dignity that they thereby receive, we find that it does nothing beyond making the combination of representations necessary in a certain way, and subjecting them to a rule; and conversely that ob-

> jective significance is conferred on our representations only insofar as a certain order in their temporal relation is necessary. (A197/B242-3)

Kant here indicates that what we think of as an "object" is really just a set of relations between our representations—viz., their necessary combination. The origin of such necessary combination is not itself anything independent of the mind, but rather the mind's "synthesizing" activity in applying the fundamental and a priori concepts of an object, which Kant calls the categories. This has (at least) two significant upshots.

First, what it is to *be* an object of the senses is to be a "causally unitary, spatiotemporally persisting substance whose present complex of interrelated properties are a function of its causal nature and its causal history, which is in thoroughgoing law-governed community with other objects, and which is made of stuff that cannot come into or go out of existence absolutely."[4] That is, an object of the senses is what it is in virtue of falling under the "schematized" categories (i.e. the categories in their application to a being in time). As Kant puts the point in the second section of the System of the Principles of Pure Understanding, "The conditions of the **possibility of experience** in general are at the same time conditions of the **possibility of the objects of experience**" (A158/B197). Second, and more generally, an *object*, whether of the senses or not, must be something that falls under the categories, even in their "unschematized" (i.e. non-temporal) forms. For example, consider the category `<substance-inherence>`.[5] Nothing can *be* an object unless it is the kind of being that both substands and subsists, which is to say that it is both that in which properties inhere, and which exists independently of (in the sense of not inhereing in) other things. In this sense `<substance-inherence>` is not only maximally general, but also metaphysically fundamental. Anything that is or could be is either a subject of inherence or inheres in some subject. Hence, in applying the category of substance one is employing not only a maximally general way of *thinking about* a being, but also designating a maximally fundamental fact *about being* (i.e. what it is to be) itself. A similar point holds for all of the other categories.[6] The categories are thus *both* the discursively fundamental ways of representing objects, and the ways of representing what is fundamental *about* objects.

[4] [@allais2009, 405].

[5] Kant is reported to have said that `<substance>` is the "most preeminent" of the categories and "thus the basis of all other cognition" (*Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 29:769–70).

[6] The modal categories are the exception since, as Kant indicates, they are "merely subjectively valid for the human understanding" and "are not valid of objects in general" (CPJ 5:402); see also [@stang2016, ch. 10; @kohl2015c].

It is for this reason that Kant considers "nature" as the orderly realm of objects of experience, to be what it is (though not *that* it is) in virtue of the fundamental forms of activity of our minds.

> Categories are concepts that prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, thus to nature as the sum total of all appearances (*natura materialiter spectata*) … all appearances of nature, as far as their combination is concerned, stand under the categories, on which nature (considered merely as nature in general) depends, as the original ground of its necessary lawfulness (as *natura formaliter spectata*) (B163–5)

We can thus have a priori cognition of the lawful structure or order of nature precisely because that structure or order is *identical* with the most basic forms of the intellect's activity. Thus, though Kant doesn't put things this way, the possibility of scientific knowledge of nature is explained by a kind of identity between the form of our own mental activity and the form of objects in nature.

4.B Subject-Object Identity in Fichte

Fichte's position (in the Jena period) is largely consistent with Kant's, though it also goes beyond it, or at least goes beyond Kant's explicit discussion. Fichte contends that the fundamental principle 'A = A' is the first principle of philosophy. This is turn is founded on (both with respect to certainty in its form, and to its content) on the 'I = I'.

The ego is a special kind of object in that it is identical with the subject that is aware if it. It is, in this sense, a "subject-object". Thus, in the sort of "transcendental" self-consciousness through intellectual intuition, knower and known are identical. This identity between knower and known is the original basis for all other knowledge. Out of this point Fichte develops a theory concerning the sense in which such a subject comes to be conscious of an objective world, where "objective" has a similar meaning as it does in Kant. That is, it indicates the way in which the subject posits that which it can know as an object. Unlike Kant, however, Fichte also rejects the notion of a genuinely external existence that provides the matter for our subjective forms of activity to structure. In this sense Fichte articulates a more thoroughgoing idealism.[7]

Fichte's system thus starts from a *complete* identity of subject and object, as (self-)posited in intellectual intuition. This complete identity is thus the basis for answering the epistemological question as to what explains the possibility of knowledge, if knowledge requires

[7] See (Wood 2016) for a much less metaphysical reading of Fichte's position.

(partial) identity of the knower (subject) with what is known (object). Fichte also presents an argument (and a method – the synthetic method) for how, out of this unity, all concepts of difference are derived or generated. There is a further question as to whether this original unity has an ontological significance but I leave that to the side for now.

Fichte contends that the absolute subject, in positing itself, is also opposed to itself (as the "not-self" or "object" pole of its own self-consciousness). This might seem to lead to a contradiction and, in that sense, a dissolution or nihilism of rational activity.

But Fichte contends that that the contradiction or opposition between the self and not-self can be resolved. It is resolved by positing a third concept—the concept of divisibility—which unites the two sides (GWL 1:110–11). The synthetic method of reasoning by which the novel concept is produced involves "discovering in opposites the respect in which they are alike" (GWL 1:112–13). So, from an original identity, opposition is derived, which is then resolved in the positing of a new concept in which a new (partial) identity is discovered. According to Fichte, this resolution of contradiction through the synthesis of opposites in a new concept is necessary for all scientific knowledge. As he says of the move from the contradiction between self and not-self to the synthetic concept of divisibility,

> there can be no further question as to the possibility of this [synthesis], nor can any ground for it be given; it is absolutely possible, and we are entitled to it without further grounds of any kind. (GWL 1:114)

This synthetic method is importantly different from the analytical method (of analyzing given concepts into their components), which also leads to oppositions or contradictions. Fichte claims that with the analytic method "we not only do not get very far, as Kant says; we do not get anywhere at all" (GWL 1:113). The analytic method does not generate new concepts, or new ideneity relations, but merely generates concepts that are already present in the content of the concept(s) being analyzed. This means that in the case of a contradiction generated through mere conceptual analysis, there is no positive result. In contrast, the synthetic method enables us to move beyond contradiction and thus avoid being left with nothing (at least from the perspective of reason).

4.C Absolute Identity in Schelling

Schelling's conception of subject-object identity owes several central elements to Kant and Fichte, but it is also deeply influenced by Plato and Spinoza. From Kant and Fichte it takes the idea that knowledge requires a kind of identity between knower and known. From Spinoza Schelling takes (among other things) the idea that it is not individual subjects that are knowers, but rather the totality or unity of all that is – i.e. the "one" being or the

"absolute". From Plato, Schelling takes the idea that the ultimate object of knowledge is not a finite particular (or "appearance") but archetype of any such existence. Let's take these in turn.

We've seen already that Kant and Fichte construe the possibility of knowledge of a genuinely "scientific" kind as depending on a kind of identity between knower and known. We know of objects only what "we ourselves have put into them." However, Schelling sees this starting point as objectionably *subjective*.[8]

Schelling construes Fichte's system as unable to fully account for the objectivity of nature, making it instead something that is simply an extension of the conscious subject. But he also regards Fichte as correct in objecting to "dogmatic" attempts to reduce subjectivity to something purely objective. This leads to Schelling's articulation of an *indifference point* in which there is kind of pure homogeneity that is both epistemically and metaphysically prior to the distinction between subject and object.

> we admit no opposition between subject and object (since what is posited in the one position and in the other is the very same identity; subject and object are thus in essence one), but perchance just some sort of difference between subjectivity and objectivity. (DS 4:124)

The 'absolute' *is*, in a sense identity itself. As Schelling puts it, "absolute identity *is* only as the identity of an identity, and this is the form of its being, inseparable from its being itself" (DS 4:121). Schelling also identifies the absolute, or indifference point, with reason (DS 4:114) and claims that

> The ultimate law for the being of reason, and, since there is nothing outside reason (§ 2), for all being (because it is comprehended within reason) is the law of identity, which with respect to all being is expressed by A = A. (DS 4:116)

So identity is the ultimate law of reason, and through reason, of all being. In cognizing the absolute we cognize this identity. Schelling is quick to point out that this notion of "reason" is not that of any particular finite subject's psychology or faculty.

> Reason's thought is foreign to everyone; to conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking. (DS 4:114)

This brings us to the question of *who* it is that is doing the cognizing. Schelling, seemingly inspired by Spinoza, claims that *every* (finite) being is itself a cognizing of this identity

[8] There's a real question as to whether this charge of subjectivism is fair. For some defense of Fichte see (Pippin 2000; Beiser 2002).

(DW 4:122). The idea here seems to be related to Spinoza's view that every mental mode is the representation (or perhaps form) of some material mode.[9] But such beings are only 'appearances'. The only *an sich* or "in itself" is the totality that Schelling identifies with the entire universe (DS 4:125). So there aren't really paricular thinkers of the absolute – instead all finite beings are, in so far as they are, parts of a totality, which alone exits.

> To the one who has not withdrawn from the absolute center of gravity, it is the first being, the being that never was produced but is if anything at all is; it is to such a degree that the individual being too is possible only inside it, while outside it, apart from things separated in mere thought, there is truly nothing. (DS 4:128)

This point raises an important question, of which Schelling is quite aware, which is "how is it possible for anything to separate itself from this absolute totality or be separated from it in thought?" (DS 4:128). Schelling's position here is quite disappointing. He contends that it is "a question that cannot be answered here" since "such a separation is intrinsically impossible". Schelling sees the fixation of belief concerning finite existence to be a defect of understanding of one's relation to the absolute. But this position, absent some further argument, can seem like so much dogmatic insistence rather than genuine truth. Even worse, articulate knowledge for finite rational beings such as ourselves is always ultimately *predicative* in structure, but such structure requires *difference*, which is not part of the absolute.

Schelling's philosophy of identity seems to ensure the possibility of knowledge of ultimate reality but at the cost of making that knowledge something that transcends any finite subject and is itself ineffable. The absolute thus threatens to become an "empty night" that is the "end of…philosophy" (DS 4:403).[10]

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[9] See (Vater 2012, 165–66) for related discussion of this point.

[10] For further discussion of this point see (Bowie 1993, chaps. 1, 4; Beiser 2002, chap. 7). See also Hegel's derisive claim that Schelling's absolute is "the night in which, as one says, all cows are black" (PdG 2:18). For criticism of Schelling's epistemology (or lack of it) see (Breazeale 2014).

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