

An Essay Illuminating the Higher Principle in Schelling's System of Transcendental
Idealism

Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* attempts to give a systematic explanation of the knowledge of reality through grounding principles that unite subjectivity with objectivity, as well as transcendental idealism with the philosophy of natural purposes or teleology. Schelling makes claims to a 'higher principle' on pages 208-9, where the ground of the unity of conscious and unconscious, subjectivity and objectivity are supposedly explained. This paper will define the terms and concepts mentioned in pages 208-9, and present an opinionative critique explaining why the claims made by Schelling here are inconsistent with prior claims made in his system, and why the higher principle is intelligible because of this.

The first task of transcendental philosophy is to explain how our representations coincide with objects of external existence (10). Schelling argues that the first principle of all knowledge exists in self-consciousness and can be demonstrated by the analytic and synthetic proposition 'I am'. In order to analytically grasp the form of the proposition 'I am', one must abstract self-consciousness from all the details of empirical consciousness; resulting in the subject of self-consciousness. This subject-self constitutes the *form* of any subjectivity at all. The matter of the proposition 'I am' is derived from the primordial origin of consciousness (i.e., the self as a subject) that intellectually intuits itself as an object in the world by relating its consciousness to reality. That is to say: being conscious of something involves a difference between the subject-self who is conscious of the object, and the object as a synthetically different concept (36). Schelling takes to prove that the concept of an object entails the concept of finiteness and hence

limitation, and therefore attributes these features to the object-self and nature alike. The task of Schelling's philosophy is to reach absolute self consciousness, where the object-self is conscious of everything in the subject-self (92). The telos of this absolutization or reflective project is summoned by a moral command imposed by another object-self that has determinate powers on the subject-self (161). Free acts occur in nature and are thereby influenced and determined in part by natural laws (e.g., causal or spatiotemporal laws); but since nothing in self-consciousness can explain the will to exercise intellectual intuition or complete self-determination, this demand must itself occur in nature (183-4).

A tension between freedom and nature provokes the question: how might nature (the influencer of our actions) allow for complete self-determination (as determined by self-consciousness)? Or, how can I have freedom to act given that I am just one other object-self in the world among others? Schelling's solution to the compatibility of freedom and necessity lies in the history of species, where absolute self-determination is approached asymptotically by the whole species in effort to go from natural inclination (nature's influence on the will) to moral inclination (the will, uninfluenced). The question of *why* this unconscious natural history of humanity realises the conscious end of freedom is just understanding why nature and freedom harmonise with one another. Schelling's answer is teleological – nature is for the sake of freedom. Imbedded in nature is a telos, and its existence is just for the sake of freedom being realised over the course of human history (208). Just as the molecular structure of a banana cannot explain why their parts continuously cooperate with one another to do the task its species does (growing and then being eaten), it is because the telos of the banana (being grown and then

being eaten) determines its parts. The whole (telos of freedom) is also for the end of its parts (human actions in history).

Similarly, if Arnold Schwarzenegger's natural inclinations urge him to take steroids for a muscular physique, these inclinations would eventually get shaped and redirected towards a more fitting moral end – one that probably commands him to abstract from the superficiality of his physical appearance and instead take up water aerobics. Therefore, the natural inclinations that we have are for the sake of getting purified into moral acts over the course of human history. *“Such a preestablished harmony of the objective and the determinant is conceivable only through some higher thing, set over them both, and which is therefore neither intelligent nor free, but rather is the common source of intelligence and likewise of the free”* (208). Here, Schelling claims that the teleological relationship must be the ground of both nature and freedom, without being *in* either nature or freedom – rather, they must be the cause of each other.

The unity between the conscious and unconscious is the relationship between natural inclination and the moral command. Respectively, it is exemplified by Arnold Schwarzenegger's conscious acts and the moral laws' unconscious commands (to take water aerobics instead of injecting steroids). This unity between subjective freedom (mere choice) and objective freedom (the moral law) consists in a higher identity that aims to reunify the subject and object to complete the asymptotic approximation to freedom (and thus to self-consciousness). The ground of this unity between freedom and nature or subject and object reunifies after having been originally split at the beginning of transcendental philosophy. The original split between the

conscious and unconscious happened in proving the difference between the subject-self and object-self (209). This split originally occurred for them to eventually unify and re-appear in the ‘free act’ – the eventual situation in which we, as a species, become fully self-determining. Freedom and nature unify in a way that makes it possible for that unconscious historical process to realise our moral destinies and allow for our free acts to become expressed in the natural environment in which we physically exist. The grounds of that unity are neither subject nor object because the subject-self cannot be the ground of the teleological unity (otherwise nature would be fully determined by us) nor can the object-self be the ground unless nature became determinate (leading the subject-self to abysmal or negative freedom) (205).

Therefore, this *absolute* identity has its ground in neither nature nor freedom and has identity with itself in the sense that the absolute identity is *indifferent* to nature or freedom. It has no predicates, so there cannot be a difference within it (i.e., the absolute cannot be compared to any concept – it has no object-self) (209). It is neither determined by anything else since it is not a subject nor object. For determinacy is either the way a subject determines itself or the way an object become determined by a subject. It is therefore pure indeterminacy and pure being. As well, it cannot be analytic since there is nothing within the absolute identity to ‘contain’; it has no predicates, and thus no judgement can be made of it according to Schelling. The absolute identity lacks duality because since consciousness involves a difference between the subject-self and the object-self, distinction cannot be made of the absolute identity due to its lacking ‘parts’ (209). If, somehow, Arnold Schwarzenegger managed to distinguish himself from the absolute, that entails that he is not conscious of the absolute as being the absolute (un-predicate-able,

lacking determinacy and negation). Furthermore, the absolute's essence is to not be an object at all, so all attempts by Arnold to have consciousness of the absolute eternally result in failure.

Its lack of duality is due to its lack of any predicates whatsoever, which means we cannot express the first principle as a judgement (since all judgements must be about something, and a judgement about a concept must have predicates or attributes to judge about). ***“...In which is no duality at all, and precisely because duality is the condition of all consciousness, can never attain thereto” (208-9).*** This means we can never ascend to consciousness of the absolute since we are unable to distinguish ourselves from the absolute (no predicate to compare ourselves to) or relate ourselves to the absolute (since it is not an object nor a subject of comparison). If there is no object to compare ourselves with, it follows that the object cannot be an object for our self consciousness.

When Schelling writes ***“this absolutely identical principle...cannot in fact, have any predicates whatsoever... [it] can never be an object of knowledge...that is, an object of belief”***, a contradiction occurs (209). Since Schelling's system is not one of empirical determinations, but rather a system of the structure of possible determinacy, what he says here is undermined by his philosophical project in general. If the only immediate access we have to the absolute is our *belief* that it has no predicates and therefore cannot be an object of knowledge – this itself is a predicate and becomes a belief housed in an object of our knowledge! This absolute principle was supposed to be un-predicate-able and therefore pure indeterminacy, but assigning attributes of ‘everlasting’ to this ‘eternal unknown’ is just predicating a final cause to the absolute (209).

Schelling later argues that the self becomes conscious of the original harmony between the subjective and objective through the intuition of art (212, 218). This vehicle for expressing the absolute still seems to be involving predication. For asserting that this intuition really is a linking principle, is akin to flying a kite beyond your field of vision and creating the identity of the absolute on the basis that your kite *must* have gone somewhere intelligible to you. That is, Schelling attributes artistic intuition to a form of blindness – all while deriving this artistic intuition directly from the very thing he claims we are blind about. It is incoherent to both assert that the absolute is free from predicates, but that art is a mechanistic production existing as the common ground of the object and subject. Neither art nor self-consciousness explains why the absolute splits to become subject or object, or why an intuition can be derived therein.

REFERENCE LIST

Schelling, F.W.J. *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). Trans. Peter Heath.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.